

The prospects of primitivism

Jeremy Wyatt

Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato — The University of Waikato

1 Primitivist theories

A *primitivist theory of truth*: a theory of truth which entails that truth cannot be analyzed in more fundamental terms

Conceptual primitivism: the view that TRUTH is primitive, in that while it does exist, it cannot be analyzed in terms of more fundamental concepts

Metaphysical primitivism: the view that the property *truth* is primitive, in that while it exists, it cannot be analyzed in terms of more fundamental properties or relations

2 Asay's primitivist deflationism

The defining theses of Asay's *primitivist deflationism*:

Fundamentality: TRUTH is fundamental, in that it cannot be analyzed in terms of more fundamental concepts

Explanatory Indispensability: TRUTH is explanatorily indispensable, in that we must use TRUTH to explain certain phenomena

Omnipresence: TRUTH is a structural component of every propositional thought

Ability: TRUTH is the ability to have propositional thoughts

Insubstantiality: The property *truth* is a non-primitive, but nevertheless insubstantial (i.e. *abundant*), property

3 The foundational argument

The first stage:

P1: Some concepts are not primitive, i.e. they depend upon more fundamental concepts

Support: BACHELOR isn't primitive, since it depends upon more fundamental concepts—namely, UNMARRIED, ADULT, and MALE

P2: P2: Considering one of these more fundamental concepts, there are three possibilities: (i) it is primitive; (ii) it isn't primitive and it depends upon concepts that don't depend upon it; or (iii) it isn't primitive and it depends upon concepts that do depend upon it

Support: (i)-(iii) seem to exhaust all of the possibilities that arise here

P3: Option (iii) can be ruled out, since if concept C_1 depends upon concept C_2 , then C_2 can't depend upon C_1

Support: This easily follows from the plausible assumption that conceptual dependence is both irreflexive and transitive

P4: Option (ii) can't be true of all of these more fundamental concepts, since that would entail a vicious infinite regress

Support:

For instance, if option (ii) were true of UNMARRIED and all of the concepts upon which it depends, then UNMARRIED would depend upon an infinite number of concepts

It seems impossible for a finite mind to possess a concept of this sort, so it would follow—contrary to fact—that no actual thinker possesses UNMARRIED

C1: Option (i) must be true of some of these more fundamental concepts—that is, some of these concepts must be primitive

Support: P1-P4

The second stage:

P1: Primitive concepts must be highly general and have wide application

Support:

Primitive concepts are those that we must possess to possess any other concept

Accordingly: they must be 'all-purpose tools' that a thinker can use while possessing very few concepts

Example:

It is plausible that ENTITY is a concept that we must possess to possess any other concept

Since ENTITY has this status, it seems that it must be highly general and must have wide application (which it does, given that it applies to entities of any kind whatsoever)

P2: TRUTH is highly general and has wide application

Support: TRUTH applies to any kind of true truth-bearer, e.g. true propositions about morality, aesthetics, religion, chemistry, etc.

P3: Primitive concepts must be related to a large number of *derivative* (non-primitive) concepts

Support: Primitive concepts must function as the conceptual basis upon which one acquires all of one's other concepts

P4: TRUTH is related to a large number of derivative concepts

Support: TRUTH is related to BELIEF, KNOWLEDGE, LINGUISTIC MEANING, ASSERTION, CONJECTURE, PRETENSE, SCIENTIFIC SUCCESS, etc.

C2: TRUTH is a primitive concept

Support: P1-P4

* *Problem #1:* The analogy at the second stage is rather weak

* *Problem #2:* The minimalist explanation accounts for TRUTH's generality and wide applicability at least as well as the primitivist explanation

4 The omnipresence argument

P1: Our propositional thoughts are constituted by their component concepts

Support: For instance, if I think that mountains are solid, then my thought is constituted by the concepts MOUNTAIN and SOLID (as well as, perhaps, EXEMPLIFICATION or SET MEMBERSHIP)

P2: The concepts that constitute propositional thoughts are either aboutness-determining or structural

Support: This is a plausible assumption, in light of examples such as the thought that mountains are solid or kiwis are flightless

P3: In general, the propositional thought that p just is the propositional thought that it is true that p

Support: For instance, the thought that mountains are solid just is the thought that it is true that mountains are solid. Likewise, the thought that kiwis are flightless just is the thought that it is true that kiwis are flightless

P4: TRUTH (partially) constitutes every propositional thought (that is, TRUTH is *omnipresent*)

Support: P3

P5: TRUTH isn't an aboutness-determining component of every propositional thought

Support: Some propositional thoughts, e.g. the thought that mountains are solid, aren't about truth

P6: TRUTH is a structural component of every propositional thought—it is *structurally omnipresent*

Support: P2, P4, P5

P7: If TRUTH is structurally omnipresent, then it is not possible to define TRUTH in terms of more fundamental concepts

Support:

If TRUTH is structurally omnipresent, then the definiens of any attempted definition of TRUTH will contain TRUTH as a structural component

This means that any such attempted definition won't define TRUTH in terms of more fundamental concepts, but will rather be viciously circular and thus unsuccessful

C: TRUTH is a primitive concept

Support: P6, P7

* *The problem of symmetry*: It's just as reasonable to use the Fregean equivalence to argue that TRUTH is present in our propositional thoughts *less often* than it seems to be

* *The problem of viciousness*: Even if the omnipresence argument shows that every definition of TRUTH is circular, it fails to show that this circularity is *vicious*

5 An objection to conceptual primitivism

Asay endorses the standard view that certain propositional thoughts (e.g. beliefs) are truth-apt

However: the Omnipresence and Ability theses jointly entail that *no* propositional thoughts are truth-apt

Thus: Asay should reject one (or both) of the Omnipresence and Ability theses

6 Going forward

Some empirical questions about TRUTH that truth theorists should consider:

- Is TRUTH an innate concept?
- If not, at what age do humans tend to acquire TRUTH (e.g. 15 months, 18 months, 2 years, 4 years)?
- When they acquire TRUTH, do humans do so in virtue of their prior acquisition of certain other concepts (e.g. ENTITY and/or EXISTENCE)?
- Do members of any other species possess TRUTH? If so, how does their acquisition of TRUTH compare to that of humans?
- Do members of different human linguistic communities use the same truth concept, or do we find variation in truth concepts across certain linguistic communities?

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