

## Minimalism about Truth and Minimalism about Truth-Aptness

In “Minimalism and Truth-Aptness”, we wrote: “[M]inimalism about truth in itself poses no threat to non-cognitivists in ethics and no-truth theorists of indicative conditionals. Only an independent, appropriately minimalist theory of truth aptness would pose a genuine threat.” (p.290) Although we stand by the spirit of this remark, we now think that it is not strictly speaking correct. There are many kinds of minimalism about truth. Some of these kinds of minimalism about truth -- all quite implausible -- entail minimalism about truth-aptness. Others -- with varying degrees of plausibility -- do not entail minimalism about truth-aptness. Appropriately revised, our thesis is that no *plausible* minimalism about truth in itself poses a threat to non-cognitivists in ethics and no-truth theories of indicative conditionals. One must look to independent, appropriately minimalist theories of truth aptness if one is to find a genuine minimalist threat.

Two examples will help to illustrate the main point. Consider, first, the minimalist view that ‘S’ and ‘‘S’ is true’ ALWAYS have the same content -- and, in particular, that they have the same truth-values. On plausible assumptions about quotation, the sentence ‘‘S’ is true’ is truth-apt (perhaps even bivalent, though we don’t need to insist on that). Thus, given the (material) equivalence of ‘S’ and ‘‘S’ is true’, it will follow that ‘S’ is also truth-apt (and perhaps even either true or false). From this, it will follow that ethical sentences and indicative sentences are truth-apt (and perhaps even either true or false). But, of course, it will also follow that paradoxical sentences, indexical sentences for which no context of utterance has been specified,

vague sentences, nonsense sentences, sentences which do not have assertoric force, word salad ‘sentences’ and so on are all truth-apt as well. This result is absurd; even though this kind of minimalism about truth does entail minimalism about truth-aptness, there is no threat here to non-cognitivists in ethics and no-truth theorists of indicative conditionals.

Consider, next, the minimalist view that ‘S’ and ‘It is true that S’ ALWAYS have the same content in any given context of utterance -- and, in particular, that they have the same truth-values (if they have truth-values) in any given context of utterance. This time, on plausible assumptions about the “It is true that” operator, there is no reason at all to think that ‘It is true that S’ is bivalent. (For example, suppose that “It is true that” is a trivial weak Kleene connective: where ‘S’ fails to be either true or false, ‘It is true that S’ will likewise fail to be either true or false.) In this case, minimalism about truth-aptness is clearly not entailed by minimalism about truth; and, again, there is no threat to non-cognitivists in ethics and no-truth theorists of indicative conditionals.

Our aim in what follows is to provide a systematic catalogue of minimalist views of truth, and then to use this catalogue to vindicate the claim that no *plausible* minimalism about truth in itself poses a threat to non-cognitivists in ethics and no-truth theories of indicative conditionals. Where examples are required, we shall consider the case of indicative conditionals: most of the current debate has focussed on the case of ethical sentences, but we feel this focus may have skewed the discussion in unfortunate ways. We shall not be concerned to consider all possible positions which might go under the label ‘minimalism about truth’; rather, we shall

restrict our attention to those which claim that the primary roles of truth operators and truth predicates are semantic but minimal. Thus, for example, we shall ignore those kinds of minimalisms which hold that the truth vocabulary should be given a performative or expressivist analysis; and we shall also ignore those kinds of minimalisms which hold that the truth vocabulary requires systematic elimination in favour of an ‘immanent’ truth vocabulary (‘true-in-L’, etc.)

Before we get to the main business of the paper, we shall need to say something about several preliminary matters. *First*, there is the question of the bearers of truth: what are the things which are up for assessment in terms of truth and falsity? *Second*, there is the question of truth-aptness: what is required in order for an appropriate entity to be truth-apt? *Third*, there is the question of logical form: should we suppose that an investigation of minimalism about truth can proceed independently of the development of a substantial notion of logical form?

Preliminaries over, we shall proceed to our taxonomy of minimalist views about truth. This taxonomy has two dimensions. The first dimension concerns the question whether the views are formulated in terms of: (i) truth operators; or (ii) truth predicates; or (iii) devices of infinitary conjunction and disjunction. The second dimension concerns the question whether the views are formulated in terms of: (i) lists; or (ii) schemas; or (iii) rules of inference; or (iv) principles of substitutivity. Given our taxonomy, we shall then proceed to show that there is no plausible minimalism about truth which entails minimalism about truth-aptness.

**Bearers of truth:** There are many things which have been and/or can be taken to be bearers of truth. Moreover, there have been and/or can be many different views which can be taken about the relative importance of different bearers of truth -- e.g. there have been and/or can be many different views about whether particular bearers of truth as primitive or secondary (derivative). We shall distinguish three importantly different kinds of bearers of truth, and then make some brief remarks about the relationships which obtain between these kinds.

The first class of bearers of truth consists of entities which are only contingently truth-apt (if truth-apt at all). Such entities include sentence-tokens -- physical inscriptions, physical signals (sound or light), and the like -- and sentence-tokenings, i.e. acts in which sentence-tokens are produced.

The second class of bearers of truth consists of entities which are necessarily -- and, indeed, analytically and *a priori* -- truth apt: propositions, thought contents, belief contents, and the like. These entities may be variously conceived: e.g. as sets of possible worlds (or, more generally, as sets of truth-evaluable circumstances); or as structured entities whose components are objects, properties, and functions of various kinds; or ... .

The third class of bearers of truth consists of entities which, if truth-apt are necessarily truth-apt. Such entities include interpreted sentence-tokens -- i.e.

sentence-tokens paired with interpretation functions -- and interpreted sentence-tokenings. Not all interpreted sentence-tokens are truth-apt: e.g. those which lack assertoric force. But those interpreted sentence-tokens which have assertoric (or statementative) force are necessarily truth-apt. (This isn't controversial -- c.f. our subsequent discussion of truth-aptness.)

We take the view that the first class of bearers of truth is primitive: moreover, we develop our objections to minimalism about truth-aptness with this class of bearers of truth in mind. However, we take it that more or less the same objections can also be developed with respect to the third class of bearers of truth as well (even under the assumption that these should be taken to be primitive). After all, in this case -- no less than in the first case -- there is a question about the force which is given to a particular sentence-token by the interpretation with which it is paired. There is no obvious reason why, e.g., indicative conditionals should be supposed to have assertoric force, given merely the assumption that truth is a minimal property of interpreted sentence-tokens which have assertoric force.

Quite different questions arise when one considers the second class of bearers of truth. Here, there is no room for any substantial doctrine about truth-aptness: for we have already restricted our attention to a class of truth-apt entities. In this case, while there is still room for dispute about the status of truth, that dispute can have no consequences for questions about truth-aptness. But, on the other hand, that dispute is also obviously irrelevant to questions about the status of indicative conditionals -- for the issue is then one about whether indicative conditionals express entities of the kind which are definitionally truth-apt.

**Truth-aptness:** The simplest position to take would be the view that an entity is truth-apt just in case it is either true or false. However, there are numerous reasons why this won't do: some sentences are vague, some are paradoxical, some are nonsensical, some include non-referring terms, some include indexical vocabulary, etc. (Perhaps, for some entities, some of these cases are not problematic. But, in general, all must be considered when one raises questions about bivalence.)

In response to these problems, a natural thought is to turn to the claim that an entity is truth-apt just in case it is appropriately assessed for truth and/or just in case it ought to be assessed for truth and/or just in case it aims at truth. There may be problems with each of these suggestions -- e.g. one might find reason to reject the first two when one comes to consider the semantic paradoxes; however, we shall suppose that these suggestions are at least on the right track. Moreover, we shall suppose that a more precise answer can only be obtained from the construction of a compositional semantics for a language: at root, truth-apt sentences are those which are put together from the right kind of ingredients in the right kind of way. We do not need to pursue the details of this suggestion here.

**Logical form:** Discussions about minimalism about truth-aptness often cannot proceed without some discussion about possible discrepancies between surface syntax and logical form. Minimalism about truth (and truth-aptness) is sometimes motivated by considerations about surface syntax -- e.g. that indicative conditionals share the (relevant) surface syntax of uncontroversially truth-apt sentences. However,

it is unclear that the consistent application of this kind of motivation will deliver acceptable results.

Consider the following case. Let  $s_0$  name the sentence ‘Open the door’. Then the biconditional ‘Open the door iff  $s_0$  is true’ -- which has the form of an instantiation of one kind of T-schema -- expresses a perfectly well-formed sentence of English. So, if we hold that legitimate substitution instances of the schema are, *ipso facto*, truth-apt, then it turns out -- surely implausibly -- that at least some imperatives are truth-apt. (In general, a biconditional of the form ‘Do X iff p’ means ‘If p, do X; and if not p, then don’t do X’.)

Of course, there’s a trick here. Provided we translate our biconditional connective with the English “if and only if”, we get a sentence which makes perfect sense. But that “if and only if” doesn’t have the properties of a standard logical connective: it could just as well be rendered by “exactly if”, “just in case”, etc. (Note, too, that the same trick can be played with ‘Open the door iff ‘Open the door’ is true. On the assumption that “‘Open the door’ is true” is false because ‘Open the door’ is not truth-apt, “Open the door iff ‘Open the door’ is true” amounts to the instruction not to open the door.)

Perhaps some minimalists might reply that there are other surface syntactic tests which can be used to winnow out the imperatives -- e.g. imperatives cannot be embedded as the antecedents of conditionals. However, consider instead the sentence ‘You are to open the door’. No surface syntactic tests can tell us whether it is truth-apt or not -- for, in context, it can be used to make a statement, to issue a command,

to ask a question, and so on. The immediate moral seems to be that one needs an independent judgement about logical form before one can decide whether an utterance of this sentence is truth-apt. And then there seems to be no reason not to generalise. (More about this later.)

## II

We turn now to our taxonomy of minimalist views about truth. As foreshadowed in the introduction, there are two dimensions to our taxonomy. The *first* dimension concerns the question whether the views are formulated in terms of: (i) truth operators; or (ii) truth predicates; or (iii) devices of infinitary conjunction and disjunction. The *second* dimension concerns the question whether the views are formulated in terms of: (i) lists; or (ii) schemas; or (iii) rules of inference; or (iv) principles of substitutivity. We shall begin by taking the second dimension to be primary.

**Lists:** Minimalisms about truth are sometimes formulated in terms of lists of sentences. Perhaps the simplest such view is given by the idea that a complete theory of truth would consist of a list of all the sentences which are true. Numerous questions immediately arise. In what language should the sentences be framed? At what time and place should the list be constructed, and by whom? How could this theory give an adequate account of uses of truth vocabulary embedded in modal contexts, or within the scope of verbs of propositional attitude, etc? In order to answer these questions, it seems that the account needs to be modified. First, we need

to consider more languages -- every possible extension of our language must be considered. Second, we need more lists: one for each tuple consisting of a time, a place, and a world. Even then, we don't have enough -- we need lists which tell us what is true according to a given agent's beliefs (even when those beliefs are vague, inconsistent, etc.). Probably, we still don't have enough. This idea seems so unpromising that we shall henceforth disregard it.

**Schemas:** Minimalisms about truth are often formulated in terms of biconditional schemas. Suppose that  $P$  is a sentence, and that  $s$  is a name for  $P$ . (We shall fuss later about whether  $P$  is a sentence-token, a sentence-type, or something else.) Then three candidates for minimalist biconditional schemas are the following:

- (i)  $P \leftrightarrow s$  is true
- (ii)  $P \leftrightarrow 'P'$  is true
- (iii)  $P \leftrightarrow$  It is true that  $P$

Of course, (i)-(iii) are schematic in several senses. One important question concerns the interpretation of the biconditional connective ' $\leftrightarrow$ '. On the weakest interpretation, it expresses mere material equivalence. But there are other possibilities: strict (necessary) equivalence; relevant equivalence (of one kind or another); logical (a priori) equivalence; and so on. Another important question concerns the treatment of 'semantic anomalies', i.e. sentences which are neither true nor false, singular terms which fail to refer, etc. Should we allow that instances of these schemas can be true even though some of the sub-components of those instances of the schemas are semantically anomalous? If not, then how is the proposal that these schemas

encapsulate theories of truth to be interpreted? Should we say, instead, that the expressions flanking the biconditional connective have the same content (whether or not they have any)? Or should we insist that the substitution instances of the schema are restricted to those which are not semantically anomalous? On the other hand, if we do allow that instances of these schemas can be true even though some of the sub-components of those instances of the schemas are semantically anomalous, do we want to insist that all instances of these schemas are true? If not, how are we to circumscribe the class of instances of these schemas?

**Rules of Inference:** Minimalisms about truth are sometimes formulated in terms of rules of inference. Using the framework of our discussion of schematic minimalisms, we have three candidates for minimalist rules of inference

- (i) From “P” infer “s is true”, and vice versa
- (ii) From “P” infer “‘P’ is true”, and vice versa
- (iii) From “P” infer “It is true that P”, and vice versa

Again, (i)-(iii) are schematic in several senses. In particular, one important question concerns the kind of system in which these rules are supposed to be embedded. In axiomatic systems in which careful attention is paid to the formulation of the axioms and the other rules, it seems plausible to think that these rules will be universally acceptable. But in natural deduction systems in which there are only loose constraints upon the rule of assumption (hypothesis introduction), it is much less clear that these rules will be unexceptionable. (Perhaps (iii) will be. But there is a clear threat of paradox in the unrestricted use of (i) and (ii), at least in the ‘descending’ direction.)

**Principles of Substitutivity:** Minimalisms about truth can also be formulated in terms of principles of substitutivity. Again using the framework of our discussion of schematic minimalisms, we have three candidates for minimalist principles of substitutivity:

- (i) 'P' and 's is true' are intersubstitutable in all non-quotational contexts
- (ii) 'P' and "'P' is true" are intersubstitutable in all non-quotational contexts
- (iii) 'P' and 'It is true that P' are intersubstitutable in all non-quotational contexts

Once more, (i)-(iii) are schematic in several senses. In particular, one important question concerns the kind of intersubstitutability which these principles confer. Perhaps the most minimal kind of intersubstitutability would be intersubstitutability *salva veritate* -- and this much would certainly be intended by anyone proposing to defend this kind of minimalism about truth. However, there are stronger principles which might also be produced -- e.g. intersubstitutability *salva propositione*. Another important question concerns the qualification 'in all non-quotational contexts': what are we to count as quotational contexts? On a strict reading, nothing less than the occurrence of quotation marks would suffice: but some theorists have wished to say that attitude contexts (and even modal contexts) are, despite appearances, quotational.

Given our taxonomy of kinds of minimalism about truth, we now ask two questions:

(i) do any of these kinds of minimalism about truth entail minimalism about truth-aptness?; (ii) if so, are those minimalisms about truth which entail minimalism about truth-aptness even *prima facie* plausible?

The crucial issue, in our view, is brought clearly to light by the behaviour of sentences which involve truth predicates. Consider ‘s is true’ where s is a name. One might take the view that instances of this schema are simply false when ‘s’ refers to something which is not truth-apt. If so, then it seems plausible to think that one will be committed to the claim that every substitution instance of ‘s is true’ is truth-apt. If one were to insist that ‘s is true’ is truth-apt just in case the object referred to by ‘s’ is truth-apt, one would now be able to extract the absurd conclusion that everything (or, at any rate, everything which can be named) is truth-apt. In order to avoid the absurd conclusion, one needs to restrict the insistence: the object referred to by ‘s’ need not be truth-apt even though ‘s is true’ is truth-apt. The question is: how is the restriction to be delimited?

A natural first thought is that we should restrict our attention to cases in which ‘s’ names a sentence. (Recall that we stipulated that ‘s’ names a sentence when we introduced the first schema in which ‘s is true’ figures.) However, again, if we take the view that ‘s is true’ and ‘P’ -- where s is a name for the sentence ‘P’ -- are to have the same content, then it will follow that ‘P’ is truth-apt, for any sentence ‘P’. So, for example, the sentence ‘Open the door’ will count as truth-apt (as will ‘Ugh!’),

‘Enough!’, and ‘Buzz off!’). While this might well be called minimalism about truth-aptness, it is not a view with much to recommend it.

Beyond this point, it is clear that we need to turn our attention to the admissible substitution instances for ‘P’ -- i.e. there is nothing about the sentence ‘s is true’ which suggests further restrictions (even granted the stipulation that instances of ‘s’ refer to sentences). Consequently, the argument of JOS now kicks in. What we wanted was to get some information about the truth-aptness of ‘P’ from our minimalist principles about truth. But it now transpires that we must use antecedent information about the truth-aptness of sentences in order to frame our restrictions upon the suitable substituends for ‘P’ in those minimalist principles. Given that we learn nothing about the truth-aptness of ‘P’ from consideration of the truth-aptness of ‘s is true’ -- and given that the minimalist truth principles are only intended to apply to truth-apt substitution instances -- we can only demarcate the class of allowed substitution instances by using antecedent information about the truth-aptness of sentences.

So far, the discussion has been developed in terms of the sentence schema ‘s is true’, and carries an obvious moral for minimalisms about truth involving schemas and/or rules of inference. Clearly, exactly the same kinds of considerations will arise when we consider the sentence schema “‘P’ is true”, and the associated minimalisms about truth involving schemas or rules of inference. Given that “‘P’ is true” is truth-apt for any sentential substitution instance, we get no information about the truth-aptness of substituends in ‘P’ from consideration of the associated substitution instance in “‘P’ is true”. So we can only demarcate the allowed class of substitution instances in the

relevant schemas and rules by using antecedent information about the truth-aptness of sentences.

Suppose we consider instead the sentence schema 'It is true that P'. On plausible assumptions, instances of this schema will be truth-apt just in case instances of the schema 'P' are truth-apt. Consequently, we get no more information about the truth-aptness of sentences from consideration of the one sentence schema than we do from consideration of the other. So we can draw the same moral again: there is no inference from this kind of minimalism about truth to minimalism about truth-aptness. Moreover, we can now conclude that no plausible minimalism about truth which relies on schemas or rules of inference entails minimalism about truth-aptness: only those views which hold that everything, or at any rate every sentence, is truth-apt have that consequence. (\*\*There is a further lesson to be drawn here. A minimalism developed in terms of this sentence schema will probably be able to avoid semantic paradoxes involving truth -- but only at the price of crippling the expressive power of the language. In particular, we shall be forced to restrict our attention to a language which is too weak to allow the development of arithmetic.\*\*)

What about minimalisms which turn on principles of substitutivity? Well, one natural objection to these kinds of minimalisms turns on consideration of sentences involving hyperintensional operators. Suppose, for example, that little Johnny said that Tara is a pussy. Does it follow that little Johnny said that it is true that Tara is a pussy? (Suppose that little Johnny doesn't have the word 'truth' in his vocabulary, that he does not possess the concept of truth, etc.) It seems very plausible to think that 'P' is

NOT intersubstitutable *salva veritate* in hyperintensional contexts with any of: ‘s is true’, “‘P’ is true” and ‘It is true that P’.

Perhaps we might seek to avoid this problem by circumscribing the contexts in which the alleged principle of substitutivity applies. However, even if there is an acceptable version of the principle, it seems clear that it won’t entail any kind of minimalism about truth-aptness. After all, the principle can only apply to truth-apt substitution instances of ‘P’. (Given ‘Buzz off’, we don’t want to be committed to “It is true that buzz off” by the principle of substitutivity.) So, as in the previous cases, one can only get a commitment to minimalism about truth-aptness via the implausible -- crazy? -- assumption that every sentence is truth-apt.

All that now remains is to consider those minimalisms which are developed in terms of prosentential quantification and the like. Here, we can be brief. Given that the root idea is that the fundamental use of the word ‘true’ is to allow for infinite conjunctions and/or disjunctions of sentences, there is still a prior question about truth-aptness which must be answered before we can say *which* sentences are candidates for those conjunctions and disjunctions. Given the arguments already advanced in this paper, it is straightforward to see that there is no route here from minimalism about truth to minimalism about truth-aptness.

So, we are done. However semantic minimalism about truth is formulated, we have seen that either that minimalism about truth is utterly implausible, or else that it does not entail minimalism about truth-aptness. Since the no-truth theories about

conditionals are formulated in terms of truth-aptness, there is nothing in any plausible minimalism about truth which entails that such theories are untenable.

#### IV

Even if it is true that no plausible minimalism about truth entails minimalism about truth-aptness, at least one question remains. In “Minimalism And Truth-Aptness”, we argued, roughly, that minimalism about truth-aptness must be rejected because it fails to preserve enough of the central platitudes in which truth-aptness figures. In particular, there are central platitudes connecting belief and truth-aptness -- and central platitudes connecting belief, action, information-processing, etc. -- which minimalism about truth-aptness cannot preserve. But, if that is right, isn't there a similar argument to the conclusion that minimalism about truth must also be rejected, on the grounds that it fails to preserve enough of the central platitudes in which truth figures? Surely there are central platitudes connecting belief and truth -- and central platitudes connecting belief, action and information-processing, etc. -- which minimalism about truth cannot preserve. If so, then there can be no question of endorsing minimalism about truth while rejecting minimalism about truth-aptness on the grounds which we provided.

There are several points to be made in response to this argument. *First*, even if there is a similar argument against minimalism about truth, it is a distinct and independent argument. Until the argument is made, it remains a doxastic possibility that truth is

minimal even though truth-aptness isn't. Moreover, if the argument is good, it doesn't undermine any of the important conclusions of our paper -- for the main point which we wanted to establish is that minimalism about truth doesn't provide any reason to reject no-truth theories of indicative conditionals, etc. That there are other ways of making the same point doesn't detract from the correctness of the point. *Second*, it isn't clear that the allegedly similar argument against minimalism about truth is as strong as the argument against minimalism about truth-aptness. It seems correct to think that there are central platitudes connecting belief and truth -- e.g. that the aim of belief is truth. Consequently, it seems correct to think that the conceptual role of truth cannot be too minimal. However, it doesn't follow from this that the property of truth is not metaphysically minimal -- i.e. it doesn't follow that all of the central features of the property of truth aren't expressed by one of the minimalist schemas. (Recall that it was part of our argument to claim, not merely that the conceptual role of truth-aptness fails to be minimal, but that the property of truth-aptness is, itself, metaphysically robust.) So it seems that there is still room for the view that truth is minimal while truth-aptness is not -- where this is construed as the view that the property of truth-aptness is metaphysically robust while the property of truth is not. (Perhaps a slightly different way of formulating the point is to suggest that the property of truth -- the best realiser of the platitudes -- can also be picked out by one of the minimalist schemas.)

(\*\*\* What do we think? Well, I incline to the view that truth isn't minimal either.

However, I am not sure whether we should go into this. \*\*\*)