

Book Section

Review Essay

Pluralism about Truth

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Crispin Wright's *Truth and Objectivity*, Harvard University Press, 1992

In recent years, a focus of debate among some philosophers has been the correct characterization of true statements within some given discourse, or any discourse whatever. Do such statements, when they are taken to be true for the reasons that are considered sufficient with that given discourse, correspond to some independent external reality or merely achieve coherence with a broad range of other accepted statements? To state the issue in terms of this question, however, would strike some as inapt since the linguistic turn has been taken. What we should ask is what we mean by the predicate "true" or any predicate (like "warranted assertibility"), which is supposed to provide what is really meant by "true" and, hence, is a truth predicate.

This debate has a long history although it recently has come into focus as the "realist/anti-realist debate" through the work of Michael Dummett. The context of the debate has been narrowed because the questions of traditional metaphysics, where considered intelligible, are taken to be questions of semantical theory. The contributions of Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, and Peirce do not figure greatly in the current discussion.¹ Nevertheless, in a recent short book based on his Waynflete lectures, Crispin Wright succeeds in making a number of very interesting and original suggestions despite the confinement of the discussion to about a dozen contemporaries.

After outlining the argument presented here, some criticisms will be made based on a more pluralistic approach to metaphysical issues. No attempt will be made to enter into the rather narrow debates which characterize most of the book.

I

In *Truth and Objectivity*, Crispin Wright develops a program for a new approach to the realist/anti-realist debate. Realism is described as a combination of modesty and presumption: modesty in that it holds that the world has properties independently of us and our modes of cognition; presumption in holding that we are sometimes capable of knowing the way the world really is. Traditionally, skepticism expresses reservations regarding the presumption, and idealism refrains from the modesty involved in realism. Anti-realism is a kind of idealism; it attacks either globally or for a particular discourse the notion that we can represent an independent reality.

According to Wright, three anti-realist paradigms have tended to dominate the debate which are either beside the point or unmotivated with regard to particular regions of that debate. That is, though the paradigm in question may frame the issue rather well for a

particular discourse, it fails to have the same degree of relevance to other, equally important and controversial discourses. The first of these three paradigms is that associated with Michael Dummett. He interprets the realist position as maintaining that statements which are determinately true or false can be so beyond our capacity to determine which they are; the source of their truth is "evidence-transcendent." The second paradigm is found in the writing of authors like Hartry Field and J.L. Mackie and claims to expose "metaphysical superstition." That is, the statements of some discourses, like mathematics for Field and ethics for Mackie, though semantically representational are always false: there are no numbers or moral properties. The third paradigm, known as "expressivism," holds that the grammatical similarity of the disputed statements to assertions is misleading, they are not assertoric at all.

The shortcomings of these paradigms for a more comprehensive prosecution of the realist/anti-realist debate are as follows:

1. The issue cannot be whether there are evidence-transcendent properties when the discourse in question is about the comic; even a realist about comedy would not claim that there are comic qualities out there which we can never know.
2. If some disputed class of statements are simply false, then why do they have the degree of interest they have; why bother talking about them. Further, if a subsidiary norm such as Field's "conservativeness" can be made out for mathematical statements, then why not inquire into the nature of truth in these terms?²
3. There seems to be very little hope for making out a thorough and consistent case for expressivism since various controversial discourses exhibit internal discipline and standards of appropriateness such that relevant propositions can be part of conditionals and negations.

Consequently, a new paradigm for the realist/anti-realist debate is proposed. It is based upon a "minimalist" account of truth purportedly common to all discourses and agreeable to both sides. Realism would then consist in a number of different interpretations of the truth predicate which go beyond the minimalist one. The work that needs to be done within this paradigm is to establish first that truth is not the exclusive property of realism (hence there is a minimal content to talk about truth which is non-controversial for both sides) and second, show what *is* at issue between realists and anti-realists when the statements in question are already agreed to be "truth-apt."

That truth aptitude is a property of statements follows from a correct interpretation of the Disquotational Schema: "P" is T if and only if P. This is the basic insight behind the deflationary account of truth which Wright traces from Frank Ramsey to Paul Horwich.³ The deflationary theory holds that the significance of the disquotational schema is that it gives an all but complete account of truth, i.e. there is nothing more to truth that could be conceived as a substantial property and its predication at the metalinguistic level simply accomplishes what is accomplished by the proposition at the level of the object language. The purpose of a truth predicate for deflationism is to function merely as a

disquotational device for endorsing assertions which are either compendious ("Everything he said is true") or indirect ("Goldbach's Conjecture is true").

According to Wright, this interpretation of the disquotational schema is mistaken because it is inherently unstable and collapses into contradiction. If there is nothing more to truth than this endorsement, then the motivation for the endorsement must be the standards embodied within the discourse for such endorsements; which is to say that truth means warranted assertibility. However, warranted assertibility does not fair well as a truth predicate when we plug it into the disquotational schema. The result is that a divergence of extension opens up between "true" and "warranted assertibility." Why is this so? Simply because any meaningful proposition must be able to be embedded within a conditional, like the disquotational schema, and it must have a significant negation. What follows from these rather simple requirements is that from "P is T iff P" we can derive:

'~P' is T iff ~P

~P iff ~'P' is T

'~P' is T iff ~'P' is T⁴

So from the disquotational schema and the requirement that any significant statement has a significant negation, we can infer the following biconditional: "It is not the case that P' is true if and only if it is not the case that 'P' is true." If "true" means "warrantedly assertible" then this statement says that the denial of a statement is warrantedly assertible if and only if it is not the case that its affirmation is warrantedly assertible. So if we do not have enough information regarding a statement to warrant its assertion, we thereby *do* have warrant to deny it.

It is obvious that denying that we have warrant for a statement is not denying the statement is true, and thus it seems we must accept that the truth of statements may outstrip our warrant for them. Or, at least, "true" and "warrantedly assertible" though normatively coincident (to aim at one is to aim at the other) can be extensionally divergent in the case of statements for which our information is neutral. This is not a thesis which deflationism can accept since its whole point was to deny that there was any more to truth than the standards of assertoric warrant which govern a discourse.

However, if we interpret the disquotational schema differently than deflationism then the result does not lead to contradiction but instead indicates minimalism about truth. According to Wright, the disquotational schema embodies certain platitudes about truth:

- "that to assert is to present as true;
- "that any truth-apt content has a significant negation which is likewise truth-apt;
- "that to be true is to correspond to the facts;
- "that a statement may be justified without being true, and vice versa."⁵

Minimalism, then, is like deflationism in that it considers truth in its most basic form to be metaphysically neutral, indicating only compliance with very general principles. It rejects deflationism not only because it is inherently unstable but also because of its blanket claim that truth registers no substantial property of propositions or cannot designate anything beyond warranted assertibility. It is not that minimalism aspires to a metaphysically heavyweight account of truth in terms of correspondence; most of the rhetoric of correspondence is guaranteed by the platitudes anyway, according to Wright. Rather, minimalism conserves our ordinary talk about truth and inference in controversial areas like comedy, morals, and film criticism. Moreover, it leaves room for a pluralism of other truth predicates which mean more than minimal truth. These more than minimal truth predicates can then be the focal points for the realist/anti-realist debates about various discourses. With minimal truth as a neutral ground, the question can be whether a realist interpretation of the truth predicate is called for with regard to mathematics, primary and secondary qualities, etc. What the realist is after for each of these is, upon closer examination, unlikely to be the same from discourse to discourse. For example, saying "That is funny" is true need not mean the same thing as saying "Gravity exists" is true.

The minimalist account of truth which Wright advocates is spelled out in contrast to Putnam's "assertibility under ideal epistemic conditions"⁶ as "superassertibility." A statement is superassertible when it is warranted and some warrant for it would survive arbitrarily extensive increments to or improvements of our information. This notion of truth is: anti-realistic, epistemically constrained, based upon an internal property of statements, a projection of the standards of any meaningful discourse and metaphysically neutral. The semantic anti-realism of Dummett incorporates the thesis that "P iff P may be known," i.e. truth should be conceived globally as superassertibility.

Wright's problem with Dummettian anti-realism and the way it frames the debate is that it is not always to the point. In discourses where we suspect that "true" and "superassertible" are, or can be, extensionally divergent, like those about the past or pure number theory, this debate would be pertinent. In other words, the anti-realist about mathematics and the past wants to say that there is nothing more to the truth of these statements than that they meet the standards of the discourse and appear to be able to continue to do so. The realist wishes to say that there is something beyond those standards which makes the statements true or false. "True" statements about the past refer to occurrences which may be beyond our standards of warranted assertion, like "Caesar had a headache on his 20th birthday." Thus, according to Dummett's conception of the realist/anti-realist debate, the realist must hold that there is something beyond warranted assertibility which constitutes our understanding of "true," in other words, what we mean by "true" must be evidence-transcendent. Wright seems to part company in two ways. First, he points out that our ordinary understanding of truth, in conjunction with the disquotational schema, forces us to acknowledge that there can be an extensional divergence between "warrantedly assertible" and "true." This is because the negation of the one is not equivalent to the negation of the other: "_____ is not warrantably assertible" will cover a different range of statements than "_____ is not true." Second, Wright points out that the moral realist or comic realist, can want to say that the properties of being moral or funny are not simply reflections of our standards of assertion without meaning that they are evidence-transcendent. Assertions regarding past moments which are unreachable or

numbers which may never be counted make evidence-transcendence a pertinent issue but moral or comic realism do not.

Besides these, there are debates where the relevant terms have coincident extensions. The classic example of this is the debate from Plato's *Euthyphro* where the question is, "Is the pious, pious because it is loved by the gods, or do the gods love it because it is pious?" In this debate, it is acceptable to both Socrates and Euthyphro that the same actions are referred to by the term "pious," the question concerns *why* this designation is true. The realist, Socrates, wishes to hold that the independent constitution of the object of reference explains the tracking response of the best judges, the gods, and the superassertibility of these designations. This consideration indicates a space for the realist/anti-realist debate supplementary to Dummett's where evidence-transcendence is not the issue but something beyond superassertibility is. That is, unlike Caesar's headache, there is no obvious reason why the piety of an action must be something beyond our evidence gathering capacities but we may mean more by piety than what accords with our standards. Piety is conceivably an intrinsic property.

Wright, consequently, prosecutes his inquiry by examining cases where availability of evidence is not in question and the extension of the truth predicate displays no divergence according to its interpretation. In the *Euthyphro* debate and in some forms of debate over moral and comic realism, the extension of "true" over statements asserting something is moral or funny does not vary when the interpretation of that predicate is varied between "warrantedly assertible" and "independently constituted." "True" extends over a different range of statements about the past when we vary its interpretation between "warrantedly assertible" and "what actually happened" (there are a great many of the latter). Therefore, the realist/anti-realist debate can be usefully joined in cases where evidence-transcendence is not the issue and the extension of the "true" ranges over the same statements within the discourse.

Besides the Dummettian debate and the *Euthyphro* debate, there is another based upon the so-called "correspondence" platitude. This platitude, as stated above, can be simply accepted by the minimalist truth theorist as following from our basic understanding of truth, according to Wright. However, when the anti-realist or minimalist helps themselves to such rhetoric as "corresponds to the facts" or "tells it like it is," as Wright says they have a right to do, they do not really capture what the realist is after. What the realist is after is better described in terms of convergence and representation. This can be stated as a platitude as well:

"If two devices each function to produce representations, then if conditions are suitable, and they function properly, they will produce divergent output if and only if presented with divergent input."

The point of this is that an intuitively realist perspective on some discourse depicts us as representational systems. As such, the representations we produce ought to converge unless some kind of failure takes place. We should be forced to this by our standards of evidence, evidence gathering abilities and the subject matter in question. If so, a discourse exhibits "cognitive command," i.e. it is a priori that differences of opinion arising within

it can be satisfactorily explained only in terms of disputants working on the basis of different information, unsuitable conditions, or "malfunction."⁸

So, though phrases roughly equivalent to "corresponds to the facts" are permitted for any truth-apt discourse what the realist is after, according to Wright, is a "beefed up" conception of correspondence which is concerned with representation and convergence, i.e. cognitive command. However, even this does not go all the way towards making out what the intuitive realist is after, since an anti-realist about arithmetic would claim cognitive command for that discourse. Nevertheless, it does seem a stage that a realist has to pass through, a necessary though not sufficient condition for what Wright calls "intuitive realism."

If this is correct, then we ought to be able to offer a criterion by which we can tell when differences of opinion involve cognitive shortcoming and when they do not. Thus, if an empirical identification statement ("That is an owl.") or an arithmetical statement (" $2+2=4$ ") is in dispute, these ought to be distinguishable from statements about something being moral or funny. What exactly is the nature of the cognitive shortcoming in the first two which is not present in the latter? Wright admits that this would be hard to make out, particularly when we have stated the cognitive command restraint in such a way as to eliminate vagueness as a source of dispute. Consequently, cognitive command as a serious point of demarcation risks trivialisation. He argues, though, that the burden of proof is on the realist. Using the commonsense rejection of realism about comic properties as a basis he asserts that minimalism about truth should be the default stance everywhere, and that the realist should have to earn any extra substance which they wish to associate with a particular discourse. This is somewhat unpersuasive given that commonsense is realist about the past, morals, secondary qualities, and even the referents of names like IBM and New York State. Further, in Wright's discussion of the theoreticity of observation he is forced to admit that even science, or any discourse relying on observation, may not be subject to cognitive command. All that aside, this leaves Wright in the position to examine the options available to the realist who would like to argue that it is cognitive shortcoming when there is a dispute about comedy or morals. They must either defend a semantic realism for the discourse in question or an intuitionist epistemology. Either the cognitive shortcoming consists in there being a comic or moral property which is beyond the evidence gathering capacities of the disputants or there has to have been a failure in the use of capacities which we do have which enable us to represent these properties. Wright is fond of the comedy example precisely because of the absurdity of the idea of evidence-transcendent comic properties. Thus the other avenue of approach is to examine the epistemology involved to discover the source of error, which can only be a failure in inference or in "observation" in the sense of intuition. (One thinks, in reading this discussion, how the current, over-used phrase in American moral and political discourse, "You just don't get it" is ripe for analysis).

The relation between inferential and intuitional justifications is then examined as well as the supervenience of one discourse upon another. The conclusion Wright comes to is that the realist is forced, if evidence-transcendence is unacceptable for the discourse in question, to defend the existence of *sui generis* states of affairs with corresponding faculties to observe them. This is to be avoided as a general rule:

"We ought not to associate a special faculty with a particular region of discourse, a faculty, that is, apt for the production of non-inferentially justified beliefs essentially involving its distinctive vocabulary, unless the best explanation of our practice of that discourse, and especially the phenomenon of non-collusive assent about opinions expressed therein, has to invoke the idea that such a faculty is at work."⁹

No explanation of how we are able to engage in a particular cognitive discourse is really an explanation if it provides no other details about a particular faculty which we are said to have than that it provides the basis for beliefs about its field, particularly if it can be replaced by an explanation which does not assume this faculty. This would, it seems, prove a tremendous challenge to anyone who wished to be a realist about some discourse and cognitive command was the necessary condition for that. That is, unless there are other conceptions of realism for which cognitive command is not a necessary condition.

The "best explanation test" invoked here is connected to the realist/anti-realist debate about morals.¹⁰ Wright moves on to discuss this in some detail and says that what it is really about is something else he dubs "wide cosmological role." The best explanation test is meant to be something which certain states of affairs, e.g. moral ones, would pass because they explain why certain subjects have certain beliefs. This can be replaced by one which asks what else besides those beliefs the existence of such states of affairs would explain. Wright compares the Wetness of These Rocks to the Wrongness of That Act. The former helps explain not only my perception and belief regarding the rocks but also pre-cognitive-sensuous, interactive and brute effects like a pre-linguistic child's interest, why I slip and fall and the growth of lichen. The latter only seems to figure in explanations which must refer to our moral responses either immediately (why I was disgusted) or eventually (why the revolution took place). An investigation, then, of the width of the cosmological role of the states of affairs involved would be crucial to making out whether realism was appropriate for them. Notably, Wright points out that though this argues against moral realism it does not indicate simply that only causal states of affairs will pass the test. Among possible candidates are mathematical properties (the prime number of tiles explain why the contractor could not cover the rectangular surface without remainder, even though he had never heard of prime numbers) and secondary qualities (the red rag enraged the bull, the smell of cheese attracted the mouse).

The book concludes with an interpretation of Wittgenstein's rule-following considerations and a defense of minimalism about meaning. An interesting outcome of Wright's defense, against Boghossian's charge that it is inconsistent, is that the reason for it does not exercise cognitive command. The book also contains extensive appendices and discussion notes which follow up discussions in the recent literature as well as issues raised when the lectures were delivered.

II

In spite of the rhetoric about pluralism found in this book, the actual program is more foundational and reductionist. Wright is willing to admit that there may be something to the pre-philosophical intuition behind realism but the realist has to pass through a series

of increasingly difficult tests in order to justify that intuition. We begin with a minimalism about truth, then pass through a series of different debates about the significance of the truth predicate, ending ultimately with the notion of a state of affairs having wide cosmological role and thus earning the prize of being worthy of the most realist interpretation.

Fundamental to Wright's approach are the assumptions that realism has to be earned and that it comes in degrees. The former is based on his questionable view that common-sense is predisposed to anti-realism; while it may be with regard to comic discourse it does not seem to be in most other domains. The latter implies that there is something like a single scale by which realisms can be measured but this is inherently anti-pluralist. Furthermore, Wright takes realism to be essentially connected to correspondence, representation and cognitive command. This implies that the explanation of disputes within some discourse must refer either to evidence-transcendent properties or an intuitional epistemology. Since evidence-transcendence seems absurd for discourses concerning comedy and morals, we are forced to accept an intuitional epistemology, which in turn appears unacceptable. (Particularly, since Wright sets it out as a general principle that reference to such intuitional faculties is to be avoided where possible). Nor does it help the realist to say that the disputed discourse supervenes upon another. If the discourse displays cognitive command then the properties it asserts must receive either an inferential or non-inferential justification. Either the properties in question can be intuited or the principles of inference by which we infer from, say, the non-comic or non-moral to the comic or moral, must be intuited. Thus, the realist is "forced marched" to assert either semantic realism or an intuitional epistemology, according to Wright.

However, this is only the case if we are forced into Wright's dilemma, namely that justification is based on either intuition or inference. Wright, it seems, ought to give us an account of intuition and the distinction between intuitional and inferential justification which can bear the philosophical weight he is putting on it. He does not give us this here and the relevant discussions are revealing. In a footnote regarding Grice and Strawson's response to Quine's criticism of the analytic/synthetic dogma, Wright states:

"Grice and Strawson make the beginnings of a case for supposing that ordinary talk of analyticity has, as a matter of sociological fact, sufficient discipline to qualify as minimally apt for truth; the Quinean riposte can then be that that falls a long way short of showing that it deserves anything amounting to an intuitive realism, and that the most formidable barrier to a further advance remains the provision of an epistemology, whether *sui generis* or somehow reductive, explaining how modal judgements generally possess Cognitive Command."¹¹

The justification for employing the analytic/synthetic distinction is that it qualifies as minimally truth apt and that it works in practice. Consequently, in order to be employed it need not be interpreted realistically, need not possess Cognitive Command and need not provide for itself either an intuitional or inferential justification.

Further, in Wright's defense of meaning-minimalism against Boghossian's charge that it is incoherent¹² he concludes:

"There is a discomfort about this position, touched on earlier. The meaning-minimalist will have to hold that the question whether meaning-minimalism is to be accepted is a question apt only for a correct answer, and so not an answer exerting Cognitive Command. This means that the view must lack a certain kind of *cogency*: whatever arguments might support it, it will be possible to decline them without cognitive shortcoming."¹³

The arguments for meaning-minimalism, not canvassed here, do not exert Cognitive Command. Nor do they offer either an intuitional or inferential justification.

What does this show? Wright constructs his discussion of the realist/anti-realist debates so that the realist is forced into a dilemma of choosing between two unacceptable alternatives: either defend a faculty of intuition for *sui generis* states of affairs within disputed discourses or claim that the relevant properties are evidence-transcendent. The realist is forced to this position, however, on the assumption that realisms are basically one sort of thing having to do essentially with correspondence, representation, and ultimately, cognitive command. Why, though, do realists have to describe their position as being essentially about representation or cognitive command? Could they possibly be both realists and abjure the necessity of offering either intuitional or inferential justifications? This would require that there be justifications which cannot be neatly classified as either intuitional or inferential. Are there such justifications? Those involved in the debate between Quine on the one hand, and Strawson and Grice, on the other seem to be such. Are these not the kind of justifications which are being offered for meaning-minimalism?

However, can a realist offer this kind of argument for realism, the kind that Wright offers for meaning-minimalism and for the analytic/synthetic distinction? It is not being suggested here that this is certainly the case. However, if one could be a realist and employ what are essentially *dialectical* justifications for their position, then they could avoid Wright's dilemma. Such a realist could assert the independent existence of various states of affairs but not attempt either an intuitional or inferential justification for that claim. Plato is arguably such a realist. And Aristotle's criticism of that position stands in the way of such a move. On the other hand, what is Wright's justification for his position if not dialectical?

Consequently, although Wright's discussion is very careful and creative, it does not go far enough in the direction of pluralism for two reasons. First, it assumes that all realisms are graded along a fairly uniform scale of increasing degrees of universality and inescapable representability. However, if a true metaphysical pluralism were countenanced, "reality" would mean different things in different domains and would necessarily not be universal. Second, while Wright offers dialectical justifications for his own position, he demands foundational ones from the realist. However, it is questionable how foundational a true pluralist can be. So if a pluralistic realism is possible, and it is a possibility Wright is taking seriously, it is not clear that it should be made to meet the demands of foundationalism or reductionism.

The kind of pluralism that is being hinted at here is suggested in the work of philosophers like George Santayana, Stephen C. Pepper and Paul Weiss, although of these probably only Weiss would attempt to join a strong realism with the pluralism.¹⁴ These remarks are merely meant to propose that given the possibilities explored for pluralism in Wright's study, it might be worth the effort to press further and contemplate a pluralism in which the "reality" predicate might be taken to have different interpretations in different domains. If the truth predicate is to be taken as meaning different things in different discourses, then it is certainly conceivable that "reality" correspondingly varies. If so, there would be no single scale against which the various realisms could be measured and the justifications for the system would have to be dialectical. Wright may have taken some crucial steps in the direction of exploring this possibility.

Endnotes

1. For a more historical approach, see Frank J. Farrell, *Subjectivity, Realism, and Postmodernism: The Recovery of the World in Recent Philosophy*, (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
2. Hartry Field, *Realism, Mathematics and Modality*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989).
3. Frank Ramsey, "Facts and Propositions," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, suppl. vol. 7, (1927); Paul Horwich, *Truth*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990).
4. Wright, pp.12-24.
5. *Ibid.*, p.34.
6. Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History*, (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1981).
7. Wright, p.91.
8. *Ibid.*, pp.92-3.
9. *Ibid.*, p.153.
10. See Gilbert Harman, *The Nature of Morality*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); David Wiggins, *Needs, Values and Truth*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987).
11. Wright, pp.154-55, note #5.
12. Paul Boghossian, "The Status of Content," *Philosophical Review*, 99 (1989), pp.157-183.
13. Wright, p.236.
14. George Santayana, *Realms of Being*, (New York: Cooper Square Press); Stephen C. Pepper, *World Hypotheses: A Study in Philosophical Evidence*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1948); Paul Weiss, *Modes of Being*, (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1958); *Being and Other Realities*, (Chicago & LaSalle, IL: Open Court Press, 1995).