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Commentary on Slob

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In Response To: Wouter Slob's [But that simply isn't true: rethinking truth in argumentation](#)

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In this very extensive paper Professor Slob argues that, despite what he identifies as the "Integration Problem", there is a role for the concept of truth in argumentation. The concept he sees a place for he calls "deflationary truth". It is remarkably like the performative view of truth put forward in the 1950's at Oxford by Strawson and others, who thought they were explaining the meaning of the word 'truth' when they said things like: "The word 'true' is used to endorse or concede statements." (Strawson 1949) Compare Slob: "truth marks the acceptance of theses that are no longer challenged".

The "Integration Problem" is a problem whose articulation he attributes to Ralph Johnson, who raises it in this form: "a premise may be true but not acceptable; a premise may be false but acceptable". If we take 'acceptable' in this context to be short for 'acceptable to X' (where X refers to a particular person), we can take the expression to mean 'regarded as true by X'. This is my analysis of what Johnson has in mind, of course, but this interpretation yields the maximum in paradoxicality in the above statement of the Integration Problem.

On this interpretation of 'acceptable' I must confess that I do not find the Integration Problem to be much of a problem at all. It simply reflects the fact that sometimes our judgments of the truth value of propositions are later found to be mistaken. That this can occur is a reassuring fact about the concept of truth we operate with. If this never occurred we would have to conclude either that we are omniscient or that our concept of truth is defective. All our assertions would be like "I am here.", true whenever uttered.

Professor Slob, on the other hand, does see a serious problem here, once we start describing disputes about particular claims. He conceives of two person disputes involving a protagonist P and his/her opponent O as involving differing perspectives, and that such disputes may not be settleable to the satisfaction of P and O. P can get O to accept thesis "t" as true (in the deflationary sense of 'true'), he claims, only in one way: "The only way to achieve this, is when the proponent succeeds in deriving support from what the opponent already accepts." This restriction seems to follow from conceiving of disputants as having incommensurable perspectives.

Slob presents one version of the incommensurable perspectives thesis in conjunction with Allen's account of the Integration Problem in terms of reasonableness: "a premise is acceptable just in case it is reasonable to accept it". Slob comments: "But precisely what is reasonable to believe is up to the standards of some perspective. It is perfectly suitable for an Azande to believe in witchcraft ..."

This example only has force if we are talking about whether or not the Azande can be criticized or faulted for having such beliefs. They cannot be faulted because they have not had the opportunity to discover their errors. (One reason for this is that the power of witchcraft is a matter of belief dependence, so it works because they cooperate doxastically.) But even so the Azande are mistaken if they regard witchcraft as a pure physical theory. Thus, their theory can be criticized even though it would not be fair to criticize any individual Azande. Slob's comment on this situation is revealing: "Neither is there any possibility to criticize a perspective effectively, as inner perspectival reasonableness simply disqualifies anything that does not cohere with it, no position is liable to substantial criticism." This reflects a failure to distinguish between the individual's rejection of criticism and legitimate criticism of the position. A criticism can be legitimate even though the believer does not accept it as such.

Professor Slob also supports his case for the "deflationary truth" concept by arguing that one of the theories that offer a neutral standpoint for settling disputes does not work. This is the correspondence theory of truth. According to the theory, an asserted proposition is true if and only if there is an appropriate fact corresponding to it. Slob's argument starts with the claim that facts must be "mind independent" in a certain way if they are to be normative for the truth value of propositions (or "thoughts", as he calls them). This is correct. Then he discusses the nature of facts, and notes in particular that there is a problem about how they are to be individuated. There seems no alternative but to say that it is done linguistically. Now he sees a problem: "The thought that snow is white demands as a corresponding fact that snow is white, and not for instance that snow is frozen water. But how to distinguish the fact that snow is white from the fact that snow is frozen water? How, in other words, can it be individuated? The problem lies in the demand that a specific thought must correspond to a specific fact. This demands that facts can be individuated without relying on the thought they are supposed to make true."

This last assertion is, to my mind, an error. There are two different senses of 'rely on' involved here. To make the difference clear let us distinguish possible facts from actual facts. A possible fact is individuated whenever an assertion is made. If reality is such that the assertion turns out to correspond to an actual fact then it is true. If no actual fact is found to correspond, then the assertion is false. In this case we have attempted to state a fact but we have only individuated a possible one. A possible fact relies on the assertion for its identity, but the existence or nonexistence of the fact determines if the assertion is true. So the reliances go in opposite directions and can happily coexist.

Professor Slob's other attempt to refute talk about a full blooded concept of truth involves the Kantian metaphysics: "The legacy ... of Kant ... is that the real truth is set at a distance and that we only have access to the world as it appears to us. It is this presumption, also, that underlies the idea that something can be both acceptable and false, or not acceptable while true."

I think this is drawing the needed distinction in the wrong place. We can draw a distinction between reality and appearance within our experience. Mirages and apparently bent sticks protruding from water are examples. But we do not need to be this esoteric to make a distinction between the true and the false generally. If I assert that my rental car is a GM product, this assertion has a truth value and any of you can establish it on having the car identified ostensively. No impossible access to the noumenon is needed. To put the point one way, we do not need access to the "real truth" to settle our disputes, since they are engendered by experience in the first place.

In effect, Professor Slob is arguing against the possibility of appealing to the noumena themselves to settle disputes arising from judgments about perceptual experience. And, of course, this cannot be done since our only access to the properties of things is through our sensory modalities. But I find this puzzling. It is not as if one party has misperceived the object or state of affairs when both have fully functioning sensory organs. If this were the case, further investigation would resolve the dispute. If you and I look at an example of the Muller Lyer figure and we disagree about whether the horizontal lines were the same length, the matter could be settled by measuring the lines or superimposing a replica of one line on the other. In general, it is almost always possible to go beyond the information being relied on in arriving at different judgments of the same matter. This is why we do not often get the stalemates that the perspectivists imply we should get.

I could say much more about this very "meaty" paper, but I will end by raising a misgiving about how Professor Slob conceives the relationship between truth and acceptability. At one point he says that the truth requirement "is supposed to establish the goodness of arguments", and in the same paragraph adds "the truth requirement was dug up to ... be able to challenge acceptability where needed". These passages give an impression that he thinks of the ordinary concept of truth (as contrasted with the deflationary concept) as providing a touchstone in premiss evaluation, as if it was a kind of Platonic concept that, if possessed, would enable us to discern whether or not a premise were true. But we cannot challenge someone's judgment that a premiss is unacceptable by showing them the truth, or support our contrary judgment by merely affirming its truth. If there is any concept to be utilized in arriving at an acceptability judgment or truth value judgment, it is the concept of evidence. And in settling arguments we are not stuck with what we and our opponent know, we can seek additional evidence. This step will almost always lead to resolution.

References

Strawson, P.F. (1949). "Truth." *Analysis* 9: 83-97.
