

Looking across languages: Anglocentrism, cross-linguistic experimental philosophy, and the future of inquiry about truth

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KO TE TANGATA
FOR THE PEOPLE



Truth and analytic philosophy

- Truth has been one of the focal topics of analytic philosophy since its inception in the late 19th Century
- Analytic theories of truth are conceptually diverse, invoking notions like correspondence to fact, verifiability, superwarrant, transparency, prosentences, pretence, and replacement



Anglocentrism



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- However: analytic debates about truth have been largely—and, we think, regrettably—homogenous along another crucial dimension
- When supporting their own theories of truth or criticising opposing theories, analytic philosophers standardly rely solely on their own intuitions
 - These intuitions are expressed in English and are often about how certain English expressions (e.g. ‘true’ and ‘truth’) are ordinarily used
 - Analytic philosophers use such intuitions to assess theories of e.g. ‘the concept of truth,’ ‘the meaning of the truth predicate,’ and ‘the nature of truth’

Anglocentrism



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- In this way: analytic philosophers exhibit a tendency to debate theories of truth that are framed in *universal* terms, even though the intuitions that inform these debates are articulated exclusively in and are solely about English
 - We can call this overall tendency *Anglocentrism*

Plan for the talk



- In this talk: we will argue that this *Anglocentric* model for inquiring about truth is outmoded and needs to be replaced
- A key component of our alternative model is *cross-linguistic experimental philosophy*: experimental philosophy that is conducted in and about the widest possible range of languages
- To start: we will briefly describe three major kinds of debate about truth and how extant experimental findings have been applied in two of them
- We will then explain the essential roles that cross-linguistic experimental philosophy plays in all three of these debates

Three debates about truth



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- The analytic debates about truth that we will discuss respectively concern:
 - i. The concept TRUTH
 - ii. The meaning of *alethic vocabulary* such as ‘true’ and ‘truth,’ and
 - iii. The nature of the property/relation *truth*

Debates about TRUTH



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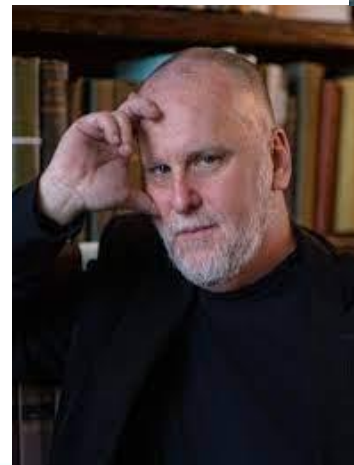
- Many analytic philosophers have speculated about how we think about truth and why we think about truth as we do
 - These speculations are often framed in terms of the concept TRUTH
 - In developing theories of TRUTH, analytic philosophers have put forward different views about the sort of entity that TRUTH is

Debates about TRUTH



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- *Three examples:*
 - Alston (2002, pp. 12-13) proposes that we identify TRUTH with the meaning of the word ‘true’ when that word is used in a particular range of cases (e.g. in an assertive use of the sentence ‘The proposition that Algeria is in North Africa is true’)
 - Lynch (2009, p. 7) proposes that our “folk concept” TRUTH is “the way we tacitly think about [truth] in ordinary life”
 - Asay (2021) has recently argued that we should take TRUTH to be the ability to have propositional thoughts such as beliefs, hopes, or desires



Debates about TRUTH



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- For present purposes: we will adopt a *coarse-grained* conception of TRUTH, according to which TRUTH is a mental entity of some sort that thinkers deploy whenever they have thoughts involving truth
 - For instance: if Eric wonders whether the last statement that he read on Wikipedia is true, then he deploys the concept TRUTH
 - Likewise, if Patrice is convinced that her mechanic's claims about her carburettor aren't true, then she deploys the concept TRUTH

Debates about alethic vocabulary



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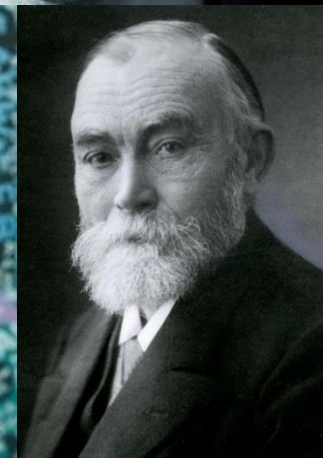
- Analytic philosophers have also produced a range of theories concerning the meaning of truth-related, or *alethic, vocabulary*
 - In English: alethic vocabulary includes ‘true’ and ‘truth’
 - It also includes ‘correct’ and ‘right,’ when the latter are used in certain sentences, e.g. ‘Harold believes that the Earth is flat, but his belief is wrong/incorrect, since the Earth isn’t flat’ (see Moltmann (2015, 2021) and Mizumoto (2022))

Debates about alethic vocabulary



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- *Three examples:*
 - After presenting his treadmill argument, Frege (1918, p. 291) concludes that “it is probable that the content of the word ‘true’ is unique and indefinable”
 - By contrast: Horwich (2010, p. 41) maintains that the meaning of ‘true’ is fixed by our disposition to accept the instances of the schema:
 - (ES) The proposition that p is true iff p
 - Kölbel (2008, §§ 3-4) has recently proposed that ‘true’ is ambiguous between two meanings, one of which is the meaning that Horwich identifies



Debates about alethic vocabulary



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- In what follows: we will adopt a coarse-grained, *translational conception* of alethic vocabulary that is compatible with all extant theories of alethic vocabulary
 - According to this conception: a linguistic expression e of language L is a piece of alethic vocabulary iff e is a standard translation of ‘true,’ ‘truth,’ ‘false,’ ‘falsity’/‘right,’ ‘wrong,’ ‘correct,’ or ‘incorrect,’ when the latter are used to speak about the truth or falsity of a truth-bearer

Debates about *truth*



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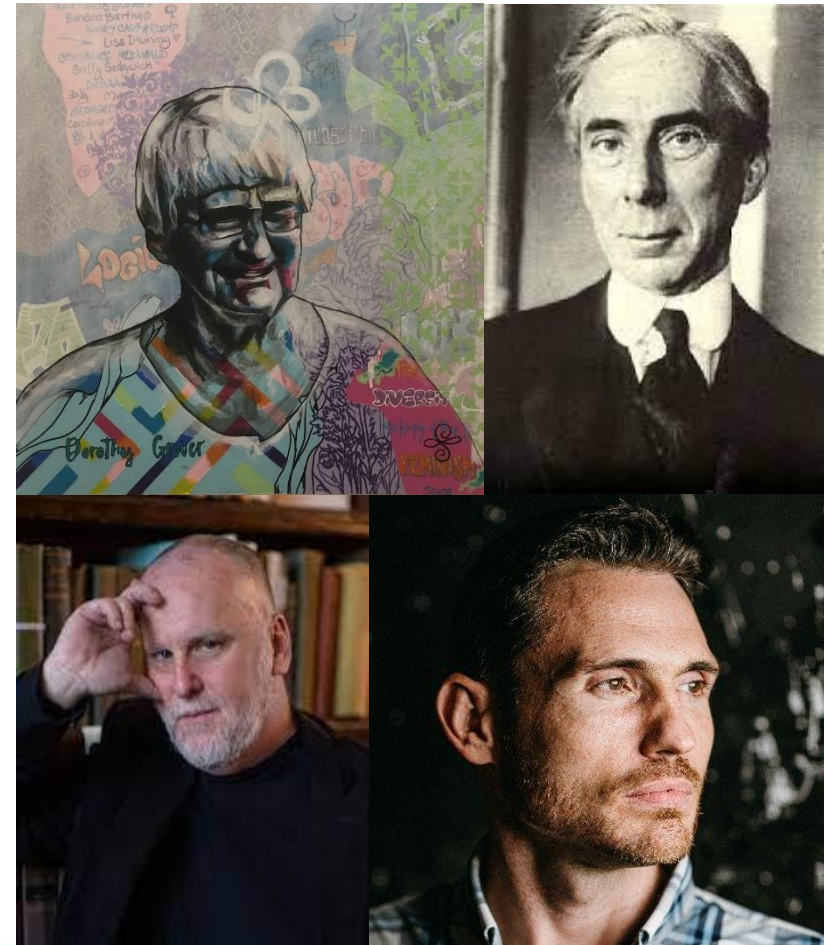
- In addition to reflecting on TRUTH and the meaning of alethic vocabulary, analytic philosophers have long been concerned to identify the nature of the property/relation *truth*

Debates about *truth*



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- *Four examples:*
 - Rasmussen (2014) takes a proposition's having *truth* to consist in its corresponding to an 'arrangement'
 - Lynch (2009) maintains that *truth* is 'manifested' by different properties in different domains
 - The early Russell (1904) suggested that while *truth* does exist, it is a primitive, indefinable property
 - By contrast: certain deflationists such as Grover (1992) and Brandom (1994) have argued that *truth* doesn't exist at all



Debates about *truth*



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- In what follows: we will also use a coarse-grained conception of the property *truth*
- Described in this coarse-grained way: *truth* is just the property that is possessed by all and only the true truth-bearers
 - For instance: since the statement that Oslo is the most populous city in Norway is true, it possesses *truth*
 - By contrast: since the statement that Bergen is the most populous city in Norway isn't true, it fails to possess *truth*

Extant experimental research on truth



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- Thus far: experimental philosophers have shown that experimental inquiry is valuable for both debates about TRUTH and debates about alethic vocabulary
- *Example:* Reuter and Brun (2022)



Extant experimental research on truth



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- Reuter and Brun (R&B) aimed to evaluate two hypotheses regarding the ordinary meaning of ‘true,’ when this word is applied to statements pertaining to empirical matters:
 - *Hypothesis 1 (correspondentism)*: Laypeople consider an empirical statement S of person P to be true or false depending on whether S corresponds with reality, and regardless of S ’s coherence with other relevant beliefs of $[P]$
 - *Hypothesis 2 (coherentism)*: Laypeople consider an empirical statement S of person P to be true or false depending on whether S coheres with other relevant beliefs of $[P]$, and regardless of S ’s correspondence with reality

Extant experimental research on truth



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- R&B evaluated these hypotheses using:
 - i. A vignette in which the protagonist's belief coheres with other relevant beliefs that they have but fails to correspond with reality and
 - ii. A vignette in which the protagonist's belief corresponds to reality but fails to cohere with other relevant beliefs that they have
- Their main proposal is:

“[T]he variation we found indicates that ‘true’ is ambiguous since the responses were in fact divided between answers in line with coherentist predictions and answers in line with correspondentist predictions.” (p. 509)

Extant experimental research on truth



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- As R&B indicate: their experiments produced evidence that within the empirical domain, ‘true’ is ambiguous between a correspondence-style reading a coherence-style reading
 - This evidence is highly relevant to debates about the meaning of alethic vocabulary (for a complementary result, see Kölbel (2008))
- It is also relevant to debates about TRUTH
 - The ways in which we ordinarily speak about truth reflect the ways in which we ordinarily think about truth
 - As a result: data on the usage of alethic vocabulary can improve our understanding of how humans deploy the concept TRUTH
 - We can use this empirically-grounded understanding to evaluate philosophical theories of TRUTH
- A loose end in their discussion—and in contemporary experimental work on truth generally—is how, exactly, experimental findings might bear on debates about the metaphysics of *truth*

Extant experimental research on truth



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- To close: we will aim to advance the contemporary discussion by explaining why *cross-linguistic* experimental philosophy is indispensable to debates about *truth*, TRUTH, and alethic vocabulary

Cross-linguistic x-phi and debates about TRUTH



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- As mentioned, extant findings in experimental philosophy inform debates about TRUTH insofar as:
 - i. These findings provide us with information about how we use alethic vocabulary, and
 - ii. We can draw strong inferences on the basis of this information about the ways in which we tend to deploy TRUTH
- *A notable fact about TRUTH*: TRUTH isn't meant to be a concept that is possessed only by the members of certain linguistic communities (e.g. the community of humans who speak New Zealand English)
 - Rather, TRUTH is meant to be a concept that is possessed by a *linguistically diverse* subset of actual creatures—the set of creatures who are able to think about truth, irrespective of the languages that they speak

Cross-linguistic x-phi and debates about TRUTH



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- For this reason: experimental studies on truth should involve participants from a broad array of linguistic communities
 - If they involve e.g. only English-speaking participants, then they will not enable us to draw general conclusions about the behaviour of TRUTH
 - Rather: they will enable us to draw only comparatively modest conclusions about how TRUTH is used by English speakers

Cross-linguistic x -phi and debates about TRUTH



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- *A significant worry:*
 - TRUTH is meant to be the concept that is possessed by all and only the creatures who are able to think about truth
 - How are we to determine whether a given creature x belongs to this set?
- *Our response:*
 - Insofar as this set isn't restricted to English speakers, it won't do to test for x 's competence with 'true' and 'truth'
 - Rather: we need to draw on a *language-independent* method
 - In recent work, we have argued that there is a promising method of this sort: determining whether x is capable of passing an *implicit false-belief task*

Cross-linguistic x-phi and debates about alethic vocabulary



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- As mentioned: the main aim of a theory of alethic vocabulary is to specify what alethic vocabulary means
- A primary source of evidence regarding the meaning of alethic vocabulary is how that vocabulary is *used*
- Notably: alethic vocabulary is used not only by working academics but by competent speakers generally
 - For this reason: philosophers interested in the meaning of alethic vocabulary should investigate how that vocabulary is used by competent speakers as such
- Empirical methods (e.g. those used by Reuter and Brun (2022)) provide the most reliable way of doing this
- As a result: these methods are vital to debates about alethic vocabulary

Cross-linguistic x-phi and debates about alethic vocabulary



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- *A crucial point:* alethic vocabulary is present in many, and perhaps all, existing natural languages (see Goddard (2018, § 3.4))
- For this reason: a theory of alethic vocabulary should provide insight into the uniformities and differences in the meaning of alethic vocabulary across the world's natural languages
- This insight can only be provided by serious cross-linguistic studies of these languages
- This means that cross-linguistic experimental philosophy is indispensable to debates about alethic vocabulary

Cross-linguistic x-phi and debates about *truth*



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- Lastly, regarding debates about the nature of *truth*, we should first consider why *experimental philosophy* is valuable to these debates
- As we see it, there are at least two ways in which experimental findings impact debates about *truth*

Cross-linguistic x-phi and debates about *truth*



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- The first is highlighted by Nahmias et al. (2005) in a discussion of how experimental philosophy can inform metaphysical debates about whether free will can exist in a deterministic world (*compatibilism*) or not (*incompatibilism*):

“We are not...suggesting that discovering what folk intuitions really are would *resolve* the free will problem. There are various responses either side could make if it turned out their view did not fit with ordinary intuitions...Nonetheless, if a philosophical theory *does* turn out to be privileged by the endorsement of the folk, that would seem to position the burden of proof on the shoulders of those who argue *contrary* to folk intuitions. If it turns out that a significant majority of people make judgments that support either compatibilist or incompatibilist views, that would at least give ‘squatters’ rights’ to whichever position has such support.” (p. 564)

Cross-linguistic x-phi and debates about *truth*



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- Applied to debates about *truth*: the suggestion is that if a theory of *truth* fails to align with our ordinary judgments about truth, then as a result, the burden of proof falls on advocates of that theory
 - The reason for this is that such experimental findings constitute *preliminary evidence* in debates about *truth*'s nature

Cross-linguistic x-phi and debates about *truth*



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- Ordinary speakers successfully navigate the natural and social worlds using their (implicit) beliefs about *truth*
- Absent evidence that this success is due to factors that aren't conducive to the truth of these beliefs, that ordinary speakers are successful in this regard provides some evidence that *truth* is as it is represented in these beliefs, i.e. that the beliefs are true
- So, for instance: if we find that most ordinary speakers (implicitly) believe that *truth* consists in some kind of correspondence to fact, then that finding constitutes preliminary evidence that *truth* does indeed consist in correspondence to fact

Cross-linguistic x-phi and debates about *truth*



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- Since this sort of evidence is preliminary, it can of course be overridden by other evidence
 - *Potential examples:* philosophical arguments which demonstrate that correspondence theories of truth are incoherent, or scientific findings that our minds or language do not ‘represent’ the world in a sense that can underpin a correspondence theory of truth
- The main point is that experimental findings regarding our ordinary (implicit) beliefs about *truth* provide an evidential *point of departure* in debates about *truth*’s nature
 - As such: they also indicate where the burden of proof lies in metaphysical debates about *truth*

Cross-linguistic x-phi and debates about *truth*



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- A second way in which experimental philosophy can impact debates about *truth* is by providing evidence for or against *objections* against theories of *truth* that turn on (tacit) empirical hypotheses
 - A notable objection of this sort: the *non-coextensiveness objection*
 - This objection comes in two main forms:
 - *Form #1*: theory *T* identifies *truth* with property *P*, yet a truth-bearer can have *P* even though it isn't true
 - *Form #2*: theory *T* identifies *truth* with property *P*, yet a truth-bearer can be true even though it lacks *P*
 - A well-known example of Form #1: Bertrand Russell's *Bishop Stubbs objection* against coherence theories of truth

Cross-linguistic x-phi and debates about *truth*



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“[T]he objection to the coherence-theory lies in this, that it presupposes a more usual meaning of truth and falsehood in constructing its coherent whole, and that this more usual meaning, though indispensable to the theory, cannot be explained by means of the theory. The proposition “Bishop Stubbs was hanged for murder” is, we are told, not coherent with the whole of truth or with experience. But that means, when we examine it, that something is *known* which is inconsistent with this proposition. Thus what is inconsistent with the proposition must be something *true*: it may be perfectly possible to construct a coherent whole of *false* propositions in which “Bishop Stubbs was hanged for murder” would find a place. In a word, the partial truths of which the whole of truth is composed must be such propositions as would commonly be called true, not such as would commonly be called false; there is no explanation, on the coherence-theory, of the distinction commonly expressed by the words *true* and *false*, and no evidence that a system of false propositions might not, as in a good novel, be just as coherent as the system which is the whole of truth.” (Russell 1910, pp. 156-157)

Cross-linguistic λ - ϕ and debates about *truth*



- Russell takes coherence theories of *truth* to entail that a proposition p 's having *truth* consists in p being a member of at least one possible, coherent set of propositions
- Against such theories, Russell points out that there are false propositions (e.g. the proposition s that Bishop Stubbs was hanged for murder) that are nevertheless members of at least one possible, coherent set of propositions
- He suggests that a coherence theorist might respond by insisting that s is inconsistent with other propositions that we know to be true, such as the conjunction of:
 - q = Bishop Stubbs was never convicted of murder and
 - r = if a person is never convicted of murder, then they are not hanged for murder
- On this basis, the coherence theorist might insist that s can be dismissed as clearly untrue

Cross-linguistic x-phi and debates about *truth*



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- Russell's follow-up objection: in offering this response, the coherence theorist is using 'true' in its *ordinary* sense, according to which a proposition's being true *doesn't* consist in its being a member of at least one possible, coherent set of propositions
- Russell contends that for this reason, the coherence theorist is ultimately compelled to use 'true' and 'false' in ways that are inconsistent with their theory of *truth*

Cross-linguistic x-phi and debates about *truth*



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- Here, we would make two points:
 - Russell initially suggests that there are false propositions that are members of at least one possible, coherent set of propositions
 - He supports this suggestion using an example of a proposition that he takes to be obviously false yet also a member of at least one possible, coherent set of propositions
- To evaluate this example, it isn't enough to consider what Russell finds obvious, nor what you, I, and our colleagues find obvious
- Rather: we need to use empirical methods to determine whether most speakers who can competently use 'false' (or a standard translation thereof) judge that this proposition is false

Cross-linguistic x-phi and debates about *truth*



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- A similar point applies to Russell’s follow-up objection
 - He contends that coherence theorists must ultimately use ‘true’ in its ordinary sense and that in this sense, a proposition’s being ‘true’ does not consist in its being a member of at least one possible, coherent set of propositions
 - Russell is here advancing an empirical hypothesis about the meaning of ‘true,’ and empirical methods are needed to evaluate this hypothesis
- These points show that empirical methods are essential when we evaluate Russell’s Bishop Stubbs objection—and any other objection to a theory of *truth* that turns on a (tacit) empirical hypothesis

Cross-linguistic x-phi and debates about *truth*



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- Given these observations, it is fairly straightforward to explain why *cross-linguistic* experimental philosophy is indispensable to debates about *truth*
- Ordinary speakers' (implicit) beliefs about *truth* constitute preliminary evidence concerning *truth's* nature and for that reason, improve our understanding of the burden of proof in debates about *truth*
 - The crucial question: *whose* ordinary beliefs about *truth* are relevant here?
 - The most defensible answer, as we see it: the ordinary beliefs about *truth* that are held by actual humans, no matter the languages that they speak

Cross-linguistic x-phi and debates about *truth*



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- Rationale behind this answer:
 - A theory of *truth* aims to identify the nature of the property/relation *truth*
 - It will be widely granted that if *truth* has a nature, then its nature doesn't vary across linguistic communities
 - Rather, *truth* is standardly taken to have the nature that it has throughout the actual world (and perhaps in all possible worlds)
 - As a result: when we aim to determine whether a theory *T* of *truth* aligns with our ordinary beliefs about *truth*, it would be entirely *arbitrary* to privilege the ordinary beliefs held by members of a certain linguistic community/communities
 - Instead: the only non-arbitrary approach here is to compare the beliefs about *truth* that are held by members of a diverse array of linguistic communities

Cross-linguistic x-phi and debates about *truth*



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- Similar considerations apply in connection with the non-coextensiveness objection
 - The metaphysical upshot of this objection is meant to be that *truth* \neq property *P*
 - Again: this upshot isn't meant to hold only within certain linguistic communities
 - Rather: it is meant to hold throughout the actual world (and perhaps in all possible worlds)
 - Accordingly: when assessing the tacit empirical hypotheses that are built into instances of the non-coextensiveness objection, we should determine whether they are borne out among humans *as such*, no matter the languages that they speak
 - To determine this: we must test these hypotheses using participants from a large range of linguistic communities

Summing up



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- In sum:
 - Experimental inquiry about truth plays a valuable role in three overarching debates about truth in analytic philosophy
 - Once we appreciate this: we see that in particular, *cross-linguistic* experimental inquiry is indispensable to all of these debates
 - At present: there are very few cross-linguistic studies of truth
 - As a result: a priority going forward should be to conduct more studies of this kind and to expand the range of languages covered by such studies
 - In doing so: we will be able to generate significant progress in debates about truth and promote cross-cultural understanding within and beyond philosophy



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Kia ora!