Introduction

Gottlob Frege begins his canonical paper "On sense and reference" with an intriguing puzzle (1952). Consider a simple sentence of the form 'A is identical to B.' It is rather trivial that everything is what it is, and not something else. So all identity sentences, in a sense, are trivial. If A is identical to B, then A *just is* B, and so 'A is identical to B' really amounts to no more than just 'A is identical to A.' And yet identity sentences can be incredibly informative, something it takes ages to discover. (The classic example being that Hesperus, the evening star, is identical to Phosphorus, the morning star.) How is this possible? How can identity be both trivial and informative?

Frege solves his puzzle by distinguishing between the *sense* of a term and its *referent*. The senses associated with the names 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus' are different, though their referent (Venus) is the same. The difference in sense between 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus' accounts for the informativeness of the sentence 'Hesperus is identical to Phosphorus,' as this truth differs in its sense from the trivial sentences 'Hesperus is identical to Phosphorus is identical to Phosphorus.'

This book begins with a different puzzle – one which also caught Frege's attention – and which is importantly similar in structure to the puzzle over identity. In "The thought," Frege considers the equivalence that holds between a sentence 'p' and the sentence 'It is true that p':

The Primitivist Theory of Truth

It is also worthy of notice that the sentence "I smell the scent of violets" has just the same content as the sentence "it is true that I smell the scent of violets." So it seems, then, that nothing is added to the thought by my ascribing to it the property of truth. And yet is it not a great result when the scientist after much hesitation and careful inquiry, can finally say "what I supposed is true"?

(Frege 1956: 293)

On the one hand, Frege points out, the appearance of truth here is utterly dispensable. It adds nothing. To discover that it is *true* that there are subatomic particles is no more than to discover that there are subatomic particles. But was this not a remarkable discovery? Did it not mark a great scientific advance? Scientific inquiry aims for the truth, yet adding truth to our thoughts seems to be no addition at all. How is this possible? How can truth be so dispensable, and yet so important?¹

This book is an exploration into the nature of truth. My aim is to offer an account of truth that respects the two features to which Frege calls our attention. On the one hand, we need to countenance the equivalence, whatever its nature, between the thought that p and the thought that it is true that p. But coming to accept this feature of truth – whether it is called its "redundancy," "transparency," or ability to "disappear" – should not lead us to think that truth is an unimportant, impotent, or dispensable notion. Truth, I shall argue, belongs amongst our most basic and fundamental notions. But this perspective on truth is fully compatible with taking truth not to be an ordinary property, such that predicating truth of something does not really "add" anything to it.

The theory of truth that I shall be advancing is best described as being *metaphysically deflationary* while *conceptually substantive*. I argue that there is no *property* of truth, in any sense

¹ Cf. Greimann (2004).

2

Introduction

of 'property' that bears any metaphysical weight. This take on the property of truth helps us explain the equivalence between 'p' and 'It is true that p.' But I am no deflationist about the *concept* of truth. To the contrary, I argue that truth is one of our most important concepts. It is a *fundamental* or *primitive* concept, one which we cannot analyze, define, or reduce into further, more basic concepts. We understand much else in terms of truth, but truth itself is bedrock.

My goal for this book is to articulate and defend a novel theory of truth. The genus to which my account belongs has not received much philosophical attention, though it enjoys a noble heritage. By defending a primitivist theory of truth, I join a club that includes Frege, Donald Davidson, and certain early stages of both G. E. Moore and Bertrand Russell. But although all of these thinkers belong in the primitivist camp, there are crucial differences between their views, and none of them adopts (or even recognizes) the particular combination of metaphysical deflationism and conceptual primitivism that I advocate. Aside from these famous proponents of primitivism, a number of contemporary philosophers have expressed sympathy with the view, though they have not argued in favor of it.² My goal is to offer the sustained articulation and defense that primitivism deserves.

Primitivism typically receives very little attention in philosophical discussions of truth. In his quite comprehensive survey of the theory of truth, Richard Kirkham mentions primitivism only by way of noting that Davidson holds it (1992: 248). In their survey of the theory of truth, Alexis Burgess and John Burgess mention primitivism only in passing, also by noting that the view belongs to Davidson (2011: 86–9). Wolfgang Künne's magisterial tome on truth acknowledges

² See Wiggins (2002: 316), Armstrong (2004: 17), Lowe (2007: 259; 2009: 215), and Schaffer (2008: 309).

The Primitivist Theory of Truth

up front that it will engage primitivism "only indirectly" (2003: 13, 18). Frederick Schmitt's anthology on the theory of truth includes no coverage of primitivism (2004).³

Despite not receiving much overall attention from theorists of truth, primitivism has attracted an uncommon amount of scorn. Reporting on this fact, Stewart Candlish notes that "primitivism has generally been thought so implausible that almost no one else has ever been able to take it seriously, and even Russell himself, despite what Peter Hylton has called his 'White Queen-like talent for believing the impossible,' could not manage to hold it for long" (2007: 101).⁴ Barnett Savery describes primitivism as being the result of a "youthful aberration" on the part of Russell and Moore, and states that he will "dispose of this view with abruptness" (1955: 515). Paul Horwich also abruptly dismisses primitivism as "the least attractive conclusion" in the theory of truth, treating it as a theory of last resort (1990: 10).

The inattention and bad publicity given to primitivism is unfortunate, though perhaps understandable. It might be thought that taking truth as a primitive entails not being able to say anything informative about truth. If truth is primitive, then there is nothing to say about it, let alone an entire book. But this view is mistaken. To say that truth cannot be analyzed into more fundamental notions is not to say that we cannot say anything informative about the concept of truth. *Because* truth is primitive, it can be used to elucidate other notions. We appreciate the nature of truth by seeing how it fits together with other notions such as knowledge, justification, assertion, meaning, and others.

³ But note that the truth anthology by Blackburn and Simmons (1999) includes Davidson's *locus classicus* on primitivism (Davidson 1996), as does Lynch (2001), which also includes Ernest Sosa's defense of primitivism (Sosa 2001).

⁴ See Hylton (1984: 385), where Hylton himself calls the view "absurd."

Introduction

One way of arguing for primitivism is by way of elimination: show how all the other theories of truth face insuperable difficulties, and conclude that primitivism is the best of a bad lot.⁵ I think we can do better by arguing for primitivism directly. There are plenty of well-known criticisms of the various non-primitivist accounts of truth, and it is not my ambition to rehearse them again.⁶ My focus instead will be on giving arguments that take primitivism as their conclusion, and then showing the various theoretical virtues that accompany primitivism about truth. Nevertheless, along the way I shall be arguing directly against other theories of truth here and there, though my main goal is to stand up for primitivism.

The book is divided into two main parts, and proceeds as follows. The aim of Part I is to identify and articulate the specific theory of truth that I advance. In Chapter 1, I outline my favored approach to the theory of truth. Crucial to this approach is the tripartite distinction between the *property* of truth, the concept of truth, and the word 'truth.' Each of these dimensions in turn admits of a substantive/deflationary distinction. These two distinctions are crucial for articulating my own view, which is substantive about the concept of truth and deflationary about the property of truth. Chapter 2 delves into the history of primitivism, focusing mainly on the "golden age" of primitivism of the early twentieth century when Frege, Moore, and Russell courted the view (though only Frege would hold onto the theory throughout his life). Chapter 3 then presents the official statement of my two-pronged theory of truth, clears up a preliminary objection, and contrasts my view with some contemporary primitivists (Ernest Sosa, Colin McGinn, and Trenton Merricks).

⁵ Cf. Patterson (2010).

⁶ Kirkham (1992) and Künne (2003) are excellent sources of such objections.

The Primitivist Theory of Truth

Part II presents the argumentative portion of the book. Chapter 4 commences the defense of my positive view by articulating the nature of and then arguing for the truth of metaphysical deflationism. The argument draws on considerations involving recombination and truthmaking, and concludes that there is no *property* of truth in any metaphysically robust sense. (Importantly, we shall see just what it is for a property to be "metaphysically robust.") This chapter also argues against correspondence theories by showing how metaphysical deflationists can undercut the motivation for such theories by appealing to truthmaker theory. Chapter 5 turns to the defense of conceptual primitivism, and begins with Frege's own argument for primitivism, the "treadmill." Though the treadmill is ultimately broken, I show how we can revive the argument by way of Frege's doctrine of "omnipresence." Chapter 6 then presents a battery of arguments that also seek to establish primitivism directly. In Chapter 7 I show how primitivists can take advantage of Tarski's pioneering work on truth in support of their position. Chapter 8 offers a sustained *indirect* argument for primitivism by demonstrating the various theoretical virtues that primitivism enjoys over its rivals, particularly deflationary theories of the concept of truth. Hence, this chapter includes the book's most direct criticisms of deflationism. I conclude in Chapter 9 by taking up the liar paradox, and showing how primitivists enjoy a wide variety of theoretical resources in handling it.

A wider objective of the book is to shift the dialectic in the theory of truth. Nowadays, most of the attention in the theory of truth is split between deflationary theories and correspondence theories. When we view the dialectic in these terms, problems with one view can be taken as support for the other. For example, the explanatory impotence of deflationary views leads some toward a more substantive correspondence theory. But the metaphysical baggage and obscurity of the

6

Introduction

correspondence theory's key theoretical notions leads others to the theoretically clear and simple deflationary platform. Everything changes once primitivism arrives on the scene. The brand of primitivism that I offer avoids both of these worries. It offers a substantive, explanatory account of the nature of truth without taking on any problematic metaphysical consequences. As a result, we need to rethink the overarching dialectic in the theory of truth. Hence, even if primitivism is not, at the end of the day, the best account of the nature of truth, its very availability as a contender reshapes the way that we ought to think and argue about truth. If the pages that follow do not convince you that primitivism is true, at the least they should make you rethink how to think about truth.

PART I

Identifying primitivism

1

Truth, TRUTH, and 'truth'

Philosophical theories of truth have taken on many forms over the years. Not every theory of truth addresses the same set of questions, and not every theory approaches the nature of truth in the same way. As a result, our first task is to isolate the framework with which we shall be approaching the theory of truth. The main goals of this chapter, accordingly, are two-fold. First, we need to understand just what is at stake in the theory of truth. What is a theory of truth out to accomplish? To answer this question, we must begin by drawing two crucial distinctions. The first is that between the property of truth, the concept of truth, and the word 'truth' (and its cognates). The second distinction is between substantive and *deflationary* approaches to the theory of truth. Equipped with both distinctions, we can appreciate that whether a substantive or deflationary approach is called for depends upon whether we are concerned with the property, concept, or word.

Having drawn these paramount distinctions, the second goal is to understand what, in general, a primitivist theory is. Primitivist theories have arisen in various corners of philosophy (such as ethics, epistemology, and the philosophy of science). These fellow travelers demonstrate that primitivist views are not theories of last resort: quite to the contrary, they are independently plausible and defensible.

11

The Primitivist Theory of Truth

1.1 What is the theory of truth?

A theory of truth will not tell you what is true. To find out what is true, we have to turn to empirical and rational investigation. The sciences and mathematics provide us with lots of truths about the world. They tell us what is true. But they do not tell us what truth is, which is the main objective of a theory of truth. Theories of truth set out to capture the nature and essence of truth, assuming it even has one. Physics teaches us that the sentence 'All motion is relative to frames of reference' is true. The theory of truth tells us what it is in which the truth of that sentence consists. A theory of the nature of, say, water will offer an account of what it is that is shared by all samples of water, in virtue of which they are samples of water. Similarly, a theory of the nature of truth will offer an account of what it is, if anything, that is shared by all truths, in virtue of which they are true.

Examples of theories of truth are far easier to find than adequate statements of what the theory of truth is. Perhaps most commonly, there are correspondence theories of truth.¹ These theories maintain that truth is defined in terms of correspondence with fact, or reality: something is true just in case it corresponds to some fact. Next, there are coherence theories of truth.² Here truths are true in virtue of their cohering together in some further specified way. There are also pragmatic theories of truth³ and epistemic theories of truth.⁴ These theories make something's being true depend, respectively, upon its usefulness to us in believing it, or on certain facts

¹ Classic (but importantly distinct) examples include Chapter 12 of Russell (1912) and Austin (1950). Contemporary correspondence theories are found in Fumerton (2002), Newman (2002), David (2004), and Vision (2004).

² See, e.g., Joachim (1906) and Young (2001).

³ See, e.g., Dewey (1941) and James (1981).

⁴ See, e.g., Dummett (1958–9) and Putnam (1981).