

## *Deflationary Truth*

It seems at first glance that “it is true that Caesar was murdered” says something different from plain “Caesar was murdered”. However, the fact being asserted seems identical in both sentences, so it is tempting to wonder whether the concept of truth is entirely redundant here. It seems to add little more than underlining the sentence, or saying it louder. Thus there is a possible Redundancy Theory of truth, which says that this example captures the situation for all uses of the word ‘true’. We could delete the word from English, and nothing would be lost.

Consigning a major philosophical difficulty to oblivion would be very appealing, but gradually examples emerged where the redundancy is not so obvious. In “I forget what answer she gave yesterday, but it was true” we can’t drop ‘true’ and assert the answer, because we have lost the answer. The claim that “all the sentences in our sacred text are true” becomes inexpressible. In general, the redundancy strategy won’t work if the actual sentence involved is not available to replace the assertion that the sentence is true. It thus becomes impossible for logicians to talk about the successes and failures of their systems in terms of anything other than rules and syntax. It is hard to express the thought that “valid inferences preserve truth” if ‘true’ has been banned from English. The principle of Bivalence (that p is always T or F) refers to truth, so it would have to be replaced by Excluded Middle (either p or not-p), which makes it hard to compare logical systems. We seem to need ‘true’ to talk about language, even if we can manage without it when we talk about the world – and thought would be very cramped if we could not discuss language.

If we follow this line of argument, we conclude that ‘true’ is irrelevant to ordinary talk about the world, and is only useful for talk about talk. The resulting theory of truth is called ‘deflationary’ or ‘minimal’. Truth is most useful when theorising about thought and language, and has occasional uses in daily life, but (the key point) the existence of ‘truth’ adds nothing to the world, and is not needed for a good understanding of the world. Hence we should give up discussing the nature of truth, and the criteria for deciding whether something is true, and confine ourselves to describing how the word ‘true’ is used, in formal and natural languages. Deflationists say that the word ‘true’ has no more or less significant content than the word ‘and’.

This deflationary attitude to truth gained impetus with the arrival of the rigorous Semantic Theory of Truth, which sharpened up the concept by withdrawing it into a ‘metalanguage’, which is used to discuss the workings of our normal practical language. The theory also showed exactly how an assertion that some sentence is true can be completely replaced by the sentence itself (by the process of ‘disquotation’ – of using the sentence instead of mentioning it). If truth is talk about talk, then plain talk can proceed without it, and ‘true’ is only employed to refer to sentences, discuss inferences, and make generalisations about talk. Truth used to be a mega-concept, because it was how we connected to reality, but deflationists say we can just accept, believe and assert sentences, and relegate ‘true’ to the back room, for explaining our thinking.

The disquotational approach to deflation, which says ‘true’ is meaningful but can always be replaced, doesn’t deal with all of the tricky cases. It won’t do when you don’t know exactly what the true sentence is. It gets in a tangle if the relevant sentence is actually about truth. It can’t eliminate ‘true’ from the compositional axioms, needed to build up complex sentences from atomic sentences, since they tell us how to preserve truth when using ‘and’, ‘or’ etc. Disquotation confines you to one language, so you can’t compare truth across languages, or talk of truths not expressed in your language. Falsehood becomes harder to explain in the disquotational approach, when it might have been considered the equal and opposite of truth. Hence fans of deflationary approaches to truth look for other strategies, such as treating truth as a primitive, or just specifying axioms for its behaviour. Much of the work done by ‘true’ can be farmed out to reference and predication, where reference attaches you to the world, and truths are acceptable predications.

Much of the motivation for deflationism came from the mounting doubts about the correspondence theory of truth. (What exactly is correspondence? What are the two different things which are said to correspond?). Critics of the deflationary view say that while correspondence may have given a bad name to ‘robust’ approaches to truth (which look for connections to the world, and validating criteria for truth), there is too much at stake for such a tame retreat. Such critics find the idea of ‘truthmakers’ appealing, though the ‘making’ relation certainly counts as much too ‘robust’ for any deflationist.

Even if we doubt whether the concept of truth helps is to connect our talk to reality, critics claim that ‘true’ is far too important in ordinary talk and life to be reduced to a trivial technical term. You have only to consider disputes in a law court, in which people have to discuss whether testimony is true, then evaluate the truth about events from combinations of evidence, and judge whether witnesses appear to be truthful when questioned. We even ask witnesses to swear to speak truly, before they have said anything. The witness may apply the disquotational strategy, by repeating what they said when its truth is challenged, but a discussion in the jury room would struggle without attaching a strong meaning to the word ‘true’. It is hard to describe someone as a ‘liar’ without a robust sense of truth.

Deflationists are inclined to replace the idea of truth in ordinary life with belief and assertion, but accounts of belief seem to involve a fairly robust idea of truth. Such commitment to truth, for example, comes in degrees, which cannot be captured by neat formal methods. If I remark that “there is some truth in what you say”, this invites us to split your remark into more or less truthful parts, and we talk in science of a growing “verisimilitude” as a theory steadily improves. Beliefs are responsive to reasons, and can grow or diminish in strength. We could say that this was just an emotion, but most people would refer the strength of their beliefs to the weight of truth in them. It might be said that ‘true’ permits an inference from a proposition to a fact, and that we could never talk of the facts if we lacked a concept of truth. We might even say that no human enquiry makes any sense if we don’t specify that it aims at truth in its field. More technically minded philosophers tend to adhere to deflationist views of truth in the face of these criticisms, and modern philosophers must now beware of placing a huge weight on a concept which can often look rather thin.