

## THE PRIMITIVIST THEORY OF TRUTH

Jamin Asay's book offers a fresh and daring perspective on the age-old question 'What is truth?' with a comprehensive articulation and defense of primitivism, the view that truth is a fundamental and indefinable concept. Often associated with Frege and the early Russell and Moore, primitivism has been largely absent from the larger conversation surrounding the nature of truth. Asay defends primitivism by drawing on a range of arguments from metaphysics, philosophy of language, and philosophy of logic, and navigates between correspondence theory and deflationism by reviving analytic philosophy's first theory of truth. In its exploration of the role that truth plays in our cognitive and linguistic lives, *The Primitivist Theory of Truth* offers an account of not just the nature of truth, but also the foundational role that truth plays in our conceptual scheme. It will be valuable for students and scholars of philosophy of language and of metaphysics.

JAMIN ASAY is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Lingnan University, Hong Kong. He has published articles in journals including *Philosophy of Science*, *Philosophia Mathematica*, *Philosophical Studies*, *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, and *International Studies in the Philosophy of Science*.

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# *The Primitivist Theory of Truth*

*Jamin Asay*  
*Lingnan University*





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*For Emily*

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## *Preface*

My interest in the theory of truth began with my very first graduate seminar at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, in a course co-taught by Keith Simmons and Thomas Hofweber. I was hooked. Ever since, I have wondered if there was a better option in the theory of truth, one that avoided the Scylla and Charybdis of correspondence theory and deflationism. My goal in writing this book was to defend one such option.

I do not recall when I first became attracted to primitivism about truth. I have long suspected that deflationary accounts cannot tell the whole story about truth, but my interest in the theory of truthmaking has led me to believe that the metaphysical pull behind correspondence theory is best captured not by any particular account of the nature of truth, but rather by an explicitly metaphysical theory such as truthmaking. Anyone who doubts that progress can be made in philosophy should make a study of theories of truth in the twentieth century. The debates that were live at the dawn of analytic philosophy between correspondence theorists, coherentists, and pragmatists were inextricable from the corresponding metaphysical debates between realism, idealism, and quietism. The lesson we can glean, first from Tarski, and later from the deflationists, is that issues surrounding the nature of truth can be separated from questions about realism and anti-realism. As a result, the questions we can ask about the nature of truth have been thrown into relief. Are we interested in asking primarily

### *Preface*

metaphysical questions about the nature of the *property* of truth, or about what it is that *makes* things true or false? Or are we interested in asking conceptual questions about our *concept* of truth, and what it is to possess such a notion? My project offers a primitivist account of our concept of truth that perfectly harmonizes with a fully deflationary account of the property of truth. As for the distinctly metaphysical question of what makes our judgments true, I believe that it is best explored independently, from the perspective of truthmaker theory.

I owe a huge debt of gratitude to a number of friends and colleagues who have supported me throughout the process of writing this book. My greatest intellectual debt is to Keith Simmons, who has supported me at every stage of my career. Keith has taught me a tremendous amount about the philosophical problems that surround truth; but more importantly, he has been a perfect model of an advisor, teacher, and philosopher.

Special mention also goes to Jody Azzouni and Nic Damnjanovic, who provided me with thoroughgoing comments for the bulk of the manuscript. I am grateful to the many others who have given their time reading, commenting on, and talking with me about this project. This list includes Bob Adams, Dorit Bar-On, Sam Baron, Jake Beck, Simon Blackburn, Katie Elliott, Drew Johnson, Marc Lange, Bill Lycan, Ram Neta, Pete Nichols, David Oderberg, Geoff Sayre-McCord, and surely others I have failed to mention.

Various portions of the book have been presented to a number of audiences, including one at the 2012 meeting of the North and South Carolina Philosophical Societies, and at the philosophy departments at Texas Tech University, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the University of Reading, and the University of Sydney. My thanks go to all those in attendance for their constructive comments and questions.

## *Preface*

Some of the material from Chapter 4 has been previously published in my “Against *Truth*,” forthcoming in *Erkenntnis*. I thank Springer for permission to reproduce it here. Material from Chapter 7 has been previously published in my “Tarski and Primitivism about Truth,” forthcoming in *Philosophers’ Imprint*.

It is only fitting that this book should come out with Cambridge University Press. The early defenders of primitivism – Moore and Russell – formulated, defended, and later retracted their brand of primitivism while at Cambridge. Frege, that era’s other important primitivist, came to be known to the English-speaking world through the efforts of the Cantabrigians. So I am delighted that the book is being released by Cambridge, and I am grateful to Hilary Gaskin for her efforts and support of the project throughout its various stages.

Let me also take this opportunity to express my appreciation to all the various philosophy departments that have supported me along the way. My teachers at Whitman College recruited me to philosophy, and I shall be forever grateful. My teachers at Northern Illinois University set me on the course I continue today, and I cannot overestimate the influence that the faculty at the University of North Carolina have had on my philosophical development. I also appreciate the warm welcome I have received from all my new colleagues at Lingnan University; I cannot imagine a better place to have started my professional career.

Finally, let me express my deepest gratitude to my partner Emily Matchar for all she has done to help make this book become a reality. Emily has seen this project progress from beginning to end; we were together in Sydney when the idea for the book first occurred to me, in Chapel Hill for the bulk of its writing, and now in Hong Kong seeing it through to the end. I can only hope that some day I shall be half the writer that she is.