On Minimalism about Truth

Wylie Breckenridge

I am going to motivate and present, but not evaluate, Horwich's 'minimalist' theory of 'true' and truth.[1] First, some clarification. I take it that a predicate such as 'true' is used to pick out a property, where I mean 'property' in the week sense of being any function from possible worlds to extensions at those worlds, where an *extension at a world* is a class of individuals of that world. In this sense there is the property of being in my desk draw, and the property of being either 6 feet tall or a resident of New York, neither of which might count as a property in some stronger sense. Not uncontroversially, but for sake of definiteness, for I will take it that the *meaning* of a predicate is the property that it picks out, that to *know* the meaning of a predicate is to know which property it picks out, and that to *give* the meaning of a predicate, or to *analyse* it, is to specify which property it picks out by giving conditions under which any individual in any world is in the extension of that property. The meaning of the predicate 'bachelor', for example, is that property whose extension at a world is the set of all bachelors in that world. One way to analyse 'bachelor' is to say: s is a bachelor iff s is a bachelor. This is not a helpful analysis, in the sense that anyone who does not already know what 'bachelor' means cannot use it come to know what it means - in effect it says that 'bachelor' means what 'bachelor' means. A more helpful analysis is: s is a bachelor iff s is an unmarried male (assume for present purposes that this is true). This is more helpful because one may know the meaning of 'unmarried' and 'male' but not 'bachelor', and by means of the analysis come to know the meaning of 'bachelor'. I shall use the term *reductive* for this kind of analysis - one by means of which someone who does not already do so may come to know the meaning of a predicate. Note that to know the meaning of a predicate is to know which property it picks out, not to know the extension of that property at each world, and we can know the first without knowing the second. I know the meaning of 'bachelor' (still assuming that the simple analysis is correct), but I don't know what its extension is, for example, in the actual world. I know which property it picks out because I know the conditions under which an individual is a bachelor. I don't know its extension in the actual world because I don't know who the actual bachelors are.

Here we are interested in the predicate 'true' and the property, truth, that it picks out. I say *the* predicate 'true', but ordinary language suggests that we have at least two. We say, for instance, that 'grass is green' is true, by which we seem to be predicating truth of a *sentence* – the words 'grass is green'. And we say that it is true that grass is green, by which we seem to be predicating truth of a *proposition* – that which is expressed by the words 'grass is green'. Horwich takes this as sufficient reason to think there are propositions as well as sentences, and that each has its own truth predicate. Let 'sentential truth' be a name for the property that we intend the first predicate to pick out, and 'propositional truth' be a name for the second. Sentential truth and propositional truth are distinct – there is at least one possible world (the actual world, for instance) at which the class of true propositions is distinct from the class of true sentences. Horwich thinks it more natural to set out a theory of propositional truth and then explain sentential truth in terms of it, the idea being that a sentence is true if and only if the proposition that it picks out (expresses) is true. He concedes that we could proceed instead by setting out a theory of sentential truth and then explaining propositional truth along these lines: a proposition is true if and only if it can be picked out by a true

[1] As presented his 'The Minimalist Conception of Truth' in S. Blackburn and K. Simmons (eds.) *Truth*.

sentence. But he takes natural language to suggest that we think of propositional truth as explanatorily more basic – we might say that ‘grass is green’ is true because grass is green, but not that grass is green because ‘grass is green’ is true – and thus the natural first subject for a theory of truth.

How might we analyse ‘true’, as it is applied to propositions? That is, how might we specify conditions under which a proposition in a world is true at that world? For any particular proposition there is a natural answer: the proposition that grass is green is true iff grass is green, the proposition that snow is white is true iff snow is white, and so on. We might say, then, that an analysis of ‘true’ is given by all instances of what Horwich calls ‘the equivalence schema’:

The proposition that p is true iff p.

This appears to be a reductive analysis. To use it to learn the conditions under which a particular proposition is true it is not necessary to already know the meaning of ‘true’ - it is only necessary to already know the meaning of the sentence used to express that proposition, i.e. to understand that proposition. But it is *not* a reductive analysis. To use it to learn, for *every* proposition, the conditions under which that proposition is true it is necessary to already understand *every* proposition. Nobody can, and so it is not possible to use this analysis to come to know the meaning of ‘true’, and so it is not, in the way that I am using the term, reductive.

Correspondence theories seek to reductively analyse ‘true’ by claiming that the condition under which a proposition is true is that it corresponds to a fact. Coherence theories do so by claiming that a proposition is true on condition that it belongs to a coherent set of beliefs. Pragmatist theories do so by claiming that a proposition is true on condition that it is useful to believe. Horwich’s minimalism rejects all these and claims, on the contrary, that there is *no* reductive analysis of ‘true’ - that there is no way of specifying general conditions under which any proposition is true that can be used by someone who does not know the meaning of ‘true’ to come to know it. Note that this is *not* to claim that we don’t know what ‘true’ means. The positive claim of Horwich’s theory is this: knowing what ‘true’ means consists in being disposed to accept all instances of the equivalence schema, and anyone who is so disposed, as most of us are, knows what it means. Note, first, that to know the meaning of ‘true’ according to this account does not require that we first understand every proposition. It only requires that if we *were* to come to understand a proposition then we *would* accept the corresponding instance of the schema. This, presumably, is what Horwich means by ‘disposed’. Note, second, the claim is not just that anyone who knows the meaning of ‘true’ will be disposed to accept all instances of the schema - that is uncontroversial. The claim is that knowing the meaning of ‘true’ *consists in* being so disposed, and that is certainly controversial.

What does Horwich’s minimalism say about truth as opposed to ‘true’? Note that theorising about ‘true’ is distinct from theorising about truth. The topic of the first is a predicate and its role in picking out a property. The topic of the second is the property that it picks out. It would be of interest to a student of bachelorhood, for example, that bachelors tend to be happier than married men, but it would be of no interest to a student of ‘bachelor’. What Horwich says about the property that ‘true’ picks out is similar, I think, to what we would naturally say about the property (in the weak sense)

that ‘in my desk draw’ picks out. This is not a ‘real’ property in the sense that the things in my desk drawer don’t ‘really’ have anything in common – it’s *just* a property (in the weak sense) that I might find useful to pick out when I’m thinking and talking. Compare this to the property, say, of being green. It might well be that green things have something ‘real’ in common – some kind of molecular structure, for example – and if this is so then being green is real in a way that being in my desk drawer is not. We might also say that being in my desk drawer is not a *reducible* property, in the sense that there are no other properties (in even the weak sense) in virtue of which the things in my desk drawer are in my desk drawer. Again contrast this with being green, for which it might well be the case that green things are green in virtue of being X, where X is some other property or combination of properties (perhaps properties of molecular structure). Note that there is a genuine distinction between being real and being reducible in the senses in which I am using them. As I have said, we would say that being in my desk drawer is not real and irreducible, and that being green is real and reducible. But we might also say that being a green thing in my desk drawer is not real but reducible (to being green and being in my desk drawer), and that being a photon is real but irreducible (current science says, I think, that photons are unstructured – basic constituents of the Universe).

Horwich’s view is that truth is more like being in my desk draw than being green. It is not real - there is nothing ‘real’ that true propositions have in common. It is, in effect, the infinitely disjunctive property such that p is true iff

p is the proposition *that grass is green* and grass is green
or
p is the proposition *that snow is white* and snow is white
or …

where there is one disjunct for each proposition. This is to put it alongside properties like being in my desk drawer, which is, in effect, the property such that x is in my desk drawer iff

x is the pair of scissors in my desk drawer
or
x is the pencil sharpener in my desk drawer
or …

where there is one disjunct for each thing in my drawer. Furthermore, he claims that truth is irreducible – there are no other properties (in even the weak sense) in virtue of which true propositions are true. We should expect no such reduction, he claims, because this disjunction is explanatorily basic – it accounts for everything that we believe and say about the truth of propositions.

If truth is not a real property, then why do we have the predicate ‘true’ at all? This is a question that Horwich is under some obligation to answer. He claims that we have it because, and only because, it is useful: it gives us a way to assert a proposition by mentioning but not using it. (Compare this to ‘in my desk drawer’ - it seems that unless this was somehow useful to me in my speech and thought then there would be little point in having it.) ‘True’ is not particularly useful when I want to assert that grass is green – instead of saying “’grass is green’ is true” I can just say “grass is green”. It is

more useful if I hear you assert a proposition using a long and easily forgotten sentence, and with which I agree – I can just say "that's true." It is more useful if I want to assert a proposition without knowing which proposition I am asserting – I can say "whatever Mary said this morning was true", even when I have no idea what Mary said. It is much more useful, and perhaps even necessary, if I want to assert every one of an infinite class of propositions. I can't assert that if grass is green then grass is green, that if snow is white then snow is white, and so on for every possible proposition. But I can assert that every proposition of the form 'if p then p' is true, from which it can be inferred, using the equivalence schema, that if grass is green then grass is green, that if snow is white then snow is white, and so on for every possible proposition.

There are, then, three major claims made by Horwich's minimalism. First, that there is no reductive analysis of 'true' and to know its meaning is to be disposed to accept all instances of the equivalence schema. Second, that truth is not a real property, that it cannot be reduced to other properties, and that everything about it is best explained by instances of the equivalence schema. And third, that truth is nothing more than a property whose associated predicate we can use to assert propositions that otherwise would be more difficult or impossible to assert. The theory is 'minimalist' in this sense: it implies that although 'true' may be linguistically and logically useful and interesting, truth itself is metaphysically *un*interesting.