

A New Approach to the Coherence Theory of Truth

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Abstract:

This paper does *not* argue that the coherence theory should be the accepted theory about what truth is. It aims, rather, to present the coherence theory of truth in a new light, in a way that sheds understanding on why the theory has had such prominence in the history of the philosophy of truth. Thus, although this paper is not a defence of the theory *per se*, it offers a charitable interpretation of it. The coherence theory has a paradoxical status in the literature, since it is considered the chief competitor with the correspondence theory and yet critiques of it are often extremely scathing. This paper is designed to reveal a better grasp and understanding of what the coherence theory's status should be. The first important result is that coherence is a perfectly acceptable extensional description of truth, as it simply predicates something about all the true things. The second even more interesting result is that if coherentists want their theory to achieve an analysis of the meaning of truth then they must be committed to an ontological position, specifically, some form of idealism. The conclusions of this paper therefore are informative about the theoretical space that coherentists have to move in today and also hopefully illuminative of why the coherence theory has been attached to the philosophical doctrines and positions that it has been associated with historically.

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In philosophy the question, ‘What do we actually use this word or this proposition for?’ repeatedly leads to valuable insights.

–Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* 6.211.¹

Part I: The Framework for Theories of Truth

1. Introduction

A theory of truth is some choice of the necessary and sufficient conditions that make a thing have the property of being true. For example, to say that the true things are exactly the things which are useful to believe, is to offer a theory of truth. If one were to know a sentence was true, then one could infer that it was useful (in virtue of it being a necessary condition) and if one were to know a sentence was useful, then one could infer that it was true (in virtue of it being a sufficient condition). The chosen condition can, of course, be more complex than a simple property. A theory of truth might say, for instance, that the true things are all and only those things that are either useful or discovered by scientific methods. This may be understood as a condition that is itself a combination of two more basic conditions. The way conditions can be built can be understood in terms of the connectives of propositional logic: conjunction ($A \wedge B$), disjunction ($A \vee B$), conditional ($A \rightarrow B$), negation ($\neg A$). This represents a precise way of understanding what theories of truth are and will clarify the nature of disagreements between competing views. Many things have been called theories of truth which do not say anything about the necessary and sufficient conditions for truth and are sometimes mistakenly considered to be competitors with each other.²

In order to determine which theory of truth is better or more interesting than others, some criteria must be specified by which the choice of conditions can be judged. Richard Kirkham has argued that there are remarkably different projects

¹ Wittgenstein (1921) p. 65. The original quotation appears in parentheses.

² See Kirkham (1992) p. 38 for examples.

that a theory of truth can be put forward as fulfilling and that they have their own criteria.³ Generally, there are projects that are not as bold as others and are therefore easier to fulfill, and there are projects that are more restrictive and consequently more difficult to fulfill. For example, a less restrictive project would be to say what all true things in the actual world have in common. If all true things just happen to be useful then being useful is a necessary and sufficient condition for being true. This is to say that the true things and the useful things are *materially equivalent*, meaning it can never be the case that a thing has one and not the other. The theory would therefore say that a thing is true if and only if (or “iff” for short) it were useful. If such a theory were sound, we could draw the inference from a thing being true to it being useful, but it might still be said that the thing is true *in virtue* of something else, like correctly describing reality. This would amount to truth being materially equivalent to being useful, but truth *consisting in* something else. This is an important distinction that will guide the structure of this paper.

Following the standard terminology in the philosophy of language, the project of finding a material equivalence will be called “the extension project”. This project tries to say something about all the objects that fall under the predicate “is true”. The deeper project will be called “the meaning project”, for it aims to give something that is equivalent to the phrase “is true”. Kirkham calls this second project “the assertion project” but misconstrues its place within the broader scheme of theories of truth.⁴ Kirkham places under the larger category of “metaphysical” projects any project that specifies the necessary and sufficient conditions for truth. The assertion project, however, is not included under this label and is instead called a “speech-act” project. Kirkham correctly acknowledges that to fulfill such a project is to make a bolder claim than the less demanding ones, but the demarcation between it and metaphysical theories is misleading. To have a theory that fixed the meaning of “is true” would be also to fulfill the extension project precisely because that theory

³ Kirkham (1992) pp. 20-31.

⁴ See Kirkham (1992) pp. 20-1 for the division into projects and sub-projects.

would at the same time provide the necessary and sufficient conditions for truth. For example, to hold that “is true” means “corresponds with reality” would entail that corresponding with reality were a necessary and sufficient condition for truth. The meaning project will therefore be understood here as getting what the extension project does and taking it further. It says that not only does a condition coincide with being true, but that it actually is another way of talking about the property of truth.

Kirkham also describes the assertion project as fixing the intension, sense and connotation of “is true”. A separate project, called the “essence” project, is considered as fixing the necessary and sufficient conditions for truth that would hold in every possible world. This reveals a potential confusion of terms, since “intension” is sometimes used to mean what Kirkham means by “essence”. For illustration, sometimes a condition coincides with a property in every possible world and yet the condition still not fix what the property consists in.⁵ Consider a theory of being trilateral, for instance: in every possible world, all and only those objects which are trilateral are also triangular. Yet these two properties simply are different things, namely of having three sides in the first and having three angles in the second. Indeed, the theory which says all and only those objects which have three sides are trilateral, fulfills the strongest project that a theory might aim to achieve. Another way of looking at this project is that it would explain to someone who did not know what “trilateral” meant how to use the word, whereas describing it as equivalent to triangular would be misleading. It seems that “has three sides” *unpacks* what it means to be trilateral. Sometimes intension is merely a matter of what holds in all possible worlds. Others, like Kirkham, use “intension” as a synonym for “meaning”.⁶ The concern here will be with the extension project, as outlined above, and the deeper project which will just be referred to as “the meaning project”

⁵ Braun (2012) pp. 11-3.

⁶ Kirkham (1992) p. 9.

to avoid taking a position on whether intension should be thought of as identical or different to meaning.⁷

The correspondence theory has been the most well received theory of truth, and it is usually taken to be fulfilling the meaning project. It says that for a thing to be true means that it corresponds with reality. Historically, its chief competitor has been the coherence theory of truth. Some writers, however, dismiss the coherence theory from the outset and characterise it as plainly flawed.⁸ Understanding this tension between the coherence theory's historical importance and its often scathing critical reception is one of the motivations of this paper. Given the framework of the different projects of theories of truth, it will be seen to what extent the coherence theory of truth is viable. Specifically, it will be seen how far the coherence theory can go based on its own features, in terms of whether it can fulfill the strong project of fixing what truth consists in or whether it can merely describe the extension of "is true". As will be seen, the coherence theory of truth is never argued for in isolation. Advocates of the theory have always married coherence about truth with some other positions on ontological, epistemological, or semantic issues. To what extent a coherentist about truth needs to be committed to these other issues is one of the questions this paper seeks to answer. The different avenues coherentists can take to make their view plausible will be considered and explored.

2. Deflationism vs. Substantial Theories

2.1 The equivalence schema

The broadest distinction in what are usually called theories of truth is between deflationary theories, or deflationism, and substantial theories. Deflationary theories are not exactly like theories in the sense recounted above. The key feature of deflationism is that there is no particular condition that all true things are true in virtue of. Each particular truth, deflationists maintain, has its own condition. "Snow

⁷ See Braun (2012) for discussion.

⁸ For examples of the main objections see Kirkham (1992) pp. 107-8, Russell (1912) pp. 90-1, Walker (1989) p. 26 and Young (1995) pp. 64-7.

is white” is true because snow is white and “Canberra is Australia’s capital” is true because Canberra is Australia’s capital, they would say. Deflationism produces a schema that can be applied so that, for any object which is of the sort of thing that might be true, a unique truth-condition may be derived. The schema has the form:

$$\langle p \rangle \text{ is true iff } p$$

where $\langle p \rangle$ is a place-holder for the sorts of things that can be true (truth-bearers) and p is a place-holder for a sentence that refers to the relevant parts of reality.⁹

Taking a sentence as a truth-bearer, $\langle p \rangle$ can be replaced by the sentence in quotation marks and p replaced by the disquoted sentence. For example, the schema generates: “grass is green” is true iff grass is green. For a belief it would generate: the belief that grass is green is true iff grass is green.¹⁰ Significantly, the truth-bearer on the right-hand side does not have to be a thing that is actually true. The equivalence schema tells us what the truth-condition of a thing would be even if it is false. For example, the schema generates: “Melbourne is Australia’s capital” is true iff Melbourne is Australia’s capital. Deflationism therefore does an odd combination of things. It denies that there is any particular condition that is fulfilled by each true thing and yet it allows that for any truth-bearer whatsoever we can derive its truth-condition.

2.2 Substantial theories

Substantial theories of truth can be understood as trying to explain how we know that the deflationist schema works. Not only does the schema generate the correct truth-condition for any given sentence, but also it seems as though it will always generate the correct condition for any arbitrary sentence. Reflection on what exactly is going on in the schema might allow for a description of the nature of it. From this, a theory of truth specifying the necessary and sufficient conditions for truth in general might be able to be drawn. Instances of the schema reveal that the right-

⁹ This version of the schema is borrowed from the article on “The Deflationary Theory of Truth” in *the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. See Damnjanovic & Stoljar (2010).

¹⁰ Note the difference between (1) \langle the belief that grass is green \rangle is true; and (2) \langle the belief that “grass is green” is true \rangle . (1) says a belief is true and (2) names a belief about a sentence.

hand side is always talking about the way the world is, or in a word, reality. A phrase on the left like “grass is green” just names a sentence, but the disquoted phrase on the right points to reality. All instances of the schema similarly point to things in the world and the way they are.

The reason why the schema is always taking about reality should be clear. The sorts of things that can be true or false just are things that say something about the world. They are what are known as declarative sentences. Inserting into the schema phrases like “please open the door” or “where are the keys?” generates nonsense. Therefore, as a preliminary point, it might be said that true things have some sort of positive connection with reality. This revelation is as ancient as philosophy itself.¹¹ It explains why the correspondence theory of truth has been and remains so popular. All that theory says is that correspondence with the way things are is what is going on in all instances of the deflationist schema; correspondence is the necessary and sufficient condition for truth. Admittedly, correspondence is different for each thing. Sometimes it is correspondence with the capital city of Australia, sometimes with the colour of grass. It can hardly be denied though that “correspondence with reality” captures the general relation that is common to all true things. Some writers have even called it a fact of ordinary language that this is what the word “true” means.¹² In that case then, it seems there is a straightforward theory which fulfills the deepest project that a theory of truth can be used for. “Corresponds with reality” seems to unpack the meaning of “is true”.

Colin McGinn has expressed an unfounded objection to the correspondence theory that reveals how the theory can be greatly misinterpreted.¹³ McGinn thinks that the equivalence schema generates the correct truth-conditions for sentences but argues that “correspondence” does not describe what is happening in all instances of it. The

¹¹ See Smith (2012) p. 5 for examples in ancient philosophy of the connection between truth and reality.

¹² Walker (1989) pp. 2-3, 21; Austin (1950) p. 152; James (1907) p. 53.

¹³ McGinn (2002).

argument proceeds by saying there are many different correspondence relations a sentence can have to possible facts. Correspondence can be thought of as a function from a sentence to a fact and while “snow is white” can map on to the fact *snow is white* there is equally a function mapping it onto *snow is not white*. There is no reason to favour one type of correspondence over another and so to specify one correspondence function as privileged would be to collapse the theory into deflationism altogether. The correspondence theory is either too imprecise or says nothing beyond deflationism anyway, and so should not be the accepted theory of truth, McGinn thinks.

The problem with this objection is that “correspondence” is not nearly as ambiguous as McGinn suggests. While it might make sense for there to be different correspondence functions, one of them is in fact privileged over others by ordinary language. For illustration, suppose a restaurant bill is paid one day with a signature on the bill. The waiter can legitimately ask whether the signature on the bill corresponds to the signature on the card, but it would be absurd to ask in reply “correspond in what way, negatively or positively?” To return to truth, when it said that a sentence corresponds with reality it is just assumed that the disquotational correspondence is what is in question. The correspondence theory says more than deflationism, however, as it says that “correspondence” is what all instances of the schema have in common.

This reveals an important point that will guide much of this discussion. The positive connection with reality, which the correspondence theory of truth tries to directly capture, is going to be a basic requirement for any successful theory of truth. For even the extension project needs to capture the correct things as being true or false, and then obviously the meaning project will also need this as a minimum requirement. There are other requirements that will need to be added so that some theories can be determined better than others. Even in the extension project, a theory could be adequate with regard to picking out the correct things as true and

yet be utterly trivial, like a theory that said a thing is true iff it is true. The criteria relevant to particular projects will be discussed in Parts II and III. Here, the attention will be on the basic claim that truth has some positive connection with reality. While this claim has intuitive appeal, it would not, however, be correct to say that it is absolutely universally acknowledged and thus a discussion of views dismissing this claim is in place.

3. Anti-realism

3.1 Denying the facts

Not all philosophers agree that the equivalence schema fixes the correct truth conditions for sentences. Those of this opinion usually take issue with the nature of the right-hand side of the formula and are called anti-realists about truth. Since this paper works within the framework that the equivalence is in fact sound, some comments are in place about the tenability of these views which would interpret the project as misguided from the start. A full refutation of anti-realism would require a project of its own. The remarks here serve to highlight the counter-intuitive nature of anti-realism and thereby place the burden of proof on those who would contradict the traditional outline of a view on truth.

The right hand-side of the equivalence schema is just a disquotation of the sentence offered on the left. Thus, the relevant fact about the world matches the content of the sentence precisely. Some versions of anti-realist theories of truth would say that facts about the world always require some qualification, even when the surface structure of the corresponding sentence would not lend itself to this. For example, relativism about truth is an anti-realist theory of truth because it would insist that “grass is green” is true iff grass is green *for* some person x .¹⁴ Relativism allows that the sentence can be true for one and false for another, according to whatever it consists in for a fact to be the case *for* someone.

¹⁴ Kirkham (1992) p. 99.

The relativist claim is just that there are no solid facts like grass's being green but only relative facts that vary for whatever reason. The world is made up of such facts and thus a sentence cannot be true *simpliciter* but only have relative truth.

Relativism is sometimes lumped together with scepticism about truth, with both threatening to undermine any sense of objective truth. The association of these two, however, is actually a mistake.¹⁵ The relativist is saying something about the world, specifically, that facts are always relative to a viewpoint. This actually seeks to undermine scepticism, for the relativist thinks he knows the way the world is through knowing that there are only subjective truths.¹⁶

A similar view is one that just denies that there are facts of the matter at all, and has been called by Simon Blackburn "postmodernism" about truth.¹⁷ There is, of course, no standard usage of the term "postmodernism" so the view can be hard to characterise.¹⁸ Generally though, a postmodernist would hold that truth is so contaminated by the internal and external forces that impact human experience, from things as broad as political and social structures to the minute facts of one's own personal psychology, that what is true and what is not is as contingent and ever-changing as any dynamic force might be. In ironic fashion appropriate to postmodern thought, the possibility of having and talking about truth is itself seen as an elaborate fabrication. It is not merely that language fails to grasp onto what is out there, but that there is actually nothing at all that resembles what is called a fact to even be grasped at all.¹⁹ The postmodernist about truth would deny the equivalence schema and any account which took as basic the claim that the true things are directly connected with reality. Relativism and postmodernism are counter-intuitive views that challenge the way the phrase "is true" is used. Whatever can be said for the face-value plausibility of either of these accounts, it should be clear that no only

¹⁵ E.g. Blackburn (2006) pp. xiii-xv.

¹⁶ Annas & Barnes (1985) pp. 97-8 agree with this interpretation.

¹⁷ Blackburn (2006) pp. 150-1.

¹⁸ Ermarth (2011).

¹⁹ Blackburn (2006) p. 75 associates the phrase "there are no facts, only interpretations" with postmodernism and relativism.

do relativists and postmodernists need to support their arguments, but they need to offer alternative stories about language, about how it should be revised in light of their claims, or perhaps why it can never be salvaged. It should be clear that this places the burden of proof on those who support these views, not on those who deny them because of their counter-intuitive character.

3.2 James O. Young's theory of truth

James O. Young has offered a detailed account of an anti-realist theory of truth. The major objection to this theory reveals a further problem with anti-realist theories of truth. Part of the issue with relativism and postmodernism is that they made bold claims about the nature of facts in the world. However, making such a claim is not necessary for a denial of the equivalence schema. Young's theory is a type of anti-realism that keeps intact the ordinary account of facts and then insists that truth is just not a matter of these.²⁰ The problem, in outline, is as follows. Young supposes that there could be some remote part of the universe that our most advanced science is not even able to tell us about.²¹ The intuition that most people have would be to say that there are some facts of the matter, for instance its exact distance from Earth being one, and Young is happy to admit as much. We can never have a justified belief about such a fact, however, following from our complete inability to acquire information about this place. Young is lead to believe that truth can never be a matter of such unknowable facts because he believes that the meaning of sentences is always derived from recognisable conditions and that truth is a matter of meaning.²² Young's main work has been to defend these two claims, but whether or not they are sound is not the question at hand.

One important thing follows from Young's account, and applies equally to any account which believes in facts but says truth is not necessarily a matter of them.

²⁰ Young (2001) p. 97: "it is possible that a fact is the case but that there are no truths about this fact." See also Young (1995) pp. 30, 36.

²¹Young (1995) p. 145.

²² *Ibid.* pp. 51-53.

Although we cannot have knowledge of the facts, we can come up with sentences which we could imagine do coincide with them, and we can just call “true” the ones that would (if we were able to know) match up with the way things really are. Young is right in saying that there is some issue with the fact that we cannot access some part of the universe. A more intuitively correct way to approach the problem, however, is just by saying that we cannot determine which of the sentences about that part of the universe are true. Some indeed are true, but we cannot know which ones. This is very different to saying that truth can never be a matter of these facts. If the word “true” is going to be reserved for beliefs and sentences which relate to justification conditions then the question may be asked of what word Young is going to choose to call sentences and beliefs that coincide with fact.²³ Again, this is not an attempt to prove wrong Young’s theory wrong but, rather, to highlight a general issue that anti-realists need to deal with. The way of proceeding chosen for this paper, based on the equivalence schema, is not an arbitrarily chosen one but reflects the standard view about truth. To seriously take issue with it would require not merely pointing out problems with it, but with an elaboration of an alternative account of the relationship between reality and how the word “truth” is used.

4. The Coherence Theory

4.1 The bare notion of coherence

Coherence theories of truth say that a necessary and sufficient condition for a thing’s truth is that thing’s coherence, whatever this may mean. Generally, coherence is a property that a truth-bearer has in relation to other truth-bearers. It is only within a context of a set of things like beliefs, sentences etc., that it makes sense to speak of things being coherent. It is standard to talk of a coherent set and also of a single truth-bearer cohering *with* some set. It is acceptable to say that a single proposition is coherent, but it must always be remembered that this is only possible because of its relation to other propositions.

²³ Kirkham (1992) p. 103 is similarly critical of theories that try to reserve the word “truth” for some specific purpose.

The most illuminating description of coherence that can be given is that it involves beliefs 'hanging together' or having mutual overlap.²⁴ Sometimes the relation is described as 'mutual support' but this description implicitly tries to smuggle in something that is possibly not essential to coherence. Specifically, that description might suggest that in virtue of their connectedness (and nothing else) there is some reason to suppose that the beliefs are all true, or more likely to be true. Coherence, however, is just the notion that the truth-value of a belief in a set is bound up with the truth-values of other beliefs in the set. Take for instance a set of beliefs that is coherent because many beliefs are the logical consequences of many others. Then if one belief can be shown to be true, many other beliefs can be shown to be true also via *modus ponens*. However, if one belief can be shown to be false then via *modus tollens* many others can be shown to be false. Coherence does not necessarily mean that beliefs are more likely to be true, but only that, whatever their truth-values are, they are likely to be *the same*.²⁵

What counts as making beliefs coherent varies as widely as the many ways beliefs can be bound up together. The most obvious way is through logical entailment, or deductive inference, but every other form of inference has been used to describe what can possibly count as coherence. Reasoning from particular instances to a general rule, what is known as inductive reasoning, involves the truth-value of the rule depending on the truth-values of the instances and vice-versa. Also reasoning to the best explanation, what is called abductive reasoning, shares the characteristic of the truth-values of things hanging together. These last two are just ways of saying that coherence can be cashed out in explanatory relations between beliefs. It is important to note however that this is not competing with the account of coherence as entailment or implication but is just another instance of the more general notion of tying together the truth-values of beliefs.

²⁴ Angere (2008), p. 1.

²⁵ Shogenji (1999) p. 345: "[coherence] makes [beliefs] more likely to be true together; however, it also makes them more likely to be *false together*." (Emphasis in original).

4.2 Coherence applied: truth and justification

In epistemology, coherence is of interest as a way of justifying beliefs. A coherence theory of justification says that if a set of beliefs is coherent and some are known to be true, then this justifies believing the others. A more radical version would say that, even if none of the beliefs were known to be true, the fact of the coherence of the whole is enough to justify them. This version says, in other words, that coherence in itself is truth-conducive. This view has come under much criticism and is not the accepted notion of coherence here.²⁶ This represents just one way in which coherence can be employed for philosophical purposes. It is important to note this distinction because sometimes a coherence theory of justification is called a theory of truth, even though by itself a theory of justification says nothing about the necessary and sufficient conditions for truth.²⁷

To assume that coherentists about truth take the coherentist justification theory and add on the bolder claim that coherence in fact guarantees truth, or that to discover coherence is nothing other than to discover truth, is an error that does great injustice to coherentism about truth. As has been seen, any plausible view of truth connects the true things to reality, and so the things that are justified are justified *as* being connected to reality. This connection to the world is what makes coherentism plausible, for coherence only means the hanging together of beliefs and not necessarily their making each other more likely to be true.²⁸

C.I. Lewis tried to capture the connection to the world by conceding something to the foundationalists, who are often seen as the main competitors with coherentists in the justification field, and allowed that some beliefs are justified not by their relation to other beliefs.²⁹ Once these foundational beliefs can be shown to cohere

²⁶ See Shogenji (1999) and Olsson (2001) for discussion.

²⁷ For example Davidson (1983) offers a theory of justification that is called in that very paper a theory of truth.

²⁸ Shogenji (1999) p. 345.

²⁹ Lewis, C. I. (1946).

with others, then there is good reason to believe the others too. Donald Davidson's unique approach to coherentism involves showing that beliefs are by their very nature veridical.³⁰ That is to say, in virtue of the fact that sentences are uttered in response to states of affairs in the world, as a general rule, one cannot have entirely false beliefs, the argument goes. Davidson rejects the foundationalist account entirely and maintains that since beliefs are generally true then coherence gives us good reason to believe that our entire body of beliefs is justified if coherent, or at least that some coherent subset of our beliefs is justified.

In coherence theories of truth, it is usual to speak of a designated, or specified, set of propositions and then say it is not coherence with any arbitrary set but coherence with this particular set which is a necessary and sufficient condition for truth. Such a way of proceeding is not present in coherence theories of justification. The sorts of questions that the two camps of coherentists deal with bear less resemblance than what the initial division between the related notions of justification and truth might suggest. Investigating how coherentists can connect a designated set of propositions to reality, and thereby to the true things, is the purpose of the next part of this paper.

³⁰ Davidson (1983).

Part II: The Extension Project

Any theory of truth is judged by the minimum requirements that it (a) makes the true things all and only those things which are, or would be, called true in ordinary language, and that it (b) says something interesting enough so as to not be eliminable from the outset. Coherentists have at their disposal the choice of the designated set to fulfill (a). That set needs to coincide with the set of true things in order to for the theory to be adequate. If coherentism is to succeed, there cannot be anything that coheres with the designated set and is not true, or true and does not cohere with the designated set. Avoiding triviality is the point of requirement (b).

Coherentists say that there is an important description of the set of true things that other theories fail to recognise, namely, that the set is coherent. Coherentists have usually assumed that by saying the set is coherent they are fulfilling (b) and have put their effort into showing that there are no counter-examples and so fulfill (a). The way the extension project will be understood here will be as making a claim about the set of true things. This is a reversal of the traditional way of proceeding, but it is justified. Extension theories of truth are allowed to take the true things for granted. That is the upshot of making only a descriptive claim about truth. There is textual evidence that this is what the coherentists are doing anyway. This part of the paper tries to explicitly say that the true things are the things being discussed so that attention can be given to requirement (b). Specifically, this part will be concerned with how informative the claim is that the true things are coherent. Coherence, as an imprecise notion involving entailment relations and mutual overlap between propositions, naturally comes in degrees. If the true things only exhibit coherence in a very trivial way, then the informativeness of coherentism as an extension theory is undermined.

5. Brand Blanshard and F.H. Bradley

The writings of Francis Herbert Bradley (1846-1924) represent the best known of any of the British idealists and serve to encapsulate the doctrines, and the motivations underpinning them, of the tradition of the time. Roughly, the school gained dominance between the time of Hegel (d. 1831) and the rise of analytic philosophy in the early twentieth-century. Strangely though, it is the philosopher Brand Blanshard, writing after the time of the school's prevalence and who was not British nor even perhaps an idealist, who presents the most elaborate and systematic account of truth founded in the principles of the British idealism tradition.³¹ Blanshard openly cites the influence of the thinkers of that tradition on the system of philosophy presented in both volumes of *The Nature of Thought* (1939, 1941) and it is clear that, though writing in a different intellectual climate to those writers, their thoughts and attitudes towards the problems of philosophy reverberate deeply throughout his project.³²

Above all else, the British idealists used the tool of metaphysics as the way to address, and indeed solve, philosophical problems.³³ This way of proceeding is in contrast to the concern with epistemological questions that dominated the early modern times and the fundamental concern with language that came to preoccupy the twentieth-century. Broadly speaking, questions about the way things are, or about how the world is constituted, took first importance for the British idealists. The answers to these sorts of questions informed their other doctrines. It is a very traditionally conceived pursuit of philosophy, concerned fundamentally with the nature of "ultimate reality".³⁴ For present purposes, the most important doctrines which sprung from the metaphysical musings of the time are those concerned with epistemic justification, exhibited in Bradley, and those about the nature of truth, exhibited in Blanshard.

³¹ See Faust (1998) for a discussion of Blanshard's ontology.

³² See Blanshard (1939) p. 518-9 for Blanshard's own rendition of the influences on his thought.

³³ Mander (2011) pp. 4-6.

³⁴ Bradley (1893) p. 132 references "an absolute criterion" and "ultimate reality".

5.1 The designated set

For both Bradley and Blanshard, reality must be considered as an objective whole which is organised systematically and expresses its unity and comprehensibility to those who would understand it. For Bradley, one is justified in holding a belief about the world if that belief coheres with others, and this derives from the fact that reality itself exhibits the features that a coherent set of beliefs has. Reality, as a unity, has its parts hanging together. Blanshard is less concerned not only with the justification of beliefs but also with the question of the very nature of truth and he takes care to distinguish between these topics.³⁵ While there is controversy over whether Bradley was a coherentist about truth or should be interpreted as such, Blanshard is held up as a prime advocate of this view.³⁶ To get around the standard objections to coherentism and meet the adequacy condition, Blanshard maintains that it is not coherence merely with anything that makes a belief true, but coherence with a particular, designated set. To fulfill requirement (a) Blanshard says of the designated set:

“That theory does not hold that any and every system is true, no matter how abstract and limited; it holds that one system only is true, namely the system in which everything real and possible is coherently included.”³⁷

The inclusion of the word “possible” here is misleading. The inference that might be drawn is that Blanshard thinks that the designated set is somehow the *most coherent* out of all possible sets. This, however, would be a much harder claim than what seems to be made out in the rest of the argument and Blanshard offers no arguments defending such an interpretation. Moreover it is a totally unnecessary claim for the coherence theory of truth; for the true things to be fairly coherent is enough to make it a serious contender for fulfilling the extension project on truth. Even if Blanshard did intend to assert such a claim, for the purposes of the charitable interpretation

³⁵ Blanshard (1941) p. 260.

³⁶ Damnjanovic & Candlish (2013) argue against Bradley as a coherentist about truth, while Young (2013) suggests the coherentist interpretation but admits the difficulty of this view. Kirkham (1992) p. 104 takes Blanshard as the paradigmatic example of a coherentist about truth.

³⁷ Blanshard (1941) p. 276.

offered in this paper, it is better to ignore talk about “possible” propositions somehow bearing on the designated set.

Attention must be turned therefore to the meaning of “real” things being included in the coherent system. The most basic intuition about truth, which is rejected only by the anti-realists, is that the true things have some connection with reality. In ordinary language, to say a statement is “real” is just a less usual way of saying that it is true. To say that the coherent set contains everything real is just to say that it is the set of true things. For the purposes of the extension project, to take the true things for granted is a perfectly acceptable way of proceeding. Any accusations at this point that the theory is question begging or subsuming itself into some version of the correspondence theory can only derive from a misapprehension of the project. An extension theory does not attempt to say what truth consists in. Such a theory can, and ought, to talk directly about the true things and make some descriptive claim about them. In the case of Bradley, even if he did not hold that coherence constitutes the nature of truth, an undeniably important element of Bradley’s thought was to take reality as a system. This thought is made crucial for Blanshard’s coherence theory. Coherentists today owe something to the thought of the British idealists, even if the latter would never have assented to the doctrines of the former.

Blanshard, admittedly, is clear that he wants to make the deeper point about what truth consists in.³⁸ This paper therefore seems to be attributing a much less ambitious project to *The Nature of Thought* than its author intended. Regardless of what these intentions were, coherentists today can take away from his work a way of making a substantial extension theory of truth. This is just a way of saying that coherentists can defy the deflationists and have their theory fulfill requirements (a) and (b). The most important part of Blanshard’s work, for the present purpose, is

³⁸ Blanshard (1941) p. 261.

Chapter XXVI of volume two called 'Coherence as the Nature of Truth'. This part of the text is dedicated entirely to showing that there are no counter-examples to the coherence theory. It is dedicated, in other words, to showing that the theory fulfills requirement (a). This is obviously a far cry from fixing the meaning of "is true". The chapter is a roundabout way of showing that the real things are indeed the true things. Blanshard does not want to plainly say that the true things are just assumed to be the objects of discussion because he wants to make the deeper claim about the meaning of truth. The two projects should, however, always be demarcated and discussed separately

To take the coherence theory of truth as fulfilling the extension project does not rule out the correspondence theory fixing what truth consists in. It is not an objection to the coherence theory that it captures the same things as the correspondence theory as being true. Indeed, remembering that the correspondence theory does not diverge at all from the ordinary use of language, it is a point in coherentism's favour. It is actually a basic requirement that a successful extension theory should do this, given the assumption that anti-realist theories of truth are wrong. Blanshard anticipates the objection by saying:

"But it has been charged that 'approximation' covers a surrender to correspondence. For do we not really mean by this that our present system is true so far as it *corresponds* to the further reality, and false so far as it fails of this? We may call the relation 'correspondence' if we wish."³⁹

Blanshard's argument for calling the relation "coherence" consists in showing that coherence is a viable way of thinking about truth and then giving reasons why calling it "correspondence" can be misleading. In other words, Blanshard can see why the word "correspondence" captures something about our intuitions about truth, but he also thinks that the correspondence theory has been puffed up too much by its proponents and that it thereby deviates from describing truth accurately. For example, the theory has been associated with the view that a mental

³⁹ Blanshard (1941) p. 273 (emphasis in original).

image of an object somehow literally takes on the properties of the object, which Blanshard dismisses as absurd because a mental image, as basically a thought, cannot embody characteristics like being red or being heavy like a physical object can.⁴⁰ The correspondence theory is also sometimes associated with an undesirable ontological commitment to the existence of real “facts” that exist above and beyond the ordinary objects of experience.⁴¹ In addition to grass and every property that pertains to it, this view would say, there is this real object in the world called *the fact that grass is green*. Blanshard might be right about such views being problematic, but the conclusion that should be drawn is that these puffed up correspondence theories are philosophically specious. The correspondence theory outlined in Part I just entails that the word “correspondence” unpacks what is going on in instances of the deflationist equivalence schema. This theory is not incompatible with Blanshard’s theory taken as an extension theory, which is fully to the credit of Blanshard and the coherentists.

5.2 The coherence of truth and reality

The claims of the coherence theory of truth, if true, would fulfill requirements (a) and (b) and as such be a worthy extension theory of truth. Coherentists about truth need to show, however, that the true things do in fact hang together. Since truth, it has been established, is a matter of reality, the challenge can equally be said to be showing that the world is a coherent place. This, however, must only be understood in a metaphorical sense. If things are coherent that means they hang together and in different ways entail each other. While a proposition can be entailed by a belief or otherwise have its truth-value bound up with it, there is nothing about grass or snow or a table that can imply or entail anything else. Nevertheless, in examining how plausible the claim is that the true things cohere, we may direct our attention to

⁴⁰ Blanshard (1939) pp. 257-281.

⁴¹ Russell (1918, 1919) articulates realism about facts. See Strawson (1950) and Austin (1961) for more views on facts.

reality and talk about how facts relate to each other, although it must be remembered that this is a non-literal way of speaking.

Blanshard argues that the coherence of reality is a consequence of coherentism about truth, and also Bradley unambiguously argues for it.⁴² On the face of it, there are points for and against the suggestion. The case against the coherence of reality is that there are many truths which seem utterly independent of others, where one can vary freely without affecting the truth or falsity of any of the others. Grass is in fact green and snow is in fact white, but these are not bound up in any way it seems. In the language of possible worlds theory, we might say that there are many worlds where only one of these is true and it just so happens that in the actual world both of these are true. One being true does not make it more likely that the other is too. The same can be said for many choices of true things. The argument in favour of worldly coherence says that for any true thing there are many true things which do cohere with it. Recalling that coherence need not mean strict deductive implication, we may say the fact that Canberra is Australia's capital coheres with the fact that Canberra is the site of federal parliament, that Canberra has an airport, and that Melbourne is not Australia's capital. The unhelpful conclusion from these considerations is that each truth has many true things it coheres with and also many true things it does not cohere with.

In terms of overall coherence, a further consideration may strike one as plausible, namely, that for any single truth the number of things which are independent of it far outweigh the things which do cohere with it. The total set of true things then, it would seem, could not possibly be coherent. There are several ways of responding to this problem, some more elaborate, like Blanshard's own response, and some simpler.

⁴² This is the argument of 'The General Nature of Reality' in *Appearance and Reality* (pp. 132-152 of Allard & Stock)

The simple response would be to admit the premise that each true thing has a great number of independent beliefs but deny that this does any damage to the theory. The coherence theory of truth, it might be said, is only committed to the claim that the world has a basic, minimum level of coherence. We may call this the minimal view of coherence. Following this route, it can actually be proven that the world exemplifies this sort coherence. Here, we might say that coherence means *not* being *incoherent*. The only way for a set to be incoherent is for it to be either (1) inconsistent, meaning that not all propositions can be true at the same time, or (2) have every proposition totally independent of every other. So long as neither of these hold, then the world has the basic sort of coherence.

It can be proven that the world is not inconsistent, for this would amount to a fact being both the case and not the case. The second possibility is just as easily shown to not hold, for that would require that every proposition could be altered without affecting any others. To change the facts about Canberra or to make Melbourne Australia's capital would have some impact on the fact that Canberra is now Australia's capital. The coherentist has the option at this point of saying that the project has been fulfilled. It might be that the world is not inconsistent and that facts are not radically independent are obvious points about truth, but these are points that the correspondence theory nonetheless does not explicitly capture. There is, in other words, still a reason to hold the coherence theory of truth as it still fulfills condition (b) even with this minimal sort of coherence.

The claim that coherence means being not incoherent might not be greeted with universal assent, however. In the epistemology field, for instance, the basic type of coherence alluded to in the previous paragraph is of little interest. If a set of beliefs is merely consistent and at least two of them hang together this can hardly be set to justify the entire set. Epistemologists might turn their attention to the beliefs that do hang together, but this is a rejection of the significance of the minimal sort of coherence because the subset worth considering presumably has just a different

sort of coherence. Although the extra beliefs of the larger set do not take away from the potential truth of the smaller set, the effect they have on the entire set is of making it less coherent. Thus it might be said that coherence and incoherence are not exhaustive options where one means the negation of the other. Rather, on this view, some sets of beliefs are neither coherent nor incoherent.

In formal terms, we might say that a set of perfectly coherent beliefs has the coherence value 1 while an incoherent set has the value 0. Under the minimal view, any value at all that is greater than 0 represents coherence. Obviously though, the value can be greater than 0 and still be extremely small. A defender of the minimal view might protest that having a small coherence value just means that a set is justified to a small degree. This view might not always be appropriate. When coherentists about justification are responding to an extreme sort of scepticism that no belief is ever rationally justified, the response that beliefs sometimes have a small justification seems idle. It just amounts to saying that there is some possibility that they are true, which the sceptic can admit without diminishing the threat of scepticism one iota. In terms of theories of truth a similar objection can be made. If the set of true things has many coherent subsets which themselves only have tenuous links between them, then the relevance of the coherence theory becomes questionable. The coherence theory becomes closer to what would be called the “consistency theory of truth” which is a trivial theory because obviously all the true things can be true at the same time. Coherentists would want to have another option open to them other than reducing coherence to a defensible but very insignificant notion.

6. A More Substantive Coherence

The minimal view of coherence was offered in response to an argument against the coherence of reality. Starting from any single truth we can see that it coheres with many other truths. Essentially though, the argument says, truths seem stuck in their own subsets, unable to get in touch with others and hang together with them also.

While all the truths about Canberra might cohere, the truths about Paris remain forever elusive. Rejecting these sorts of claims is what substantive theories of coherence try to do. That is, these views try to show that from a single truth many truths that might not be immediately apparent do in fact cohere with it.

These responses appeal to a certain characteristic of coherence, namely that a proposition can mediate between two others as a link between them. For example, the beliefs that Jenny likes green and Jenny likes the colour of grass have only a tenuous link between them *unless* the belief that grass is green is added. The beliefs in this case really do hang together in the intuitive sense and therefore cohere, even in this simplistic example.

One view might be to expand this style of thinking to show how it cannot really make sense to talk of the world being divided into subsets of facts. To return to the cities example, it might be thought that Canberra being Australia's capital and Paris being France's capital are independent. Take the belief about Canberra. It alone does not cohere with the belief that representatives from Canberra discuss diplomatic issues with representatives from Paris. Only when the third belief that Paris is also France's capital does the second belief cohere with the first. Again, it seems that all three hang together and cohere. So now every fact about Paris being the capital will cohere with the others. Adding the belief that Paris is the site of presidential inauguration is *not* like adding an independent belief to the set which does not bear on its coherence. Coherentists are just going to maintain that our lack of imagination, or our not being able to conceive the variety of ways facts cohere, are no reasons for believing that the world is not actually coherent. The more we reflect and think about things, the more that the world does seem to appear coherent. The world has coherence to a significant degree and enough to make it fulfill requirement (b).

6.1 The argument from coherence as justification

A related argument to the above appeals to the logic behind the coherence theory of justification.⁴³ One way that theory can be deployed is in responding to radical sceptics who insist what we normally call justification can never be achieved because it leads to an infinite regress. A more plausible use of the coherence theory, one that is implicitly used in detective stories and investigations, is to establish the truth of some belief or set of beliefs through means like observation or reliable memory, and then derive other less obvious beliefs through coherence.⁴⁴ If a set of beliefs is coherent then their truth-values are bound up, so if some of them are true then it is likely that others in the set are true. Given that truth is a matter of reality, this is only possible if reality is coherent. If a suspect has his fingerprints on the scene of the crime, has no alibi and has a motivation to commit the crime, then we might say that these cohere with it being true that the suspect committed the crime. Since this last thing refers to reality by referring to truth, then there must be something about reality which lends itself to such a conclusion being drawn. The answer of course is that reality is coherent. A coherence theory of justification does imply that the true things are extensionally coherent and that reality is coherent.

6.2 Blanshard's causation argument

Blanshard has a related response that involves the notion of causation. This view makes some bolder claims than the preceding arguments and as such might be harder to accept. It represents another way that the coherentist can advance the claim that the true things and reality are coherent.

According to Blanshard, there are no independent facts and no independent truths because no events are ever causally unrelated. Attention is shifted here from things being the case to the reasons *why* they are the case. The question is no longer of which city is which country's capital but what the other facts are that brought it

⁴³ Blanshard (1941) pp. 266-7 and Bradley (1893) pp. 132-4 offer arguments in this style.

⁴⁴ Russell (1912) p. 91 is critical of coherence except when used as a test of truth with other beliefs that have been determined true independent of coherence.

about that such a thing is the case. If a suspect stands to make a financial gain from the will of the murder victim then that explains, or at least offers a potential explanation, of why the other evidence has been accumulated against them. This appeals to the abductive element of coherence, for obviously one does not imply the latter but it does provide a way to fill in what would otherwise be a missing blank.

For illustration, Blanshard takes the example of him climbing a hill in Vermont and looking at Mount Washington.⁴⁵ He is wearing a felt hat at the time. The goal is to show that if he were wearing a different hat, a straw hat say, then the world would be changed in such a way that Mount Washington itself would also be changed. The argument proceeds by bringing into question all the relevant things which could have brought about the wearing of the hat. Blanshard talks about the workings of his brain, which would presumably affect the decision making process of choosing to wear the hat, and mentions the influence of outside physical factors, as things that would have affected his wearing the hat. The weather on the day, for instance, would have affected his mood and the way he looks at his hat, and also smaller features, like the positions of his hats in his wardrobes, would have affected it also. The transitivity of causation is crucial here. For to claim that “no region of the universe would remain unpenetrated” the things which indirectly affect the hat must become relevant.⁴⁶ The weather might affect the decision process and this in turn is affected by cosmic forces and the position of the earth at such a point in its rotation. Now for the point to be proven, Blanshard suggests that if the hat were a straw hat then the macro causes would have to be altered and these things would bear on Mount Washington. The weather, for instance, would impact on the environment and then this would effect Mount Washington in a multitude of ways.

One of the early thoughts against coherence was that it is plausible that variables can be altered freely in the style of talk about possible worlds. There is some

⁴⁵ Blanshard (1941) p. 293.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

possible world which is exactly like the actual world except grass is red there, the suggestion goes. It has been shown in the last section that this can only be an exaggeration, for in this new world the fact about grass being the same colour as leaves in summer, for instance, is different. A corollary of Blanshard's view is that it does not even make sense to talk about a possible world that is *roughly* like the actual world except that it has some few basic facts changed. To change the colour of grass or the style of a certain sort of hat would be to change everything in some way. Obviously, Blanshard does concede that there are degrees of things which are more relevant.⁴⁷ A geologist writing about Mount Washington can dismiss as relevant certain styles of hat and other miscellaneous information because only the things which are directly bound up with the object of inquiry need concern. Some things have a greater effect on things than others, and this is what inquirers about any subject are investigating. For while the macro features of the universe might impact on Blanshard's wearing a certain hat, the more immediate features about his owning such a hat and it being accessible to him on a day bear *more* relevance. Talk about degrees of relevance is just to capture the intuition behind the absurdity of responding to a comment about it being a fine day by replying "Quite so, since umbellifers have imbricated petals."⁴⁸

It is this implication that reveals the downfall of Blanshard's coherence-through-causation argument. The argument makes being true and being necessary too similar: "a proposition is true precisely to the extent to which it is necessary, and necessary to the extent that it is true."⁴⁹ It therefore makes possible worlds talk impossible. Blanshard might not take this as an objection though, since it follows so closely from his results. However, it does seem that talk about necessary truth as a type of truth is important. When theologians say that God's existence is necessary they presumably mean something different to what Blanshard means by saying that

⁴⁷ Blanshard (1941) p. 295.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* p. 301.

grass's being green is necessary. Similarly, it is usually thought that logical truths are true in a different way to contingent truths, but Blanshard's theory does not allow for this.⁵⁰ The conflation between truth and necessity does damage to the ordinary usage of the terms.

7. Evaluation of the project

Those who have tried to show that the world is not coherent in any significant manner have failed it seems, but the conditions were always in favour of the coherentist in this regard. In the responses that coherentists give, they rely on two important features of what they are saying. Firstly that coherence is a notion involving degrees and not requiring any strict conditions to be fulfilled. Secondly, that the set of true things (or set of facts) contains a huge amount of things that have never really been thought of before or might not be relevant in everyday considerations. On reflection, it has been shown, truths cannot be divided into neat subsets. Those who would attack coherence might say that even given all the facts about human societies and institutions, facts about the number of craters of the Moon or about the exact distance between cosmic objects in different galaxies will always remain elusive. Intuitions might vary on this, for it could be said that the cosmic make-up of the universe gives rise to the macro features of the world and thus acts as explaining why the world directly accessed by humans is the way it is. These facts might cohere through abduction, having an explanatory role. However, even if it is conceded that a single truth will never reach out and touch *every* truth, the coherentist can rest content with having moved away from a minimal, uninteresting level of coherence. The world is coherent in an important way, coherentists have shown.

The corollary of these features of coherence is that saying the world is coherent does not bring any counter-intuitive baggage with it. Nothing beyond our ordinary

⁵⁰ See Blanshard (1941) pp. 319-22 for his treatment of logical truths.

conception of the world is being employed. And yet, something *is* being said, something which the basic correspondence theory of truth does not say. Coherentists about truth can therefore explicate their view such that it is perfectly adequate and says something significant and relevant enough about truth, and is worthy to be held as an extension theory of truth.

The extension project applied to truth is one that is worth pursuing and is philosophically interesting. Critics of the coherence theory of truth have not traditionally considered the option that this what coherentists could be pursuing, even though it is evident upon reading those texts that it is a plausible way to interpret them. Even if coherentists have, like in Blanshard's case, wanted to pursue both the extension project and fix the meaning of "is true" these two should still be demarcated and discussed separately.

On a realist conception of truth, the true things are directly connected to reality and so the claim that the true things are coherent is equivalent to reality being coherent. Of course, this is only a metaphorical way of speaking but a useful one nonetheless. More importantly, there is a serious argument to be made that reality is coherent. In its best form, it proceeds from the premise that coherence can only be an effective or useful test of truth if coherence can actually bring more of reality into the picture. For a set that is based on beliefs known to be true it is impossible for it to become more coherent and produce a divergent picture of reality. This is just a result of Shogenji's observation about coherence that they are either more likely to be true together or false together. Coherentists can further argue for the coherence of reality by arguing that it is a necessarily related system, that, via causation, a change in one feature of reality results in a change to a greater or lesser extent of everything else. This has some undesirable consequences and carries with it the rejection of certain ideas, though it is still an option open for coherentists to take. It is unnecessary though. It has been shown that the coherentists can substantiate their theory without having to sacrifice anything that would be theoretically valuable. The

coherence theory of truth, as an extension theory of truth, is just derivable just from the meaning of the words “coherence”, “truth” and “reality”.

Part III: The Meaning Project

8. The Meaning of the Meaning Project

This final part of the paper is dedicated to showing how a coherence theory can plausibly fix the meaning of truth. The argument has the form of a conditional: if one wants to be a coherentist about the meaning of truth, then one must also be committed to the view of reality known as idealism. This of course makes the coherence theory of truth as plausible as this ontological theory, and any reason for rejecting such a view of reality would therefore be a reason against the coherence theory. Some philosophers have been of the opinion that this implication is very much a drawback for the coherence theory, since idealism is not an orthodox view.⁵¹ The plausibility of idealism will, however, not be discussed here but only the claims the theory makes about reality and what they could mean for truth. It shall be those who actually hold the coherence theory to whom it will be left the job of defending the views the theory entails.

The point of Part I was to show that the equivalence schema ought be the starting point for building theories of truth. Truth, according to that scheme, is a relationship between a particular class of objects (truth-bearers) and reality. A successful theory of the meaning of truth ought to involve some illuminating way of thinking about this relationship. For example, correspondence theorists defy the deflationist by saying that “correspondence” unpacks the relationship between the truth-bearer and the relevant part of reality. The challenge for the coherentist is to plausibly make “coherence” unpack this relationship.

In Part II, it was an acceptable way of proceeding to talk about the true things and then ask whether a certain property, namely coherence, applied to them collectively. In dealing with projects about the meaning of truth, however, truth cannot be taken for granted. The ways of criticising extension theories and theories about meaning

⁵¹ Young (2013) attributes coherentism’s decline to its link to idealism and Kirkham (1992) pp. 110-1 also sees the relation as a downfall.

are therefore different. If an extension theory says that all and only the true things are p , then a way of objecting to it would be to show a thing that is true and not p , or that is p and not true. To use this sort of objection to a theory about meaning would be question-begging, for one who holds the p -theory would simply deny that any non- p thing is in fact true. A subtle alteration needs to be made. There must be some criteria for judging theories of truth, and the aim of Part I was to argue that it is ordinary language, that is, how the word "true" is used, which will be the ultimate criterion. The equivalence schema seems correct because it aligns with the ordinary usage of "truth". A theory of truth just is a way of trying to explain the phenomenon of the use of the word "true" by competent speakers. Thus, to object to the p -theory about the meaning of truth, it must be said that a certain object *seems* to be true according to our ordinary intuitions about truth and yet the p -theory does not make it true. The more specific point of Part I was to show that the equivalence schema elucidates our most basic intuitions about truth.

9. Realism vs. Idealism

Realism and idealism are theories about the nature of reality. The realist picture of the world is that objects exist independently of any mind that can perceive or otherwise experience them. For illustration, consider that to perceive an object is to perceive the way it is. In other words, it is to perceive its reality. The claim realism makes is that this reality would be exactly the same if no one had ever existed to perceive it. The world of objects is therefore in some sense 'waiting out there' to affect people's minds.

Idealism claims that the objects of experience do not lie outside our minds waiting to affect us, but that their constituting reality is inseparable from the operation of minds or some mind. This is a broad claim but a necessary one to make to encompass all varieties of what have been called idealist ontologies. Idealist theories can be split into two camps, absolute and non-absolute idealism, with each of these having their own subdivisions. Non-absolute idealist theories say that there is at

least something which exists outside of human thought and experience which is somehow responsible for reality. In George Berkeley's theistic idealism it is God who stands as the creator of reality and on whose mind, fundamentally, all objects derive their existence. This is not merely the view that God was the first cause of the world, but that no object was or ever is made that is not a part of God's mind. In Kantian idealism, the reality of an object is its appearance, but this appearance is derived from the object "in-itself" whereby it exists beyond experience.⁵² Absolute theories can be understood as denying that there is anything which stands outside of experience.⁵³ Advocates of this view say objects are mind-dependent in the same way other idealists say they are, but they deny the need for their to be some extra-experiential thing for this to be related to. For this family of views, the process of experiencing reality and there actually being a reality to experience are inseparable. F.H. Bradley, who belonged to this camp, represents his view by paraphrasing Hegel and saying "there is nothing behind the curtain other than that which is in front of it."⁵⁴ The common characteristic of all idealist ontologies is, in short, that tables, chairs and other things that are ordinarily thought to make up reality, are the same *sort* of thing as beliefs.

10. Truth and Ontology

10.1 Realism

The aim of Part I was to show that the equivalence schema should be the starting point for building theories of truth. Truth, according to that scheme, is a relationship between a particular class of objects (truth-bearers) and reality. To offer up a theory of truth of the meaning of truth is to offer up some way of illuminating this relationship. Since reality is a component of the relationship, a theory of reality may have some bearing on the success or failure of a theory of truth. The correspondence theory of truth, however, is not affected by differing ontologies. The

⁵²See Redding (2009) pp. 52-59, 72, 83 for discussion.

⁵³ Kirkham (1992) p. 74 would label Berkeley an absolute idealist, taking the interpretation that any non-absolute idealism must have something independent of all minds (even God's). The difference of interpretations is not crucial here.

⁵⁴ Bradley (1914) p. 309. See Hegel (1807) p. 103 for the passage Bradley is referencing.

right-hand side of the equivalence schema just refers to a piece of reality, and it is open what the nature of this reality is. A belief, for example, can correspond to the reality that makes it true whether or not this reality lies beyond the experience of the one who holds the sentence, belief, or proposition as true.⁵⁵

For the coherence theory, opinion is divided about whether it requires a particular ontological commitment. Ralph Walker has expressed the view that coherentism needs idealism to be plausible.⁵⁶ James O. Young, whose theory was discussed in §3.2, has maintained the opposite view by arguing that coherentism fits equally well with idealism and realism.⁵⁷ It is not surprising that Young would hold this view, since he is moved towards coherentism from the conjunction of his semantic views and his holding of a coherence theory of justification.⁵⁸

Recall that Young holds the claim, which is quite uncontroversial, that the truth of a sentence is a matter of its meaning. The more radical part of Young's theory is that there is nothing more to meaning than justification conditions. Language-users, he thinks, can only learn to assert to sentences under the conditions they recognise as warranting its assertion.⁵⁹ Consequently, meaning must derive from these conditions and nothing else.⁶⁰ It just so happens that a sentence can only be justified when it coheres with other sentences. The end result is that by saying there is nothing to truth other than justification Young is saying there is nothing to it other than coherence. While this is a way of being a realist and a coherentist, it is not one that is taken seriously here. The basic problem with Young was that truth was not a matter of reality and that it entailed a rejection of the equivalence schema. The argument of Part I was that the schema should give the standard way of proceeding

⁵⁵ See Kirkham (1992) pp. 73-5 for what he calls "quasi-realist" theories of truth.

⁵⁶ Walker (1989) p. 40.

⁵⁷ Young (1995) p. 31.

⁵⁸ Young (2001) p. 92.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ See Young (1995) pp. 32-9 for the full argument.

for theories of truth. Being an anti-realist does not amount to much of an option for anyone who wants to be both an ontological realist and a coherentist about truth.

10.2 Coherence and idealism

Recall that coherence just means that propositions hang together in some way or another. There are two broad and importantly different ways in which this hanging together can happen. The distinction is given by Steffan Angere in the context of thinking about whether coherence in itself is truth-conducive, that is, whether knowing only that a set of propositions is coherent is a reason to believe them without knowing that any particular one is true.⁶¹ The first type of coherence is when propositions hang together because of their related content. “Jenny likes green” and “Jenny likes the colour of grass” are bound up because they both refer to Jenny and a colour she likes. If we know one is true, then we can know that the other is true also. Sometimes propositions have exactly the same content and are therefore trivially bound up with each other. Yet a set that repeats “Jenny likes green” fifty times is not any more truth-conducive than the single proposition by itself. Yet sometimes the repetition of a proposition is a reason to believe it, specifically, in the context of testimony. If I know nothing about Jenny and I hear from five different strangers that she likes green, it seems on face-value that this repetition of a single proposition is some reason for holding it to be true.

The difference is that in the first case there is nothing to differentiate propositions by except for their content. In the second case, propositions with the same content are distinguished by different reporters telling them. This reveals the second type of coherence. We may say that the reports of the five strangers cohere. If this example appears too simplistic, it can be equally be imagined that they tell elaborate stories which coincide. Another way of thinking about the difference between the two types of coherence is of one being coherence *within* a set of beliefs, which will be

⁶¹ Angere (2008) pp. 2-3.

important when assessing the coherence of a single reporter's story of events, and of coherence *between sets*, which will be used in assessing the coherence of a totality of information. When there are different sources of propositions, the second type of coherence is important.

To return to coherence theories of truth, recall now that theories about the meaning of truth cannot take the notion of truth as a given. They can, however, take reality as given, as was the purpose of Part I to show. The equivalence schema says truth is a relation between truth-bearers and reality. The reason why the correspondence theory seemed plausible was that it captured the copying relation between these two elements. It has now been seen that coherence can involve a sort of copying relation when two distinct sources are in play. The move that the coherentist can make now is to say truth is the coherence from one thing, a truth-bearer, to another source of things, namely, reality. A coherentist says that the truth-condition of a sentence, for example, "grass is green" is true iff grass is green, involves the coherence between the thing on the left of the "iff" with the thing on the right of it. Just as the correspondence theory says "correspondence with reality" is what truth means, the coherentist can be taken as saying that "coherence with reality" is what truth means.

The threat at this point is that the coherence theory has gained its plausibility from it being trivialised. The argument would say that copying is the real intuition underpinning our conception of truth and that "correspondence" has been historically how we have talked about this copying relation. The preceding argument, it might be said, has merely shown that "coherence" also captures this copying notion. The objection can continue by saying, essentially the same theory of truth is under discussion and we should just prefer to call the relation "correspondence".

If such a response seems natural then this might reveal why the coherence theory of truth, or any other theory of truth, has never gained such status so as to seriously rival the correspondence theory as to what is the generally accepted theory of truth. The correspondence theory of truth does not, it has been the contention of this paper to say, have a monopoly over making truth a matter of reality. It is not a weakness of a theory of truth that it matches the plausibility that the correspondence theory has, but is in fact a great strength. It is strange indeed that, whenever a theory of truth seems to resemble the correspondence theory, proponents of the theory deny that such a resemblance is happening and that enemies try to use it as an objection. If the coherence theory says that a thing's being true consists in that thing's cohering with reality, then this just means that the theory fulfills the basic requirement that acceptance of the equivalence schema entails. If any theory does *not* make truth a matter of reality, then that should be counted against it. This, however, does not mean that thinking of truth as correspondence is the only valid way of thinking about truth.

Coherentists want to change the nature of truth without changing its relation to reality. It is only natural then that they should seek to change the nature of reality. A realist ontology does not strictly require the correspondence theory of truth, but it lends itself to it. For in that case truth is a matter that holds between all different sorts of things, and the notion of correspondence is general enough to capture this. Coherentism requires idealism because reality can really be cohered with when everything that exists is the same sort of thing as a belief.

Coherence is necessarily a relation between things like beliefs, sentences, propositions etc. It is something that is possessed by a certain class of objects. It is the class of objects that are on the right-hand side of the equivalence schema. The coherentist about the meaning of truth then wants to say that the relation from the right-hand side to the left is one of coherence. An apparent problem appears, because while a belief can correspond to the reality of a table, it cannot cohere with

the reality of a table. Recall that in §5.2 to talk about reality being coherent was only metaphorical. This was because the ordinary conception of reality was assumed. The coherentist, it seems, is going to have make a revision of the nature of reality. This does not amount to a rejection of making truth a matter of reality.⁶²

The idealist claim is that reality depends on some mind or minds. The character of every object in reality has the character of a belief, as reality itself is something that minds bring about. Reality is something, it might be said, that exists *in* minds. Within this system of minds that determine reality, truth-bearers can cohere with reality just because reality is the sort of thing that can actually be coherent. The belief that snow is white can cohere with the fact that snow is white because they are same sort of things. This is only the case on an idealist ontology and not on a realist one.

Coherentism requires that truth-bearers and truth-makers be the same sort of thing and idealism says that everything whatsoever is of a particular nature, namely, that of being mind-dependent. Sentences and propositions and other truth-bearers that are not beliefs can cohere with reality just because they are the sorts of things that normally cohere with beliefs. In short, idealism says that there is no ontological difference of type between beliefs and other objects of existence. A belief about snow can cohere with the fact about snow in the way that two individuated propositions cohere with each other. They match each other but are distinct, because one is a certain belief pertaining to one person's mind, while the other is a belief constituting reality in general.

12. Conclusion

The coherence theory of truth is a perfectly acceptable extension theory of truth. Given the traditional starting point that says the true things are those that describe reality, it can be shown that truth is coherent because of the diversity of ways that truths interact and relate. Coherence theories always acknowledge that there is a

⁶² Walker (1989) explicitly makes truth a matter of reality and is an idealist. See especially pp. 37-39.

designated set with which coherence is important. For extension theories of truth, it is perfectly acceptable to just specify that set of true things as this set. This rules out the possibility of objecting to the theory by producing a counter-example, something that would be called true under the theory but in fact is not. The work of the coherentist is then to show that this set is coherent and the investigation of the points for and against this being the case was the point of Part II. The fact that coherence comes in degrees was relevant, because some, like Blanshard, tried to show that the true things have a very high degree of coherence. Consequently, Blanshard's theory had some implications that might not be greeted with universal assent. Nevertheless, the coherence theory can still succeed just by showing that the true things are fairly coherent. Such a conclusion is derivable just from reflection on reality and the complicated, multifarious ways that things can be bound up with each other. Reality has to be a coherent whole and that is why coherentism as a theory of justification has at least some face-value plausibility.

Of course, the main attacks on coherentism assume it to be a theory attempting to unpack the meaning of "is true". The coherentists must make a slight adjustment here, because they need to make sure that the true things fall under their theory but cannot assume the meaning of truth to be given. They can just do what the correspondence theorists do and assume that truth is a matter of reality. This is precisely what Brand Blanshard and Ralph Walker do. The point of Part I was to establish that this is a good way of proceeding for theories of truth.

The coherentist will then need to show why the relation between fact and reality should be thought of as coherence instead of correspondence. This is where ontology comes into the picture, for idealism and realism are theories about reality and will bear some relevance. Correspondence theorists can either be a realists or idealists without affecting the plausibility of their theory. Coherence is a relation between truth-bearers and on an idealist ontology everything is like a belief. Idealism is therefore a position the coherentists are going to need to adopt if they

want to have an advantage of the correspondence theorists. The belief that grass is green can very plausibly *cohere* with the greenness of grass because they are both mind-dependent things.

This paper has not taken a position on the status of idealism itself. Some might take coherentism's reliance on idealism as a *reductio ad absurdum* against the coherence theory. The overall point of this paper has been to suggest how the debate between coherentists and their opponents should shift. Coherentists ought to be committed defending the claim that reality is mind-dependent, following the British idealists and Ralph Walker. They do not, however, need to adopt a particular version of idealism, so finding a plausible account of the claim that objects are mind-dependent will be a project for coherentists to pursue. This talk about reality and how it relates to truth-bearers would represent a fundamental dialectic shift in debates between coherentists and their opponents. It is no longer a question of trying to find a counter-example to the theory. Disputes about the nature of reality are relevant to questions about the nature of truth. This is a natural corollary of the view that truth is intimately bound up with reality, yet it is an important point to make as it sets a starting point for judging competing theories of truth. To have a significantly different conception of truth to the traditional account entails a different conception of reality. Rather than shy away from disputes about reality, theorists about truth should acknowledge the importance of them and, like in the case of coherentism, be ready to adopt a new position on reality in order to defend a new view of truth.

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