

Thought and World

*An Austere Portrayal of Truth, Reference, and
Semantic Correspondence*

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1

Introduction

Pilate said to him, “So you are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice.” Pilate said to him, “What is truth?”

(*John* 19, 37–38¹)

I

When one has a belief, one is thereby related to a *proposition*. Thus, for example, if one believes that the universe is expanding, one stands in a certain psychological relation, the relation of believing, to the proposition that the universe is expanding. One is also related to this proposition if one fears that the universe is expanding or one hopes that the universe is expanding. In general, propositions are the objects to which we are related by the family of psychological relations that includes believing, fearing, hoping, desiring, intending, and considering.

We often claim that a proposition is *true*. Thus, we are all prepared to say that the proposition that snow is white is true. I will be concerned in this work to explain what we have in mind when we make such claims. That is to say, I will be concerned to analyze the concept of *propositional truth*. In addition, I will be concerned to adjudicate the various disputes about this concept that have traditionally divided philosophers.

To the extent that these efforts are successful, they will, I believe, illuminate the entire fabric of our thought and talk about truth. Thus, as I see it, while there are concepts of truth other than the concept of propositional truth, the latter concept is the most fundamental one, and is in fact the source of the content and value of the others. If this view

is correct, a theory that contributes to our understanding of the concept of propositional truth will also contribute to our understanding of its fellows.

To elaborate: Apart from the concept of propositional truth, the concepts of truth with which we are most concerned are the concepts of *sentential truth* and *doxastic truth*. These are, respectively, the notions that figure in (1) and (2):

- (1) The sentence “Snow is white” is true in English.
- (2) The belief that snow is white is true.

Now it is extremely plausible that these two concepts can be explained reductively in terms of the concept of propositional truth. To see that this holds in the case of sentential truth, observe that it is extremely plausible to say that speakers use sentences to express propositions – to say, for example, that speakers of English use the sentence “Snow is white” to express the proposition that snow is white. Assuming that this appealing view is correct, it is natural to explain sentential truth by saying that a sentence is true if the proposition that it is used to express is true. To see that the notion of doxastic truth can be reductively explained as well, observe that beliefs are naturally understood as “involving” propositions, that is, as being relational properties that have propositions as constituents, in the way that the relational property *north of Boston* has Boston as a constituent. It follows from this view that it is possible to explain the truth of beliefs by saying that a belief counts as true if the proposition that is involved in the belief is true.

It appears, then, that the concept of propositional truth is more basic than the concepts of sentential and doxastic truth. It follows that if our investigation of the former concept meets with success, it will enhance our understanding of the latter concepts.

The notion of a proposition will inevitably play a large role in the following reflections. In the early stages I will limit myself to two assumptions about the nature of propositions. To be specific, I will assume only that they have logical structures, and that concepts are their fundamental building blocks. Eventually, in Chapter 5, I will supplement these assumptions about propositions with a few assumptions about the nature of concepts. In combination with the claim that concepts are the building blocks of propositions, the latter assumptions will provide the foundation for a metaphysical theory of propositions, telling us, among other things, how propositions are individuated.

The assumption that propositions have logical structure should be stressed. It is intended in a very strong sense – specifically, as claiming that it is appropriate to view propositions as having constituent structures that parallel the logical structures of sentences. It is meant to entail, for example, that it is appropriate to regard the proposition *Hannibal crossed the Alps and Caesar crossed the Rubicon* as a complex structure consisting of two simpler propositions and a logical concept (the concept of conjunction). It is also meant to entail that it is appropriate to think of each of the simpler propositions as having an internal logical organization, an organization that can be expressed by saying that the proposition consists of two nominal concepts and a predicative concept that plays the role of a transitive verb. Claims of this sort are not universally accepted; but they have considerable intuitive appeal, and they are defended in the literature by powerful arguments.²

It is common among philosophers to use “proposition” in the way that I am using it here – that is, as referring to the objects of propositional attitudes, and therefore, as referring to entities that have logical structures and are constructed from concepts. It must be acknowledged, however, that in addition to this primary sense, “proposition” has a secondary sense that is quite different. Thus, the term is sometimes used to refer to states of affairs, and therefore, to entities that are constructed from such extra-conceptual building blocks as substances, properties, and relations. With a view to avoiding the problems that might be occasioned by this ambiguity, I will frequently use the term “thought” in place of “proposition” in the present work. Thus, in these pages, “thought” is used as a term for the objects to which we are related by such attitudes as belief, desire, and intention.³ Also, it carries a commitment to the assumption that the objects in question are logically structured, and to the assumption that they have concepts as their ultimate constituents. There are of course other ways of using “thought.” As far as I can determine, however, the various meanings of “thought” are more similar to one another than the various meanings of “proposition.” Accordingly, there will be less of a risk of confusion if I give preference to “thought” over “proposition” in formulating key principles and arguments.

II

The theory of truth that I will recommend is a version of the view that is known as *deflationism*. That is to say, it is a version of the view that truth

is philosophically and empirically neutral, in the sense that its use carries no substantive philosophical or empirical commitments.

The simplest and clearest example of a deflationary theory is the account of truth that Paul Horwich has presented under the name *minimalism*. According to Horwich, the concept of propositional truth is defined by the totality of thoughts that have the following form:

(T) The thought that p is true if and only if p .

In other words, according to Horwich, the concept is defined by the totality of thoughts that have the same form as the following thought:

The thought that the Universe is expanding is true if and only if the Universe is expanding.

Horwich explains this doctrine by saying that a person's understanding of the concept of truth "consists in his disposition to accept, without evidence, any instantiation of the schema" (T).⁴

If minimalism is correct, then there is no particular set of concepts that one must acquire prior to acquiring the concept of truth, and it is possible to acquire the concept without learning any particular philosophical or empirical theory. To master the concept, it is sufficient to acquire the ability to recognize thoughts that have a certain *form*, and to learn that thoughts of that form are always to be accepted. It can be said, then, that minimalism represents the concept of truth as autonomous and presuppositionless. By the same token, it can be said that minimalism represents this concept as one that can be used without running any philosophical or empirical risks – that is, without being committed to any philosophical or empirical doctrines that could turn out to be wrong.⁵

Although there are important differences of detail, all versions of deflationism share with minimalism the optimistic message that the concept of truth is philosophically and empirically innocuous, and most agree that thoughts of form (T) are intimately related to the content of the concept. It follows that versions of deflationism tend to have a strong appeal. It is, after all, quite pleasing to be told that in this risk-filled world, there is one piece of equipment that can be used without fear of adverse philosophical or empirical consequences! Moreover, it is extremely plausible that thoughts of form (T) have a special status. We are strongly inclined to believe that acceptance of them is forced upon us by the content of the concept of truth, and that they are somehow deeply revelatory of that content.

In the twentieth century, deflationism was championed by a number of very able philosophers, including Ayer, Belnap, Camp, Field, Grover, Horwich, Leeds, Quine, Ramsey, and Strawson.⁶ But there are anticipations in a number of earlier writers. Indeed, it is possible to read the very earliest pronouncements about truth in Western philosophy as being largely deflationary in spirit. Consider, for example, Aristotle's famous definition at *Metaphysics* Γ, 7, 10011^b, 26–8:

To say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false, while to say of what is that it is, or of what is not that it is not, is true.⁷

This suggestive passage admits of a variety of interpretations, including some that are at odds with deflationism. But to my mind, the most natural interpretation is that Aristotle means to explain falsity and truth in terms of four schemas that are equivalent to the following:

- (1) If it is not the case that p and one says that p , then what one says is false.
- (2) If it is the case that p and one says that it is not the case that p , then what one says is false.
- (3) If it is the case that p and one says that p , then what one says is true.
- (4) If it is not the case that p and one says that it is not the case that p , then what one says is true.

Now contemporary deflationists frequently cite schemas of this sort in explaining their position. Indeed, reflection shows that schemas (3) and (4) are closely related to the schema that serves as the foundation of Horwich's theory of truth. It turns out, then, that there is a plausible way of interpreting Aristotle which represents him as anticipating Horwichian minimalism.^{8,9}

The version of deflationism that I will propose is significantly different than Horwich's version, but it is nonetheless true that I am an ardent admirer of the latter view. I applaud the clarity and elegance of minimalism, and I believe that it goes a long way toward being materially adequate. Accordingly, in addition to advocating my own version of deflationism in the following pages, I will often be concerned to champion minimalism. Whenever possible, I will rely on arguments that are designed to promote both theories simultaneously. If this approach has the desired effect, then even if the reader is not moved by the arguments that are meant specifically to favor my preferred version of deflationism, he or she will still be left with positive feelings about the family of deflationary theories, and perhaps even with the sense that the deflationary approach represents our best hope of explaining truth.

Among the various alternatives to deflationary accounts of truth, the ones that have historically received the greatest attention are versions of the *correspondence theory* – that is, versions of the view that truth consists in some sort of representational or mirroring relationship between thoughts and the world.

The correspondence theory has had many distinguished advocates. The earliest in the West may have been Avicenna, who wrote in the *Metaphysics* that “truth is understood as . . . the disposition of speech or understanding that signifies the disposition in the external thing when it is equal to it.”¹⁰ Avicenna’s pronouncement was cited with approval by William of Auvergne,¹¹ and Aquinas embraced a similar doctrine (“truth is the adaequation of intellect and thing”).¹² As these examples suggest, it appears that medieval philosophers favored the form of the correspondence theory which asserts that truth consists in a relation between thought (or speech, or belief) and *objects* or *things* (as opposed to *facts* or *states of affairs*).¹³ This form of the view has continued to attract a following. Thus Kant appears to have endorsed two versions of it, maintaining both that “truth consist in agreement of knowledge with the object,” and that truth is “the conformity of our thoughts with the object.”¹⁴ And in the twentieth century, this *objectualist* form of the correspondence theory was given a new formulation by Alfred Tarski, and became quite popular in that guise.¹⁵

The *factualist* form of the correspondence theory seems to have made a later appearance in the philosophical literature than the objectualist form; indeed, as far as I have been able to determine, it did not receive much explicit attention until the twentieth century. As we will see, however, there are good reasons to think that it is the version of the correspondence theory that is most defensible, and also the form that is most deeply rooted in our conceptual scheme. Russell proposed a version of factualism in *The Problems of Philosophy*, maintaining that “a belief is true when there is a corresponding fact, and false when there is no corresponding fact.”¹⁶ Wittgenstein held a similar view, as did Moore.¹⁷ Austin defended a factualist doctrine at mid-century,¹⁸ and in more recent times, D. M. Armstrong has argued persuasively for the inevitability of factualism.¹⁹

Correspondence theorists have been moved by intuitions of two kinds. First, there are intuitions to the effect that there is a relation of representation or semantic correspondence that links thoughts (or sentences, or beliefs) to the world. And second, there are intuitions to the effect that this

relation is somehow importantly linked to truth. In Chapter 3 I will argue that these intuitions have impressive credentials, and that it is necessary to treat them with respect.

It is unusual for deflationists to arrive at such conclusions, for one of the chief tenets of standard forms of deflationism is that truth can be grasped independently of understanding of what it is for a thought (or a sentence, or a belief) to correspond to reality. I will maintain, however, that it is possible to honor the intuitions that appear to favor the correspondence theory without abandoning the core commitments of deflationism. Thus, I will argue that the relation of semantic correspondence is significantly less problematic than deflationists have recognized. It is, I will maintain, a reasonably straightforward relation, one that can be fully characterized in terms of notions that are familiar and well motivated. Furthermore, while acknowledging that there are significant a priori connections between the concept of correspondence and the concept of truth, I will argue that these connections can be fully explained without supposing that correspondence figures in the *definition* of truth. Truth can be defined, I will maintain, in a way that is entirely in keeping with the spirit, and even the letter, of deflationism.

IV

In addition to the notion of semantic correspondence, we are in possession of a number of other *relational* semantic concepts. The members of this family include reference, denotation, and expression (i.e., the semantic concept that figures in the claim that the concept *red* expresses the property *being red*). I will be much concerned with this family in the present work.²⁰

My discussion of relational semantic concepts will have three components. First, I will be concerned to show that it is possible to give illuminating characterizations of the entire range of relational concepts – characterizations that are largely deflationary in nature. Second, I will attempt to identify the sources of the practical and theoretical utility of relational concepts. Deflationists have written illuminatingly about the value of truth, but they have been comparatively silent about the value of correspondence, reference, and the rest. I will try to fill this gap. Third, I will be concerned to describe the ways in which relational semantic concepts interact with “material” or “substantive” concepts such as causation, information, and reliable indication. Many naturalistically minded philosophers have maintained that semantic concepts are

somehow reducible to material concepts. As behooves a deflationist, I emphatically reject such claims. But this is a purely negative view. It is desirable to supplement it with a positive characterization of the relationship between the semantic portion of our conceptual scheme and the material portion.

Although there is some discussion of questions about relational semantic concepts in earlier chapters, the main venue for such questions is Chapter 5. I will maintain there that the utility of relational semantic concepts derives primarily from two sources. First, they provide us with the means of generating a new classificatory system, a new family of concepts that can be used in classifying thoughts and propositional attitudes. For example, they make it possible for us to pick out the class of thoughts that contain concepts that *refer to* London, or, more simply, the class of thoughts that are *about* London. Second, they make it possible for us to formulate generalizations about the relationships between propositional attitudes and extraconceptual reality. I will illustrate this second source of utility by describing the roles that the concepts play in a well confirmed theory of mental representation – specifically, that portion of commonsense psychology that describes and explains the ways in which the mind acquires information about the environment, and the ways in which the mind makes use of that information in planning and in making decisions.

As might be expected, this account of the utility of semantic concepts will also provide an answer to the question of how such concepts interact with material or substantive concepts. Thus, in considering the generalizations that constitute our commonsense theory of mental representation, we will be considering principles that connect semantic notions to a broad range of material notions, including the material notions that have figured most prominently in the attempts of philosophers to “naturalize” semantic notions. It will not be possible to enumerate all of the relevant generalizations in the present work, but I will attempt to formulate a representative sample. To the extent that this effort is successful, it will provide us with a systematic grasp of the ways in which the semantic component of our conceptual scheme is connected to the material component.

V

In addition to the topics we have been reviewing, I will also be concerned with a number of other matters, including the reasons for our

involvement with states of affairs, the psychological mechanisms that enable our interpretations of indexicals, and the semantic paradoxes. For the most part, however, my discussions of these other issues will be short and exploratory, and will therefore make no claim to finality. I have set myself two tasks – that of improving the case for a deflationary construal of truth, and that of illuminating the relational notions that we use in characterizing the representational contents of concepts and thoughts. I pursue other goals only as means to these two ends.