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LYNCH ON THE VALUE OF TRUTH

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Few of us will deny that if a person believes something false, then she is wrong or mistaken, and that if a person believes something true, she is right. If someone believes that p , and $\langle p \rangle$ is true, then she is right about whether p ; and if someone believes that p , and $\langle p \rangle$ is false, then she is wrong about whether p .

With a nod to Plato, we may ask whether propositions are true because people who believe them are right *or* whether people who believe them are right because what they believe is true. If propositions were true because people were right to believe them, then we would have the makings of a definition of truth in terms of rightness of belief.

I take it that few of us would be happy saying that propositions are true because people who believe them are right. There is the obvious problem that there are true propositions no one believes. But it doesn't help to say that propositions are true because were people to believe them they would be right. Even aside from worries about conditional analyses in general (e.g., the conditional fallacy), this just sounds like it gets things backwards. $\langle \text{snow is white} \rangle$ is not true because of anything about actual or counterfactual people actually or possibly believing it and being right. Rather, people who believe $\langle \text{snow is white} \rangle$ are right because that proposition is true.

So, because the order of explanation runs from truth to rightness of belief, rather than vice versa, there is no prospect of defining truth as rightness of belief. That does not mean, of course, that the link between truth and rightness of belief is without interest.

However, we need some argument to think that the link is interesting. We speak of right and wrong whenever there is a norm or standard. The person who keeps his napkin on his lap counts as right relative to the norms of North American table-manners. We can therefore ask, what is different about the norm "Believe the truth and only the truth"? Lynch offers an answer to this question in his new book (Lynch 2004a): believing the truth is *good* in a way that conforming to the norms of table-manners isn't. But what does it mean to say that believing the truth is good? A person's believing something true could be prudentially, epistemically, or morally bad, and this could make their believing the truth *all-things-considered* bad. So, we need to speak, rather, of prima facie goodness. What Lynch wants to argue, as I read him, is that the following principles are true:

(TM)

For all propositions P , if P is true, then it is prima facie good to believe P .

For all propositions P, if P is false, then it is prima facie bad to believe P.¹

We call the conjunction of these principles TM for “truth matters.”

Side question: supposing falsity is untruth, can we combine these into a biconditional: for all P, P is true iff it is prima facie good to believe P? I doubt it. Suppose that P is untrue but that there is very good evidence, known to most of humanity, that P is true. Then it would seem that P is prima facie bad to believe (because unsupported by the evidence), even if it is also prima facie good to believe (because true). Prima facie badness seems compatible with prima facie goodness, and so cannot be identified with its lack.

There are many ways to be good. A thing can be intrinsically good, or good in virtue of its intrinsic properties, or be extrinsically good, good in virtue of extrinsic properties. A thing can be finally good, or good for its own sake. Among non-final goods are instrumental goods, or things that are good purely in virtue of causing of something good. There is much more to say here, but for now, we have two distinctions: intrinsic vs. extrinsic goods, and final vs. non-final (including instrumental) goods.

Many philosophers are willing to grant that believing the truth is instrumentally good (as is having good table-manners). But Lynch wants to argue for the bolder thesis that believing the truth is a final good. This, for him, is what distinguishes it from conforming to the norms of table manners. Believing the truth is (prima facie) good for its own sake. We will read ‘good’ and ‘bad’ in TM as indicating final goodness/badness.

In arguing for TM, Lynch begins by trying to show that believing the truth *about ourselves* is a final good. The argument is as follows. Believing the truth about ourselves is a constitutive part of having a sense of self (which consists, roughly, in seeing your character and life as valuable). Having a sense of self is itself arguably intrinsically good, or in any case is a constitutive part of the goods of authenticity and self-respect, which are themselves arguably intrinsically good, or in any case are constitutive parts of a clear intrinsic good—happiness. Intrinsic goods are final goods. And if X is finally good, then any constitutive part of X is finally good. It follows that believing the truth about ourselves is a final good.

As Lynch notes, the first argument doesn’t have the sort of scope he wants. It doesn’t show us that believing the truth is good *in general*. To shore up this limitation, he gives a second, bolder argument. The first part of the second argument is structurally just like the first argument. Intellectual integrity is either itself an intrinsic good, or is a constitutive part of an intrinsic good (integrity), or at least a constitutive-part-ancestor of something intrinsically good. And a constitutive part of intellectual integrity is *caring about truth*—that is, valuing believing the truth for its own sake.² Therefore, caring about truth is finally good. The second part of the argument is then this: insofar as caring about truth is finally good, truth itself is finally good, or in other words, believing the truth is finally good.

I have several worries about these arguments.

1. For those who care about details, throughout I use the lower case ‘p’ as a schematic letter throughout and reserve the upper case ‘P’ for bound objectual variables over propositions.
2. Michael Lynch, ‘Truth and Multiple Realizability’ *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 82 (2004), pp. 384–408.

My first worry is that the arguments cannot show that for any old true P, it is prima facie finally good to believe P. That is what it takes to establish TM. Suppose, for the sake of argument that Lynch has shown that whatever it is that we care about in caring about truth is a final good. How do we reach the conclusion TM? What is it that we care about in caring about truth? Is it *believing the truth about all questions that come before us*? That's probably too strong. But let us give Lynch as much to work with as possible. Now suppose, again for the sake of argument, that if it is finally good to care about X, then X is finally good. So, it will follow that *believing the truth about all questions that come before us* is finally good. What I don't see is how TM follows. Why must the goodness of this general state type or property trickle down to each and every specific state type *believing P*, where P is true?

To put it colloquially: sure, it would be wonderful to believe the truth about all propositions that come before you, but why is it wonderful for people who aren't athletically perfect to believe that snow is white? I do not at the moment see how Lynch can respond except by replacing talk of caring about *believing the truth* with an infinite set of cares: for each true P, caring about believing P. But we don't have all those cares, nor should we.

My second (and related) worry is an ontological one. We all hate it when a critic gets fussy about ontology, but hear me out! Here is my concern. I am happy to agree that caring about truth is a constitutive part of intellectual integrity, and of happiness. I am happy to admit that caring about truth is finally good *when* it is part of such goods. But I want to know whether caring about truth is finally good when it is *separated* from those goods. (Such separation is obviously not only possible but commonplace. Many people care about truth but do not *stand up* for the truth, as the examples in Lynch's book attest.) The same goes for believing the truth. Sure, believing the truth may be finally good when it is part of such and such goods, but what about the rest of the time?

How does ontology come in? One can become confused. One can think: 'Well, if caring about truth and believing the truth are constitutive goods, then they are final goods, and so all their instantiations are finally good, and your worry is misplaced.' But that cannot be right. To use a stock example, here is something finally good: *assigning a failing grade to someone who has done failing work*. Here is a constitutive part of it: *assigning a failing grade*. So, the latter should be a constitutive good. But clearly many instances of assigning a failing grade are not finally good (teachers do unfairly give failing grades).³ Rather, we need to distinguish between a property being good and a token state of affairs being good. It is natural to take the goodness of token states of affairs as fundamental and then explain the goodness of a property in terms of it: a property is good iff token states of its instantiation, actual and counterfactual, are good. So, at least arguably, if I assign a failing grade to someone who has done failing work, then the token of my assigning the failing grade is finally good by virtue of being a constitutive part in a finally good token state. It does *not* follow from this that any old instance of assigning a failing grade is good (nor that most are, or whatever), and so it does not follow that the property of *assigning a failing grade* is finally good. So, while a token state's being a constitutive part of a finally good

3. For a more vivid stock example, consider *imprisoning a person who was guilty of the horrible crime of which he was accused*. This property is finally good, as its instances are finally good. But its constituent part *imprisoning a person* has many instances which are not finally good.

token state at least arguably guarantees that the constituent state is finally good, a property's being a constitutive part of (i.e., being entailed by) a finally good property clearly does not guarantee the constituent property's final goodness.

The upshot of this is that even if Lynch has shown us that token states of caring about truth and believing the truth are finally good when they figure as constitutive parts of token states of integrity, happiness, etc., he has not shown us that all or even most token states of caring about truth and believing the truth are in finally good, even *prima facie*. But that is what he needs to show if he is to establish TM. That principle, as we are understanding it, requires that if P is true, then the property of believing P must be finally good, and this requires instances of believing P to be *prima facie* good—regardless of whether they figure in larger finally good token states or not.⁴

Taking a different approach from Lynch, one might argue that there is something finally good about token states of the form *S believes P and P is true*, as a whole, as Moore would say, not *on the whole*. I am not sure how this rather curious argument would go. Somehow the fit of the belief with the fact would be supposed to be finally good. It would then follow that if a proposition P is true, then instantiations of believing P are constitutive parts of something finally good. We could then conclude that if P is true, then *believing P* is a final good. It is a final good because instantiations of it would be finally good insofar as they are constitutive parts of finally good instantiations. Lynch doesn't explore this line of argument—maybe because of its curiousness, but maybe he can say a bit about it in his remarks.

Two more worries. The third is about the axiological principle:

If caring about X is a final good, then X is a final good.

Couldn't caring about the beauty or fruitfulness of one's garden be a final good even if neither its beauty nor its fruitfulness is? For that matter, don't we need an argument for thinking that in order for caring about the health of forests to be a final good, the health of forests must itself be a final good? It won't help to appeal to constitutive goods here. Tokens of caring about X needn't include as constitutive parts tokens of X.

Fourthly, and I think most interestingly, I want to turn to a concern Russell voiced in his third piece in a series on Meinong's philosophy.⁵ Writing about Meinong's and his own theory of truth at the time, he tells us:

4. In discussion with Lynch and others during the APA session in which this book was discussed, a question was raised whether it is essential to standard reasoning for the final goodness of virtues that constitutive parthood preserve final goodness. One might argue, for example, that courage is finally good because it is a constitutive part of happiness or eudaimonia. Would my objection then prove too much? I do not think so. First, if this is the argument for the final goodness of virtues, to be frank, it seems fallacious, because final goodness of properties is not preserved under constitutive parthood. Second, John MacFarlane noted that virtue ethicists often deny that someone can be (truly) courageous if they lack the other virtues required for eudaimonia. Such a move would clear virtue ethicists of the charge of fallacy, though it would also raise questions of trivialisation.
5. Russell, Bertrand, 'Meinong's Theory of Complexes and Assumptions (III)', *Mind* 13 (1904), pp. 509–524.

It may be said—and this is, I believe, the correct view—that there is no problem at all in truth and falsehood; that some propositions are true and some false, just as some roses are red and some white But this theory seems to leave our preference for truth a mere unaccountable prejudice, and in no way to answer to the feeling of truth and falsehood. (523).

After exploring possible ways to justify this preference, and coming up empty-handed, Russell writes in the final paragraph of his essay:

Thus the analogy with red and white roses seems, in the end, to express the matter as nearly as possible. What is truth, and what falsehood, we must merely apprehend, for both seem incapable of analysis. And as for the preference which most people—so long as they are not annoyed by instances—feel in favour of true propositions, this must be based, apparently, upon an ultimate ethical proposition ‘It is good to believe true propositions, and bad to believe false ones’. This proposition, it is to be hoped, is true; but if not, there is no reason to think that we do ill in believing it. (524)

Russell’s flippant tone in the last line suggests that both that the ‘ultimate ethical proposition’ is no answer to his original worry but also that the worry can be dismissed.

Russell’s worry is relevant to any theory of truth. What Russell is asking for is an account of our preference for—or perhaps better the preferability of—(believing) truth over (believing) falsehood in terms of the nature of truth and falsehood. If truth and falsehood are primitive, Russell thinks there is no explanation. In *True to Life*, and in other writings,⁶ Lynch has argued that truth isn’t primitive, but is rather a higher-order functional property. To be true is to have a property that instantiates the truth-role, i.e., to have the truth-role property. So, we must ask, given alethic functionalism, what is it about having the truth-role property which makes believing propositions that have this property better than believing propositions which have the falsity-role property? Now, the truth-role property will certainly build in platitudes like these: truth is a property of propositions; truth behaves in such-and-such ways with respect to logical operations such as negation, conjunction, disjunction, etc. But falsity is also a property of propositions, and behaves in such-and-such other ways with respect to those logical operations. Presumably, Lynch would not argue that the value of truth is to be found in, say, the fact that it distributes across conjunction while falsity does not. And it obviously does no good to include a platitude to the effect that believing the truth is valuable. This presupposes and does not explain the value of truth. What we need is a platitude or set of platitudes that will explain the value of truth.

Lynch might reply that this is no problem: ‘I *do* have an explanation of why it’s good to believe the truth, even if it doesn’t involve any assumption about the nature of truth. It’s good to believe the truth because of its part in self-respect, integrity, sincerity, and ultimately happiness.’ However, I am not convinced that Russell’s worry goes away. If the argument is that believing the truth—or caring about the truth—is finally good because it is a constitutive part of something

6. See especially Lynch, ‘Functionalism and our Folk Theory of Truth: Reply to Wright’, *Synthese* (forthcoming).

finally good like intellectual integrity or happiness, we can ask: why aren't the counterparts to intellectual integrity or to happiness which are otherwise just like it except for constitutively involving believing or caring about the false also finally good? What makes intellectual integrity better than *schmintellectual* integrity, if you will?

I think there is an answer here. Suppose I have intellectual integrity. Suppose the question comes up whether a job candidate is serious about our position. Professor X at the faculty meeting says, 'She's probably thinking only Princeton is good enough for her.' Suppose also that I know her politics and they are not mine (though let's assume that her having those politics poses no danger). I would, other things being equal, prefer not to have a colleague with those politics. Because I have intellectual integrity, I will not let that preference hold sway at all in my thinking about whether she should be hired. I will not allow myself to slip into wishful thinking. Nor will I keep silent in the presence of Professor X's remarks. I will challenge them. How does concern for truth enter here? Well, if the issue is whether p , then my concern for the truth will have certain implications for what I think regarding whether p and in my inquiries, private and public, about whether p . So, my concern for truth will lead me to put aside my politics and not let them affect whether I believe that the job candidate should be hired. A concern for falsity will not have these implications. A concern for truth is a concern for something that applies to a proposition $\langle p \rangle$ iff p , and a concern for falsity is a concern for something that applies to a proposition $\langle p \rangle$ iff not- p . That seems to be a very important difference between the two properties, and one that may help to explain why a concern for truth is good and a concern for falsity is not.

Lynch himself often speaks of true beliefs having the job of representing how things are. I wonder if he would say that it is this job that accounts for truth's value. The question is whether this job is anything other than the job of applying to $\langle p \rangle$ iff p . There are subtle questions about how to understand remarks like 'truth has the feature that it applies to $\langle p \rangle$ iff p .' But however we resolve those questions, truth *does* have this feature and falsity doesn't. Call this feature the *transparency feature*. I suspect that this feature is what explains truth's preferability to falsehood, and so answers Russell's worry.

Everyone knows what is coming next: a plug for minimalism. If it is because truth has the transparency feature that it has the value it has, it would seem that minimalism can explain the value of truth.

However, Lynch argues that minimalism *cannot* explain the value of truth. Minimalism gets lumped together with all the old bad theories of the past: coherence, pragmatist, epistemic, and (I think) correspondence. It is discussed last, which suggests that it does a bit better than the others. Still, like all the other theories, it falters on the value of truth, according to Lynch.

Before getting into the details of Lynch's discussion of minimalism, I want to confess that I am not quite sure what minimalism is. Put aside disquotationalism and the redundancy theory. Minimalism, as I want to think about,⁷ is the view that truth is indeed a property in whatever sense any genuine predicate expresses a property and that *in some sense* all there is to truth is its having the transparency feature. Now, what confuses me about minimalism is how it differs from primitivism. The minimalist says that truth is a property. So does the primitivist. The minimalist

7. Following Paul Horwich, *Truth* (Basil Blackwell, 1990).

says that truth lacks a conceptual or empirical analysis, or constitution. So does the primitivist. The minimalist thinks that truth has the transparency feature, and so does the primitivist. The minimalist thinks it is obvious—a priori, necessary, trivial, etc.—that truth has the transparency feature, but so does the primitivist. What's the difference between the two?

There is one further thing the minimalist should say which, if the primitivist agrees, should in my view end any dispute between the two. The minimalist should say that truth has the *asymmetric transparency feature* that if $\langle p \rangle$ is true, then it is true *because* p , and if $\langle p \rangle$ is untrue, then it is untrue because *not- p* . She should say, in other words, that truth is a simple property a proposition's exemplification of which supervenes, or better is *grounded*, according to an extremely simple pattern: *if $\langle p \rangle$ is true, then what grounds $\langle p \rangle$ being true is that p , and if $\langle p \rangle$ is untrue, then what grounds its untruth is that not- p* . The root idea here is that truth-attributing facts are grounded, ultimately, by truth-free facts.

Another thing that puzzles me is whether the minimalist must think that truth cannot figure in explanations. But I will get to that shortly.

I turn to Lynch's anti-minimalist argument. Lynch asks us to consider three schemata:

T: the proposition that p is true iff p ;

TN: other things being equal, it is good to believe that p iff it is true that p ;

(Note: TN's universal closure is 'for all propositions P , other things being equal, it is good to believe P iff P is true'.)

B: other things being equal, it is good to believe that p iff p .

He claims that the universal closure of TN expresses an important fact about truth. Let us grant this. Can the minimalist capture it? Lynch argues that, while you can deduce the instances of TN from those of T+B, we believe B-instances on the basis of believing the universal closure of TN. The minimalist, however, cannot capture B-instances by deducing them from the universal closure of TN, for that would give truth an explanatory role. So, the minimalist is stuck with an unacceptable normative particularism: we simply have many particular normative beliefs that are not based or justified by our belief in a general normative principle.

There are two issues here, which I think we should separate: the *epistemic* issue (which of B, TN, or TN's universal closure, if any, is epistemically prior to the rest) and the *explanatory* issue (which of B, TN or TN's universal closure, if any, is explanatorily prior to the rest). By the 'explanatory' issue I mean the issue of grounding: which, if any, of the relevant facts is prior in the order of grounding.

I think the minimalist must take a stand on the explanatory issue. She thinks that truth has the asymmetric transparency feature. So, she thinks that 'it is true that p ' stands to ' p ' in a relation akin to that holding between *analysandum* and *analysans*. Thus, she thinks that substantive facts expressible using 'it is true that p ' are explained or grounded by the corresponding fact expressible using ' p '. And so B-instances will be explanatorily prior to TN-instances. The minimalist needn't say that B-instances are explanatorily fundamental or basic. They are basic from the point of view of the theory of truth, because they are not grounded in facts about truth, but they need not be basic *simpliciter*. Rorty and others might rightly ask for a justification for

accepting B-instances. An adequate answer might appeal to instances of the schema S1 and some schema taking the shape of S2:

- (S1) People who believe that p are right about whether p if p and wrong about whether p if not- p ,
 (S2) Being right about whether p is good because . . . and being wrong about whether p is bad because

What about TN's universal closure? Each TN-instance is an instance of its universal closure. Now if truth has the asymmetric transparency feature, then each TN-instance is explanatorily posterior to the corresponding B-instance. It would be extremely odd, then, if TN's universal closure was explanatorily prior to the B-instances. If the universal closure were prior to the B-instances, the explanatory chain would presumably have to run as follows: TN's universal closure *explains* the TN-instances which then *explain* the B-instances. If the B-instances explain the TN-instances, the TN-instances would presumably jointly explain TN's universal closure.

One might have doubts here, of at least two kinds, one concerning expressibility and the other concerning entailment. The expressibility doubt is this. If there are propositions that are not expressible in English, then the TN-instances will not collectively explain TN's universal closure. There is much to say here. Here's a brief sketch of what I would say.⁸ I think the minimalist should think of schemata as expressing logical forms. Then she can say that for every proposition P there is a proposition of the B-form—<Other things being equal, it is good to believe $\langle p \rangle$ iff p > — that is about P . She may then say that the facts of the B-form collectively explain the general fact expressed by TN's universal closure.

The doubt about entailment can be expressed as an argument: the instances of a generalisation do not (except in special cases) jointly entail it, and so cannot jointly explain it. I accept the premise but deny the conclusion. Explanation in the relevant sense—grounding—does not require entailment. General facts may be grounded collectively by their instances. And so, if the instances of a general fact about truth are grounded, then the general fact itself is grounded, and in that sense explained. It was Horwich's acceptance of the entailment condition on explanation, I believe, that led him to set for himself the lofty goal of *deducing* all the facts about truth from the collection of propositions of the form $\langle \langle p \rangle$ is true iff $p \rangle$.⁹ This apparently cannot be done, as Gupta has persuasively argued.¹⁰ I am suggesting that it needn't be done.

I should make clear that I think that general normative facts—assuming there are such things—are themselves grounded collectively by their instances.

On the epistemic issue, I am not sure why the minimalist must say that the instances of B are epistemically prior to those of TN or to TN's universal closure. It would be crazy for the minimalist to think that we believe TN's universal closure on the basis of some sort of

8. Much of it following Horwich, *Truth*, p. 19.

9. *Truth*, p. 22.

10. Anil Gupta, 'A Critique of Deflationism' *Philosophical Topics*, 21 (1993), pp. 57–81.

I have in the past toyed with ways of eluding Gupta's problem. See Matthew McGrath, 'Weak Deflationism.' *Mind* 106 (1997), pp. 69–98; and 'What the Deflationist May Say about Truthmaking', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 66 (2003), pp. 666–688.

straightforward inductive inference from certain instances. Why must a minimalist say this? On the other hand, I do think that there is some merit to the idea that we can acquire justification for accepting general facts about truth on the basis of considerations of an arbitrary case. I think this is a reasonable way of thinking about justification for accepting normative principles: we think of the arbitrary case, and in the absence of reasons to think it is not arbitrary, we justifiably accept the principle.

Let me finally say how much I admire Lynch's book. Given its intended audience, Lynch strikes an ideal balance between the big picture issues and the details. A philosopher working on theories of truth needn't do much reading between the lines to see where Lynch stands on the matters of detail. And on the big picture issues, the book is superb. I have not touched on its coverage of relativism, for example, or pragmatism, partly because I found Lynch's discussion convincing. It is a book I wish every thinking person would read, and one which I wish every person in a position of power would read, whether he be a thinking person or not.

