

Penultimate version of a manuscript that will be published in *Acta Philosophica Fennica*—refer to the published version

## No Safe Haven for Truth Pluralists

### Abstract

Truth pluralism offers the latest extension in the tradition of substantive theorizing about truth. While various forms of this thesis are available, most frameworks commit to domain reliance. According to domain reliance, various ways of being true, such as coherence and correspondence, are tied to discourse domains rather than individual sentences. From this follows that the truth of different types of sentences is accounted for by their domain membership. For example, sentences addressing ethical matters are true if they cohere and those addressing extensional states of affairs if they correspond. By tying distinct truth-grounding properties to domains rather than individual sentences, truth pluralists avoid certain issues with definitional ambiguity and indeterminacy. I argue that contrary to the ideal situation, domains fail to provide the sought-after benefits of achieving definitional unambiguity and determinacy in the standard domain reliant pluralist frameworks. The reason is that, when combined with the inherently ambiguous nature of certain truth-relevant terms of sentences, fringe cases emerge, causing some of them to count as members of multiple domains. Consequently, some sentences end up being both true and false in the standard domain reliant pluralist frameworks, thus conflicting with both standard laws of non-contradiction and identity. Finally, I argue that truth pluralists should pay closer attention to the hitherto neglected question of inherent natural language ambiguity.

**Keywords:** truth, truth pluralism, discourse domains, ambiguity, indeterminacy, inflationism

### 1. Introduction

Truth pluralism has become a much-discussed position in contemporary truth-theoretic debates (Pedersen & Wright 2013; Wyatt 2013; Wyatt & Lynch 2016; Wyatt, Pedersen & Kellen 2018; Kim & Pedersen 2018; Edwards 2018a, 2018b).<sup>1</sup> The general thesis of truth pluralism is that there are many ways for truthbearers to be true.<sup>2</sup> According to the standard explanation, sentences get to be true in different ways based on their domain membership. For example, sentences addressing ethical matters,

---

<sup>1</sup> The term “truth pluralism” was introduced by Crispin Wright (1992) in *Truth and Objectivity*. One of its original goals was to arrive at a definition of truth that would allow both realist and anti-realist intuitions to be satisfied.

<sup>2</sup> For practical reasons, I commit to treating sentence tokens as truthbearers.

or composed of ethical concepts, belong to the domain of ethics, which is governed by an adequate truth-grounding property such as *coherence*. Other sentences are about extensional states of affairs, thus belonging to the domain of physics, which is governed by an appropriate truth-grounding property such as *correspondence*. By accommodating both, coherence and correspondence criteria, truth pluralists aim to offer a definition of truth that scales over the full range of natural truth-apt discourses, thus offering a viable alternative to traditional monist and deflationary theories (Pedersen, Wyatt & Kellen 2018, 4).<sup>3</sup>

Discourse domains have a crucial explanatory role in current pluralist frameworks.<sup>4</sup> As noted, pluralists of all persuasions tie truth-grounding properties, such as coherence and correspondence, to domains rather than to individual sentences. Consequently, the truth of different *types* of sentences is accounted for by their domain membership. In an optimal scenario, each truth-apt sentence belongs to a single unambiguously individuated domain governed by exactly one truth-grounding property. From this follows that, by knowing the domain membership of a sentence, one is able to account for its truth by inferring the property that grounds truth for the relevant domain. Without domains, explaining why a particular sentence is true in one way rather than another becomes difficult if not impossible (Wyatt 2013, 321). Even worse, without domains, some sentences end up being both true and false in pluralist frameworks, thus conflicting with the standard law of non-contradiction (Edwards 2018b, 85–86). As a result of such issues, domains are held as a safe haven that supposedly guard pluralists of all sorts from various issues with definitional ambiguity and indeterminacy.

In this paper, I argue that, like domain-free models, current domain reliant pluralist frameworks generate similar issues with ambiguity and indeterminacy. This follows from the current pluralist neglect of addressing the issues that inherent natural language ambiguity generates in their frameworks. As I demonstrate later, because some truth-relevant components of sentences allow for different yet equally valid readings, these components end up assigning sentences to multiple domains with different truth-grounding properties, with the consequence of having one of these properties and lacking another. As a result, domain reliant pluralist frameworks end up conflicting with both the standard laws of non-

---

<sup>3</sup> Note that one can be a pluralist in the context of a single truth property such as correspondence (see Sher 2005). Further, one can form a definition that commits to multiple deflated truth properties (Beall 2013). Finally, one can form a hybrid definition that allows for both inflated and deflated truth properties. In general, pluralists can utilize different monist theories, various inflated and deflated truth properties, and the logico-expressive definitions of the truth predicate, which are crucial components of deflationary theories.

<sup>4</sup> As Wyatt (2013) notes, discourse is a more permissive category than a discussion. One can have a discussion about both equality of income and preservation of natural resources and still be under the same domain of ethical discourse.

contradiction and identity. Against this backdrop, I argue that pluralists should re-consider their current aim of offering a complete, unambiguous, and determinate definition of truth for natural discourse. Finally, based on the findings, I explore some solutions to the issues noted and discuss the prospects of pluralist theories.

## 2. Truth Pluralism

Various forms of the general truth pluralist thesis have been endorsed in the literature (Edwards 2018a, 129; Kim & Pedersen 2018, 124). In general, these forms divide into strong (SP) and moderate (MP) categories:

*SP*: there are many ways of being true, *none* of which is had by all true sentences

*MP*: there are many ways of being true, *some* of which are had by all true sentences

The central difference between strong and moderate forms is that the former commit to radical *disunity* regarding truth, while the latter include both unifying *and* disunifying features. According to strong pluralism, truth is many but *not* one. There are independent ways of being true (T1, ..., Tn), with no connection in between. According to moderate pluralism, truth is both one *and* many. Different sentences get to be true in different ways, but they are all true in some unifying sense. According to the truth pluralist literature, strong forms are not widely supported (Kim & Pedersen 2018, 108; Pedersen & Lynch 2018, 561) because moderate forms have ready answers to some of the objections faced by the strong forms. For example, strong pluralism has difficulty accounting for the *normativity* of truth, defining *validity*, and explaining *generalizations* via the truth predicate. Think about the normative aspect of truth as that which is *prima facie* correct to believe.<sup>5</sup> This is a unifying feature of *all* truths. Further, validity or logical consequence is standardly defined as the preservation of truth over inference. The problem is that inference can be mixed, meaning that the premises can be true in different ways, assuming the basic pluralist premise that there are many ways of being true. The question, therefore, is what type of truth (T1, ..., Tn) is preserved over mixed inference? Lastly, concerning generalizations via the truth predicate, statements such as “everything that the Pope said is (or was) true” present themselves as ambiguous in strongly pluralist frameworks. In which of the possible ways (T1, ..., Tn)

---

<sup>5</sup> A further note concerns the value of truth. If strong pluralists hold that truth is valuable, they ought to explain whether different ways of being true entail variance in the value of truth.

is everything that the Pope said true? Because of such issues, I restrict the discussion in this paper to moderately pluralist theories, though much of what will be said here also concerns strongly pluralist frameworks, especially insofar as they commit to using discourse domains as an explanatory resource.

As noted, the general thesis of moderate pluralism is that truth is both one and many. According to the standard explanation, truth displays unity on global, general, or language levels and disunity on local, domain, or sentence levels. According to the standard explanation, there is a general or elite way of being true. This is achieved through the possession of a *general truth property* F, which is denoted by the predicate “is true.”<sup>6</sup> However, abiding by the general pluralist thesis of truth variability, discursively distinct types of sentences assume this property in different ways by possessing the relevant truth-grounding property of their domain. In other words, all true sentences are true in a general or unifying way, but the grounds of truth are many; depending on the domain, sentences possess the general truth property in different ways. This explanatory framework rests on two central commitments: a *platitude-based strategy* for defining the general truth property F and *domain reliance*, which accounts for the variability of the grounds of truth.

Starting with the first commitment, the general truth property F is commonly defined through a platitude-based strategy. According to this strategy, the general truth property inherits its nature from the concept of truth, which can be accessed through certain platitudes, intuitions, or folk beliefs about a notion. For example, Lynch (2009, 8–13, 2013, 31) commits to the following widely cited platitudes, translated in a way that makes reference to sentences:

*Objectivity*: a sentence is true iff things are as the sentence says.

*Norm of Belief*: it is *prima facie* correct to believe a sentence iff the sentence is true.

*End of Inquiry*: other things being equal, true sentences are a worthy goal of inquiry.

A chosen set of platitudes are then used as a collective definition for the general truth property.<sup>7</sup> For example, Edwards notes that “[t]ruth is given as the property that is exhaustively described by the truth platitudes” (2018a, 126, 153), and Lynch (2009, 74) claims that, through conceptual necessity, these

---

<sup>6</sup> Abiding by the law of symmetry, falsity is defined as the lack of said property.

<sup>7</sup> Note that the chosen set of platitudes need not be treated as an exhaustive definition of the concept of truth.

platitudes are features of different truth-grounding properties. Simply put, moderate pluralists hold that the general truth property F is best characterized through specific platitudes about the concept of truth. How exactly one accounts for the metaphysical connection among the concept of truth, the platitudes about truth, the general truth property, and the truth-grounding properties will be largely overlooked in this article.<sup>8</sup> I will simply assume that some satisfactory explanation to this is available. The point of focus for the remainder of this paper is the second key commitment of pluralist frameworks to domain reliance, which plays a crucial explanatory role in accounting for the variability that truth displays across different regions of discourse.

### 3. Discourse Domains

According to domain reliance, truth-grounding properties such as coherence and correspondence vary by regions of discourse or discourse domains:

Despite their different views on how to best articulate truth pluralism, strong and moderate pluralists share significant commitments. One such commitment is the commitment to *domains*. Domains are a crucial component of the theoretical framework of pluralism, as reflected by the fact that the core pluralist thesis is that the nature of truth varies *across domains*. (Pedersen, Wyatt & Kellen 2018, 6–8).

Further, Edwards (2018b, 85–86) makes an even stronger claim, arguing that domains ought to be treated as an inseparable feature of pluralist frameworks: “As a result, I think that [all] pluralists should take the notion of a domain seriously as a central aspect of the view” (see also Edwards 2011, 28, 41). Thus, there is no doubt that domains play a crucial explanatory role in current pluralist frameworks.

---

<sup>8</sup> When claiming that different types of sentences get to be true in different ways *because* they belong to distinct domains, the “because” relation between the concept of truth and the truth-grounding properties can be accounted for in many ways, some candidates being *grounding*, *manifestation*, *instantiation*, *entailment*, *determination*, and *conceptual necessity* (see Edwards 2018a, 122–141). For practical reasons, I commit to using grounding as the appropriate relation between the general truth-property F and truth-rendering properties. If one wants to remain neutral regarding a specific relation, then the term “truth-rendering” property is available. Thus, in my view, the truth of sentences belonging to different domains is *grounded* in a plurality of truth-grounding properties. However, most of what will be said here is independent of this question. Further, as the general truth property is a second-order property, the possession of which is determined by the ability of a sentence to possess the first-order truth-grounding property that is relevant to the domain it belongs to, truth-grounding properties can be called quasi-truth properties. As Pedersen notes, truth-grounding properties are “that in virtue of which propositions are true within specific domains, and so, locally behave very much like truth. They are quasi-truth properties because they only exhibit this behavior locally and, so, are distinct from truth” (2020, 356).

In general, discourse domains are taken as classes of sentences that are individuated by some semantic or ontological factor. As Kim and Pedersen (2018, 112) note, sentences belong to different domains because “they concern different subject matters or are about different kinds of states of affairs.” According to a semantics-based strategy, sentences count as members of domains based on their *subject matter* or *aboutness*. For example, sentences that address ethical matters, or are composed of ethical concepts, belong to the domain of ethics and those addressing religious matters to the domain of religion. Ontology-based strategies distinguish between different types of *entities* referred to by the truth-relevant components of sentences (Edwards 2018b, 86, 96, 2018a, 78–79). For example, sentences instantiating terms that designate extensional objects, or predicates that attribute representational properties, belong to a domain of realist speech, and those designating abstract objects or attributing non-representational properties belong to an anti-realist domain. In both cases, the goal is to individuate domains in a way that leads to them being unambiguous classes of sentences. Based on the desire to achieve this result, pluralists aim to account for the truth of different types of sentences based on their domain membership. As Edwards (2011, 31) writes: “According to the alethic pluralist, there will be a robust property in virtue of which the propositions expressed by sentences in a particular domain of discourse will be true, but this property will change depending on the domain we are considering.” Similarly, Lynch (2009, 77) notes that: “Propositions about different subjects can be made true by distinct properties each of which plays the truth-role [for the relevant domain].”<sup>9</sup> Finally, based on this somewhat heavy metaphysical framework consisting of both the platitude-based strategy of defining the general truth property and the domain reliance that accounts for truth-variability, domain reliant moderate pluralists argue that they can offer an unambiguous and determinate definition of truth, including for the grounds of truth, which scales from the concept of truth to the full range of truth-apt discourse in the context of natural languages.

However, according to the literature, domain reliance introduces its own array of definitional issues: “The notion of a domain has been both a key and controversial aspect of pluralist theories” (Edwards 2018b, 103; see Edwards 2018a, 147; Wyatt 2013, 225–236). Some of these issues deal with the metaphysically challenging task of individuating domains. For others, ambiguity is generated by discourse bearing mixed content from various domains. Based on these challenges, some have expressed skeptical remarks about the very possibility of achieving a satisfactory pluralist account (David 2013,

---

<sup>9</sup> It is worth emphasizing that domains rather than individual sentences play the adequate truth-bearing role in domain reliant pluralist frameworks. What is relevant for sentence-level truth-grounding is their domain membership.

49).<sup>10</sup> In what follows, I explore certain issues with current domain reliant pluralist models caused by inherent natural language ambiguity.

#### 4. Issues with Defining Domains

Surprisingly, not much work has been done in exploring the nature of discourse domains in the standard pluralist frameworks: “Despite the central role that domains play within the standard pluralist framework not much systematic work has been done on their nature” (Kim & Pedersen 2018, 111). Direct studies can be found from Edwards (2018a, 77–82; 2018b, 86–100) and Wyatt (2013, 225–236). In general, the now prominent domain reliant pluralists bear the burden of defining discourse domains in addition to offering a definition of truth that utilizes the notion. However, as noted in the literature, defining domains is a cumbersome and complex task (Lynch 2018, 66–67; see Blackburn 2013, 265; Quine 1960, 131). More specifically, domain reliant pluralists are pressured to offer an answer to at least the following questions, some more truth-theoretically relevant than others: What are the necessary and sufficient characteristics of each domain, and how are they distinguished from one another unambiguously? How is the domain membership of sentences accounted for? How is the domain membership of sentences bearing content—potentially counting as members of multiple domains—accounted for? How are truth-grounding properties tied to the relevant domains?<sup>11</sup> Can a single domain have more than one truth-grounding property?<sup>12</sup> How can truth-apt sentences be separated from non-truth-apt sentences in the context of domains?<sup>13</sup> Can some sentences, such as necessary truths, be members of multiple domains,

---

<sup>10</sup> Despite this, and perhaps surprisingly, the literature exploring alternative approaches such as domain-free models is sparse.

<sup>11</sup> Why is P1 and not P2 the truth-grounding property of D1? Further, it can be argued that the truth of some sentences, such as “water is H<sub>2</sub>O,” is based on multiple properties because it includes terms that refer to both mind-dependent and -independent entities. Thus, whether or not it is indeed true is dependent on both correspondence with actual states of affairs and coherence with the system of true beliefs that gives meaning to its terms.

<sup>12</sup> Wyatt (2013, 13) argues for an alternative approach where sentences belong to multiple domains: “truth pluralists should not presuppose that every atomic proposition belongs to one and only one domain.” Lynch (2013, 16) presents a similar case where “there is no need for the pluralist to sort propositions into strict domains.” Does this generate ambiguity? According to Wyatt (2013), no, for we can still hold that sentences that belong to multiple domains have only one truth-grounding property. One can find a reply to Wyatt’s argument in Edwards (2018b, 95), who disagrees with both Wyatt’s and Lynch’s approaches.

<sup>13</sup> For example, take two sentences from the domain of ethics: “killing innocent people is wrong” and “eating meat is wrong.” While the former is obviously true, things are not so simple for the latter, since, for example, we now have artificial meat.

or does each domain include its own subset of necessary truths?<sup>14</sup> While the resolution of some of these issues is underway, no simple answers are forthcoming.<sup>15</sup>

Perhaps the most researched issue concerning domains is a set of problems labeled *mixed discourse* (Edwards 2018a, 95). The general idea of mixed discourse is simple. Take two sentences, “snow is white” and “snow is beautiful,” from the distinct domains of speech regarding extensional and aesthetical properties, individuated by the extensional predicate “is white” and the aesthetical predicate “is beautiful.” Assuming that both sentences are true and that the truth of speech about extensional entities is grounded in correspondence, and that of aesthetics in coherence, one can form simple mixes of sentences, compounds, and inferences where both extensional and aesthetical speech are present. The predicate-emphasizing approach to domain membership allegedly solves the problem of mixed atomics, but the issues with mixed compounds and inferences remain persistent.<sup>16</sup> For example, it is not clear whether the truth-grounding property of “snow is white and snow is beautiful” is either correspondence coherence or both.<sup>17</sup>

Mixed discourse provides a suitable case study for illustrating the threat that natural language ambiguity poses for domain reliant pluralist frameworks. As pluralists seek to offer a definition of truth for natural discourse, and this discourse manifests content mixing in various ways, solutions for clarifying matters will be required if one relies on the notions of domains and domain membership to help achieve an unambiguous and determinate definition of truth. While domain reliant pluralists have proposed various solutions to the problems involved with content mixing in the context of truth-apt sentences, they have generally neglected a separate yet related issue that follows from the inherently ambiguous nature of certain truth-relevant terms, namely natural language predicates. More specifically, because some of these predicates encompass inherent ambiguity, as is the case, for example, of homonyms, this ambiguity risks carrying over to the pluralist frameworks. To emphasize, insofar as pluralists seek to offer an unambiguous and determinate definition of truth for natural discourse, the inherent ambiguity of some

---

<sup>14</sup> Pluralists have largely overlooked the question of how one can account for the domain membership of necessary truths. This subject ought to be explored independently.

<sup>15</sup> Solutions to some of these issues are actively sought in the literature (see Wyatt 2013, 230; Edwards 2018a, 77, 2018b, 85; Lynch 2018, 66).

<sup>16</sup> Lynch (2009, 80–81) notes that the idea of mixed atomics is self-refuting: “belonging to a particular domain is a feature an atomic proposition at least, has in virtue of being the sort of proposition it is. Propositions are the kind of propositions they are essentially; therefore, belonging to a particular domain is an essential fact about an atomic proposition.”

<sup>17</sup> One proposed solution to this issue can be found in Edwards (2018b, 100).



natural language terms should be adequately addressed. Thus far, pluralists have failed to satisfy this requirement, for they have largely circumvented this issue.

In what follows, I use Edwards' (2018a, 78–79) predicate-emphasizing approach to domain membership as a case study to illustrate a strategy that goes beyond the issue of mixed atomics.<sup>18</sup> Thereafter, I show how this approach leads to the above-noted problems with ambiguity and indeterminacy, ultimately conflicting with the standard laws of non-contradiction and identity. According to Edwards, one solution to the problem of mixed atomics is to account for the domain membership of sentences by *predicate kinds*. When dealing with atomic sentences of the form “a is F” (snow is white), where “a” (snow) is a singular term that designates a range of objects, and “is F” (is white) is a predicate that attributes a property onto the objects that the sentences are about, it is always the predicate that determines the domain of sentences:

I will suggest that it is the predicate that determines the domain [of atomic sentences]. We can distinguish between two things: what a sentence is about, and what is said about the thing the sentence is about. A sentence is about its object [...] But what makes these things sentences is that there is more: there is something that is said about the things that the sentences are about. [...] It is this aspect—the attribution of a property to an object—that makes these kinds of sentences sentences in that they are bearers of content. So, it is not what a sentence is about that we should be considering [when assigning them into domains,] it is rather what is said about the thing the sentence is about. (Edwards 2018a, 78–79; see 2018b, 97)<sup>19</sup>

Thus, according to Edwards, while atomic sentences are always about their objects, the question of truth emerges only after something is said about these objects or a property is attributed to them. In this sense, it is the attribution of a property to an object that renders these sentences truth-apt, and because of this, the predicate ought to be treated as the domain-determining factor. From this, one can argue for the ideal situation where each predicate kind is tied to a specific domain of sentences. Thus, by instantiating a predicate kind, truth-apt sentences belong to distinct domains to which the adequate truth-grounding

---

<sup>18</sup> A more general problem emerging from the discussion of this paper, and from the discussions had by various pluralists, is that if one aims for a theory of *truth*, and not only a theory of truth for *atomic sentences*, then the different ways in which *all* types of truth-apt sentences can be assigned to domains should be accounted for. Thus far, the literature focuses heavily on atomic sentences specifically.

<sup>19</sup> Edwards (2018a, 79) continues, claiming that “the singular term is not relevant to domain individuation.”

properties are tied. In general, the method of choosing either the singular term or the predicate kind as the domain-determining factor of sentences offers an answer to the following questions:

- i. How are sentences and domains individuated?
- ii. What are the necessary and sufficient criteria for accepting and rejecting sentences into domains?

However, choosing either the singular term or predicate kind as the domain-determining factor leaves the following question unanswered:

- I. How can the domain membership of sentences that instantiate ambiguous singular terms or predicates be accounted for?

In what follows, I argue that, because of the inherently ambiguous nature of some natural language predicates, the domain membership of some sentences ends up being ambiguous and indeterminate in the standard domain reliant pluralist frameworks.<sup>20</sup> The core of my argument is that, because of the inherently ambiguous nature of some predicates, some sentences end up counting as members of multiple domains with different truth-grounding properties, thus generating confusion regarding the grounds of their truth. More specifically, if there is no clarity on whether a sentence S1 belongs to the domain of D1 or D2 or both, with distinct truth-grounding properties P1 (D1) and P2 (D2), then there can be no determinate answer as to the property in which the truth of S1 is grounded. As I later demonstrate, subsequent problems emerge.

## **5. Issues with Ambiguity and Indeterminacy in Domain reliant Frameworks**

Domain reliant truth pluralist frameworks rely on strategies of domain-individuation and account for the domain membership of sentences. As demonstrated earlier, a prominent strategy relies on predicate kinds. Each predicate kind assigns sentences to a specific domain governed by a distinct truth-grounding property. Here, the term “predicate kind” can be understood in two ways. First, predicate kinds can be individuated on semantic grounds, such as subject matter or aboutness. The predicate “is right” denotes

---

<sup>20</sup> For practical reasons, I restrict the discussion to those approaches that commit to the predicate-emphasizing approach to domain membership, but the arguments provided should carry over to other approaches, such as those that commit to the relevance of singular terms for domain membership.

a distinctively normative property, rendering sentences about things that are right or wrong, etc., thus assigning them to a specific domain, a viable candidate being that of ethics. Other predicates denote extensional properties, rendering sentences that instantiate them about things that have representational or objective properties, hence assigning them to an appropriate domain, such as physics. Second, predicate kinds can be individuated on ontological grounds, relying on the ontological status of their referents. As the ontological status of the property denoted by “is right” is abstract, the non-extensional, non-representational, projected, non-natural, abundant, etc., sentences instantiating it belong to a domain that covers this type of anti-realist speech. Other sentences have predicates such as “is liquid” that denote extensional, representational, objective, natural, or sparse properties, etc., thus assigning them to a domain that covers this type of realist speech.

As expected, both of these strategies have their strengths and weaknesses. The first strategy is intuitive, but it involves the cumbersome task of individuating predicate kinds on thematic grounds. There is no shortage of natural language predicates, and assigning each of them to some of the numerous thematically individuated domains without ambiguity is a complicated task, especially bearing in mind that, in the optimal scenario, each domain is governed by a single truth-grounding property. For example, distinguishing between moral and religious discourse can be difficult; the same applies to speech about objective properties and aesthetics. In what way does the predicate “is bad” differ from “is sinful,” and does the predicate “is a mosaic” assign sentences to the domain of aesthetics, even though it attributes a representational and objective property? The ontology-based strategy suffers less from this issue because it requires only two domains: one for the realist discourse and the other for the anti-realist discourse. For example, predicates that attribute sparse, concrete, representational, extensional, natural, or causally effective properties assign sentences to a realist domain governed by an appropriate truth-grounding property, such as correspondence, while those attributing abundant, abstract, non-representational, non-extensional, or non-causal properties assign them to an anti-realist domain governed by another truth-grounding property, such as coherence or superwarrant. Regardless of the strategy, the preferred outcome remains the same. To avoid ambiguity, each sentence must belong to a distinct domain with a single truth-grounding property.

One issue with the predicate-emphasizing approach to domain individuation and membership that plagues both semantic and ontology-based strategies follows from the inherently ambiguous nature of some natural language predicates. This ambiguity comes in two kinds. First, some predicates are thick,

meaning that they play both evaluative and descriptive roles. For example, courageousness (“is courageous”) can be interpreted as a virtuous property with clear moral or prescriptive implications. Conversely, courageousness implies a tendency to act in the world, which is a causally relevant property. Thus, it is not obvious whether sentences such as “Charlie is courageous” are subject to a realist (correspondence) or anti-realist (coherence) criterion for truth (see Edwards 2018a, 79–80). Second, and more central to the discussion at hand, some predicates allow for multiple readings. Even a simple predicate such as “is white” is open to different readings because it encompasses a degree of ambiguity. It can be read as denoting the extensional property of having a certain *color* (“snow is white”) or perhaps the social property of belonging to a specific *social class* (“Charlie is White”). From this homonym-based ambiguity follows that one and the same predicate potentially assigns sentences into the distinct domains of physical and social speech or speech about extensional and non-extensional properties. Take the following atomic sentence as instantiating said predicate:

*Ambiguous*: “Donald Trump is white”

Assuming this to be a truth-apt sentence, there seems to be no initial way of telling whether it is about Trump’s physical color or the social class to which he belongs. Another way to illustrate this ambiguity is to use the notions of literal and implicit readings. Let us assume that the literal reading of *Ambiguous* is the physical reading and that the social reading is implicit. According to this strategy, *Ambiguous* claims that Trump is physically white, and it is implied that he belongs to the appropriate social class of White people. However, these are radically different understandings of one and the same sentence, with the only similarity being that they are both about Trump. What about a person of native African descent who suffers from albinism, rendering their skin color white? Here, a literal claim of them being white cannot imply that they belong to the analogous social class. While the literal reading would be true, the implied reading would be false. Further, in the case of *Ambiguous*, the readings can just as well be the reverse. Nothing in the sentence itself indicates what the possible readings are and which of them ought to be treated as correct or primary from the perspective of domain membership. Of course, the utterer knows what they mean by a given sentence, but this is not necessarily evident to anyone beyond them, not to mention the independent issues that plague approaches that commit to treating utterances as truthbearers.

One problem that the *Ambiguous* example generates in the standard domain reliant pluralist frameworks is that the truth-grounding property for the domain of physical or realist speech is *different* from that of social or anti-realist speech. It is widely held that speech about physical or extensional states of affairs is governed by a correspondence criterion. “Snow is white” is true iff the object designated by “snow” has the property predicated by “is white.” Here, truth depends on the connection that linguistic entities have with the relevant objective states of affairs. Speech about social properties is not governed by the same criterion. For example, correspondence does not exhaust why a person belongs to a specific social class. As illustrated in the example of the native African with albinism, one’s skin color does not determine their membership to a particular social class. Rather, it is a matter of coherence with other true beliefs regarding one’s identity, culture, heritage, and opinions that contributes to their inclusion in or exclusion from these types of classes. This indicates that speech about social properties is governed by something other than a correspondence criterion, the viable alternative being coherence.

However, from this two-way ambiguity of physical and social readings follows a more serious problem for domain reliant pluralists. If *Ambiguous* belongs to the domain of physical or realist speech that is governed by the truth-grounding property of correspondence, then it fails to be true. This is because Trump is physically *orange*; therefore, the sentence fails to correspond. Nevertheless, if this sentence belongs to the domain of speech about social properties that is governed by an anti-realist criterion of coherence, then it turns out to be true, for Trump, indeed, belongs to the appropriate social class. Is this ambiguity harmless? There are a couple of reasons for thinking that the answer is negative. Take the standard law of non-contradiction that many see as a necessary condition for *any* truth definition:

*Law of non-contradiction:* No sentence is both true and false.

The *Ambiguous* sentence turned out to be both true and false in the standard domain reliant pluralist frameworks. The reason is that the predicate “is white” allows for multiple readings, assigning the same sentence to distinct domains of speech about physical and social properties, whereas by possessing one of the relevant truth-grounding properties and failing to have the other, simultaneous truth and falsity emerge. Note that correspondence and coherence are both distinct truth-grounding properties, and they ground truth separately for the relevant domains. Because lacking the relevant truth-grounding property for the domain that a sentence belongs to constitutes falsity, *Ambiguous* emerges as both true and false. It is worth emphasizing that the truth and falsity of sentences is dependent on their ability to possess the

relevant truth-grounding properties because the possession of the general truth property F is determined by the ability of the sentence to possess the relevant truth-grounding property. According to pluralists, the grounds of truth are many, a claim that ought to be taken seriously. The unfortunate result seems to be that, for some sentences, ambiguity emerges regarding the grounds of their truth. Finally, it is important to realize that the noted issue with simultaneous truth and falsity concerns both semantic and ontology-based individuation strategies. The ambiguous predicate “is white” (white in color) can attribute an extensional or representational property, thus assigning a sentence to a realist domain of speech about extensional states of affairs. However, the same predicate “is white” (member of social class) can predicate a non-extensional or non-representational property, assigning a sentence to an anti-realist domain. Assuming that these domains are governed by distinct truth-grounding properties, the *Ambiguous* sentence once more emerges as both true and false, even according to the ontology-based strategies.

Interestingly enough, the troubles for domain reliant pluralists do not end here. It also follows that the fundamental law of identity becomes contradicted in the standard domain reliant pluralist frameworks when supplemented with ambiguous predicates. Take the standard law of identity:

*Identity: S is identical to S*

From which we can trivially infer that:

*Identity schema: If “S” (sentence) is true, then “S” (sentence) is true.*

or

*Identity schema instance: If “Donald Trump is white” is true, then “Donald Trump is white” is true.*

Furthermore, the latter inference emerged as false in the domain reliant scheme, for the left- and right-hand sentences allowed for different readings, assigning one and the same sentence to distinct domains with different truth-grounding properties and, at the same time, having one of these properties and lacking the other. Thus, in addition to conflicting with the standard law of non-contradiction, even the fundamental law of identity becomes compromised in the standard domain reliant pluralist frameworks

when supplemented with the inherently ambiguous natural language predicates. In what follows, I discuss these results.

## 6. Discussion

What options are there to resolve the above-mentioned issues? The initial option is to simply accept that ambiguous predicates assign sentences to multiple domains. However, this leads directly to the issue of mixed atomics, compromising the goal of an unambiguous and determinate definition of truth. If some sentences belong to multiple domains with different truth-grounding properties, or there is no clarity as to which of the possible domains they ought to be read as belonging to, then no determinate answer can be given to the question regarding the grounds of their truth. Simply put, if a predicate assigns a sentence to the distinct domains D1 and D2 with different truth-grounding properties, then the question emerges as to which of these domains ought to be treated as primary from the perspective of truth-grounding. No simple answer is forthcoming.

Another option is to treat sentences with ambiguous predicates not as single sentences but as compounds. These types of ambiguous sentences can be treated as conjunctions or disjunctions of sentences rather than individual sentences. The sentence “Donald Trump is physically white and Donald Trump is socially white” would be false, while the sentence “Donald Trump is physically white or Donald Trump is socially white” would be true. Here, a crucial step has been taken regarding the disambiguation of the original *Ambiguous* sentence. There is no guarantee that, in the case of natural discourse, this step is taken, and if this is assumed, then there are good grounds to argue that we are no longer operating in the domain of natural discourse. Rather, we are speaking about some regimented or disambiguated subsection of natural discourse, and thus, the goal of offering a complete definition of truth for natural discourse is not met. In any case, it seems that solving the issue of ambiguous predicates with the help of conjunction- or disjunction-based strategies rests on the assumption that the ambiguous predicates can be, or are, disambiguated.

Indeed, if the pluralists were to adopt a regimentation or disambiguation strategy, then they would have to re-frame their program as offering a definition of truth for a regimented subsection of natural language. However, this conflicts with one of the major commitments of current pluralist frameworks. Recall the platitude-based strategy for defining the general truth property F that all true sentences have and all false

sentences lack, which is denoted by the predicate “is true.” According to this strategy, the general truth property inherits its nature from our *common-sense beliefs* and *intuitions* about the concept of truth. Thus, the platitudes are aimed at capturing our pre-theoretical and “naturally” emerging concept of truth. According to pluralists, our pre-theoretical conception of truth is accessible through certain platitudes about the notion that we use as a collective definition for the general truth property. In this sense, pluralists are not talking about a regimented conception of truth or a restricted understanding of what it means to be a true sentence. If one wants a definition of truth for natural discourse, then it ought to be consistent with the natural or pre-theoretical ways in which truth appears in our cognitive lives. Thus, regimenting the scope of truth-apt sentences generates conflict with one of the major commitments of the pluralist program in seeking a definition of truth that is consistent with its pre-theoretical nature, that is, given by common-sense platitudes.

Of course, one could argue that the issues regarding natural language ambiguity are not only a problem for pluralist or domain reliant pluralist frameworks but for the entire range of definitions of truth for natural language discourse. One issue with this counter-argument is that, while it is indeed the case that natural language ambiguity generates problems for various types of truth definitions, many of them seek to resolve these issues by regimenting the target language and ruling out ambiguous terms. For example, one might adopt a position of truth-apt minimalism, according to which the units of truth are restricted in a way that suspicious sentences, such as those with ambiguous predicates, are cast out of the question regarding truth or falsity. This type of project can be found in Quine (1992, 78–79), according to whom only eternal sentence tokens are to be treated as truthbearers. These types of sentences are not permitted to include troublesome terms, such as ambiguous predicates. Again, however, from the perspective of the pluralist program, the problem with accommodating the Quinean approach is that we do not commonly see *only* eternal sentence tokens as truthbearers. The sentence “Donald Trump is white” is surely not an eternal sentence, and both of the senses in which it can be interpreted are truth-apt in common discourse. Entities can possess distinct colors and can belong to distinct social classes. The problem is that we do not always know the ways in which all truth-apt sentences should be interpreted, and this ambiguity is very much in line with the richness of meaning that is an inherent feature of natural discourse. Semantic richness is one of the reasons why natural languages are such useful communication systems in the first place, enabling a wide range of expressive and descriptive functions. Insofar as a definition of truth is directed at natural discourse, as the pluralist program surely seems to be, then the potential issues with ambiguity should be a top priority for examination. However, pluralists have



hitherto said very little about the inherent ambiguity of natural discourse and the problems it generates for their definitions, even while setting the goal of achieving an unambiguous and determinate definition of truth for said discourse.

Finally, I want to make a brief note about an approach to defining truth that shows promise in avoiding the already noted issues generated by natural language ambiguity, albeit still retaining the virtue of enabling the accommodation of both realist and anti-realist intuitions. One could aim to construct a Tarski-style truth definition for a regimented subsection of natural discourse that would obviously be incomplete because of the paradoxes and infinite semantic ascent. Beyond this, however, as given by the Tarskian paradigm, one would end up with a definition that gives general and scaling criteria for the truth of all truth-apt sentences. Take the Tarskian T-schema where each sentence provides its own conditions for being true:

*T-schema*: X is true iff p<sup>21</sup>

or

*T-schema instance*: “Donald Trump is white” is true iff Donald Trump is white.

Indeed, the Tarskian paradigm allows for both coherence and correspondence readings. As such, there is no in-principle reason for why it could not be used to construct a definition that allows for both realist and anti-realist ways of being true. In this sense, supplementing it with a distinctively pluralist thesis is a worthy path of inquiry.

Of course, there are central differences between the Tarski-based approach and current domain reliant pluralist frameworks. One important difference is that Tarski’s account does not commit to using domains as an explanatory resource for defining truth. Because it treats individual sentences as truthbearers, no commitment to discourse domains is required. From this follows that the Tarskian approach does not fall victim to the noted ambiguity issues emerging in the domain reliant frameworks. Independent of this, the project of defining domains is strictly non-truth-theoretical in the first place, and

---

<sup>21</sup> Tarski’s (1944, 344) explication of the T-schema reads: “We shall call any such equivalence (with ‘p’ replaced by any sentence of the language to which the word ‘true’ refers, and ‘X’ replaced by a name of this sentence) an equivalence of the form (T).”

thus, there is no in-principle reason why a definition of truth should commit to it. Of course, as domains can be understood as simple classes of sentences, avoiding them altogether seems unnecessary. Indeed, even acknowledging different ways of being true would constitute domains. One key difference between the domain-reliant pluralist models and the Tarski-inspired approach is that one can either accept that a definition results in the existence of domains or that a definition can utilize the notion of domains in accounting for the truth of sentences. As demonstrated throughout this paper, there are reasons for being suspicious about the latter path. Because of space limitations, I shall delay further discussion on the prospects of forming a domain-free pluralist definition in the spirit of Tarski's semantic conception of truth.

Finally, one note from the perspective of an unambiguous and determinate pluralist definition of truth arising from the comparison of current pluralist models and the Tarskian approach is that many of the issues with natural language ambiguity that pluralists face follow from their confidence in committing to a strict grounding claim. Pluralists are not only satisfied with offering general criteria for the truth of sentences; they seek to offer a scaling, unambiguous, and determinate definition of the grounds of truth on the level of natural discourse. The Tarskian approach simply provides general criteria for the truth of each sentence. There is no direct answer to the question of in what is the truth of each true sentence grounded in. Thus, the Tarskian approach is satisfied with a less specific definition, and for good reason. Tarski was well aware of the problems involved with offering a complete definition of truth for natural discourse, one reason being the inherent ambiguity and vagueness of natural language terms. Indeed, in this sense, Tarski can be interpreted as giving a reason why a determinate and scaling definition on the grounds of truth for natural language sentences *cannot* be given. Indeed, in light of our discussion, the issues generated by natural language ambiguity for definitions of truth in general seem to intensify the more a definition of truth commits itself to explaining. A criterial definition that makes strict grounding claims is faced with the issue of natural language ambiguity if it subjects itself to offering an unambiguous and determinate definition of truth. Other less ambitious definitional paths seem to face this issue to a lesser degree, but exploring the full scope of this idea deserves an independent study. I hope that at least some of the current findings will aid future examinations.

## References

Beall, J. (2013), "Deflated Truth Pluralism", In N. Pedersen and C. Wright (eds.): *Truth and Pluralism: Current Debates* (pp. 323–338). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Blackburn, S. (2013), “Deflationism, Pluralism, Expressivism, Pragmatism”, In N. Pedersen and C. Wright (eds.): *Truth and Pluralism: Current Debates* (pp. 263–277). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- David, M. (2013), “Lynch’s Functional Theory of Truth”, In N. Pedersen and C. Wright (eds): *Truth and Pluralism: Current Debates* (pp. 46–68). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Edwards, D. (2011), “Simplifying Alethic Pluralism”, *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 49(1): 28–48.
- Edwards, D. (2018a), *Metaphysics of Truth*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Edwards, D. (2018b), “The Metaphysics of Domains”, In J. Wyatt, N. Pedersen, and N. Kellen (eds.): *Pluralisms about Truth and Logic* (pp. 85–106). London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kim, S. and Pedersen, N. (2018), “Strong Truth Pluralism”, In J. Wyatt, N. Pedersen, and N. Kellen (eds.): *Pluralisms in Truth and Logic* (pp. 107–131). London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lynch, M. (2009), *Truth as One and Many*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lynch, M. (2013), “Three Questions for Truth Pluralism”, In N. Pedersen and C. Wright (eds): *Truth and Pluralism: Current Debates* (pp. 21–41). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lynch, M. (2018), “Truth Pluralism, Quasi-Realism, and the Problem of Double-Counting”, In W. Jeremy and N. Pedersen and N. Kellen (eds.): *Pluralism in Truth and Logic* (pp. 63–84). London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Pedersen, N. and Wright, C. (2013), “Pluralism about Truth as Alethic Disjunctivism”, In N. Pedersen and C. Wright (eds): *Truth and Pluralism: Current Debates* (pp. 87–113). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Pedersen, N. and Lynch, M. (2018), “Truth Pluralism”, In M. Glanzberg (ed.): *The Oxford Handbook of Truth* (pp. 543–575). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Pedersen, N., Wyatt, J. and Kellen, N. (2018), “Introduction”, In J. Wyatt, N. Pedersen, and N. Kellen (eds): *Pluralism in Truth and Logic* (pp. 3–35). London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Pedersen, N. 2020, “Moderate Truth Pluralism and the Structure of Doxastic Normativity”, *American Philosophical Quarterly* 57(4): 355–376.
- Quine, W.V.O. (1960), *Word and Object*. Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press.
- Quine, W.V.O. (1992), *Pursuit of Truth*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Sher, G. (2005), “Functional Pluralism”, *Philosophical Books* 46(4): 311–330.
- Tarski, A. (1944), “The Semantic Conception of Truth: and the Foundations of Semantics”, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 4(3): 341–376.

Wright, C. (1992), *Truth and Objectivity*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Wyatt, J. (2013), “Domains, Plural Truth, and Mixed Atomic Propositions”, *Philosophical Studies* 166(1): 225–36.

Wyatt, J. and Lynch, M. (2016), “From One to Many: Recent Work on Truth”, *American Philosophical Quarterly* 53(4): 323–340.

Wyatt, J., Pedersen, N. and Kellen, N. (2018), *Pluralism in Truth and Logic*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.