

XXI TRUTH: MINIMALISM

Minimalist accounts of truth

Minimalist views come in many strains and under many names (Minimalist, Disquotational, Deflationary, Redundancy). They can be thought of as comprising two claims, one negative, one positive:

Negative claim: there is no substantial property of truth

Positive claim: the truth predicate is to be entirely understood by realizing that each instance of the following two schemas is true:

S is equivalent to 'S' is true.

Not-S is equivalent to 'S' is false

Note: the quotation marks can be understood in different ways (providing names of sentences, names of propositions, anaphoric terms) and the equivalence can be understood in different ways (material equivalence, necessitated material equivalence, equivalence of meaning).

Do we need to restrict the schemas so that they don't apply to paradoxical sentences? Perhaps not.

Normativity

Belief aims after truth. Perhaps the minimalist catch that:

Believe p iff 'p' is true, i.e. believe p iff p.

Truth Value Gaps

Reference failure. Partially defined predicates. Presuppositional failure more generally.

Gappiness (first version): There are some meaningful declarative English sentences which are neither true nor false.

This seems quite compatible with minimalism. Someone who utters a sentence with a presuppositional failure makes just the same kind of mistake as someone who utters the name of that sentence within the scope of the truth predicate.

Problems

I Boghossian: 'any proposed requirement on candidacy for truth must be grounded in the preferred account of the nature of truth'

But compare randomly chosen raffle tickets. We can't say what those that are chosen have in common (other than that they are chosen); but we can say what those that are chosen and those that are not chosen have in common: they are all raffle tickets. Analogously we get a substantial property of being true-or-false, without a substantial property of being true.

II Dummett:

Suppose that \underline{P} contains a singular term which has a sense but no reference: then, according to Frege, \underline{P} expresses a proposition which has no truth-value. This proposition is therefore not true, and hence the statement 'It is true that \underline{P} ' will be false. \underline{P} will therefore not have the same sense as 'It is true that \underline{P} ', since the latter is false whilst the former is not.

Relatedly:

Suppose 'P' is neither true nor false.

Then it is not the case that 'P' is true, and it is not the case that 'P' is false.

Then not P, and not not P

Contradiction (even in intuitionistic logic)

It doesn't help to point out that 'P' fails to get a truth value; we would still be involved in asserting something that fails to get a truth value, and that is something we shouldn't do. Underlying problem here: if the minimalist account is true, then the truth predicate doesn't really provide a way of talking about a sentence without using it.

Responses

(i) Restrict the scope of the account of the truth predicate to those sentences that don't suffer presuppositional failure.

But: (a) it is unclear that the minimalist is in any position to do that

(b) it is too strong anyway: the equivalences should hold.

(ii) Just shut up. Don't say that they are not true; don't say that they are not false. Compare intuitionism: intuitionists don't want to say that undecidable mathematical sentences are true, or that they are false; but they don't want to say that they are neither true nor false. But how then can we say what we want to say, since we can't embrace the first construal of Gappiness. Another try:

Gappiness (second version): There are some meaningful declarative English sentences which are not truth-apt.

How is truth-aptitude related to truth? A natural suggestion:

(TA) 'S' is truth-apt if and only if 'S' is either true or false

But from this

If 'S' is truth-apt then 'S' is either true or false

and then by contraposition

If 'S' is not truth-apt, then it is not the case that 'S' is true or false

and then by modus ponens in a case in which S is not truth-apt

It is not the case that 'S' is true or false

Which was our original problem.

So, either we have to deny (TA)—but then how do we understand truth aptitude?—or we reject contraposition. Perhaps we need to do the latter anyway. Don't we want to accept all instances of:

If Fa or not-Fa, then 'a' has a reference.

Now we get the same problem as before. Contraposition gives us

If 'a' doesn't have a reference, then neither Fa, nor not-Fa

Rejecting Contraposition

The contradictions come because we want to accept conditionals that have non-truth-apt antecedents and false consequents; but we do not want to accept their contrapositives, which have true antecedents and non-truth-apt consequents.

The Lukasiewicz table for the conditional

if, then	T	–	F
T	T	–	F
–	T	T	–
F	T	T	T

A non-contraposing table for the conditional:

if, then	T	–	F
T	T	–	F
–	T	T	T
F	T	T	T

Combining this with the Lukasiewicz table for conjunction gives a table for the biconditional

iff	T	–	F
T	T	–	F
–	–	T	T
F	F	T	T

Which we can use to understand (TA).

Expressivism

Expressivists (Emotivists) hold that ethical sentences aren't in the business of making assertions. So

Eating meat is wrong

is rather like:

Boo: (Eating meat)

They standardly go on to say that ethical sentences are neither true nor false. But it seems that this cannot be reconciled with minimalism. Perhaps they should retreat to the claim that ethical sentences do not express beliefs.