

ARTICLE

Primitivist theories of truth: Their history and prospects

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Abstract

Primitivists about truth maintain that truth cannot be analysed in more fundamental terms. Defences of primitivism date back to the early years of analytic philosophy, being offered by G.E. Moore, Bertrand Russell, and Gottlob Frege. In more recent years, a number of contemporary philosophers—including Donald Davidson, Ernest Sosa, Trenton Merricks, Douglas Patterson, and Jamin Asay—have followed suit, defending their own versions of primitivism. I'll begin by offering a brief history of primitivism, situating each of these views within the landscape of primitivist truth theories and detailing some of their core motivations and apparent shortcomings. To close the discussion, I'll offer a diagnosis of the prospects of primitivism, focusing on the mystery challenge, which has loomed large throughout the history of primitivist truth theories, and the methodology that should be used in evaluating primitivist (and other) truth theories going forward.

1 | INTRODUCTION: THE STATUS OF PRIMITIVISM

The defining thesis of *primitivism about truth* is that while truth does exist, it cannot be analysed in more fundamental terms. As philosophical theories go, primitivism has a somewhat surprising status. On the one hand, it has been endorsed by some of the leading lights of analytic philosophy. On the other hand, for as long as it has been visible to philosophers, primitivism has remained a minority view of truth, playing second fiddle (or third or fourth or...) to more popular theories of truth, such as correspondence, coherence, pragmatist, deflationary, and pluralist theories.

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Part of the explanation for primitivism's surprising status, it seems, is that it is often expected to bring intellectual disappointment in its train. Paul Horwich (1998, pp. 9–10) memorably expresses this misgiving in a discussion of alternatives to his minimalist conception of truth¹:

Fourthly—perhaps the least attractive conclusion—there is the one-time thesis of Moore (1899, [1953]) and Russell (1904) that truth is an indefinable, inexplicable quality that some propositions simply have and others simply lack—a fundamental property of which no account can be provided. This gives a sense of impenetrable mysteriousness to the notion of truth and can be the resort only of those who feel that the decent alternatives have been exhausted.

Horwich's aversion to primitivism is understandable. Philosophers have been discussing truth for a *long* time, and it is natural to expect that these discussions will eventually produce a nuanced, positive account of truth that generates a reasonable amount of consensus. So, if upon asking what truth is, we receive only a negative answer—that we can't analyse truth in more fundamental terms—this response is likely to leave us cold.

However, as I will aim to bring out in this article, a primitivist theory of truth need not consist just, or even mainly, of this negative thesis. To the contrary, primitivist truth theories have generated fascinating hypotheses regarding both our thought about truth and the nature of truth. This shows that as we continue our search for the optimal theory of truth, we should certainly count primitivism among the decent alternatives.

To appreciate the current state of debates about primitivism, we should have a sense of how those debates have evolved. Accordingly, I'll begin by offering an overview of the history of primitivist truth theories, detailing the theories that have been offered and some of their apparent shortcomings. To close, I'll offer some remarks on the overall prospects of primitivist truth theories. In doing so, I'll first address the *mystery challenge*, which has been a running objection to primitivism since the early years of the analytic tradition. Despite its prominence, I'll argue that primitivists can resist the challenge in several compelling ways. I'll then take up the question of what sort of methodology we should use to evaluate primitivist theories, arguing that empirical methods have an underappreciated role to play.

2 | THE HISTORY OF PRIMITIVISM

2.1 | The concept-property distinction

In surveying the history of primitivist theories of truth, it will be useful to advert to one of the most fundamental distinctions pertaining to truth—that between the concept *TRUTH* and the property *truth*.² The concept *TRUTH*, whatever else we might want to say about its nature and possession-conditions, is meant to be a mental entity of some sort that thinkers deploy whenever they have thoughts involving truth. The property *truth*, by contrast, is meant to be the property that is possessed by all and only the true truth-bearers. If, for instance, Sarah thinks that Jamal's description of how an internal combustion engine works is true, then, it is standardly suggested, she deploys the concept *TRUTH*. Likewise, if we take propositions (somehow construed) to be the bearers of truth and we grant the existence of the property *truth*, then we can say that the proposition that Jupiter is a gas giant is true iff it possesses the property *truth*.

This basic distinction between *TRUTH* and *truth* will enable us to more effectively carve up the landscape of primitivist truth theories. In particular, it enables to see that while some primitivist truth theories are primitivist at the conceptual level, others are primitivist at the metaphysical, or property, level. After briefly surveying each of these theories and some of their apparent shortcomings, I will summarise the discussion using a table that is based on the concept-property distinction.

2.2 | Where we've been: Moore, Russell, and Frege

Early in the history of analytic philosophy, we find some of the pioneers of this tradition embracing primitivism about truth.³ In his seminal essay 'The nature of judgment,' G.E. Moore aims to show that contra F.H. Bradley, the truth or falsity of a proposition cannot depend upon the proposition's relation to (non-propositional) reality.⁴

Moore takes propositions to be composed of what he calls 'concepts.' He argues (1899, p. 180) that if the truth of a proposition consisted in its relation to reality, then it would follow that, contrary to fact, concepts can be true or false. For instance, Moore contends that this view of truth entails that the concept RED is true and the concept CHIMERA is false, since there are real things (viz. red things) to which RED is related, though there are no real things to which CHIMERA is related. Additionally, Moore suggests that there are in fact true propositions that stand in no relation to reality, using the proposition that $2 + 2 = 4$ as an example. These considerations lead Moore to conclude that "[a] proposition is constituted by any number of concepts, together with a specific relation between them; and according to the nature of this relation the proposition may be either true or false. What kind of relation makes a proposition true, what false, cannot be further defined, but must be immediately recognised" (1899). Here, we see Moore advancing the view that *truth* and *falsity* are primitive properties (or perhaps relations), which we can call *metaphysical primitivism*.⁵

Despite its significance, this argument for metaphysical primitivism is highly questionable. Moore's first motivation for metaphysical primitivism seems to arise due to a serious underspecification of the 'relation' between true propositions and reality that is at issue. Between 1899 and the present day, *correspondence theorists* of truth have offered numerous analyses of the correspondence relation in which they take *truth* to consist. Most, if not all, of these analyses entail that propositions, or other truth-bearers such as beliefs or judgements, are truth-apt and that concepts aren't truth-apt, insofar as concepts simply aren't capable of being the left relatum of the relevant correspondence relation.⁶ Moore wasn't aware of these theories, of course, but their existence shows that we shouldn't now be convinced by Moore's first motivation for metaphysical primitivism.

Moore's second motivation for metaphysical primitivism remains highly relevant. To be convincing, however, it needs to be developed much further, especially given the efforts of philosophers such as Gila Sher (2016, § 8.4) to develop sophisticated correspondence theories of mathematical truth. Moreover, even if Moore is correct that some true propositions stand in no relation to (non-propositional) reality, that needn't lead us to endorse metaphysical primitivism, as rival theories of *truth* such as coherence theories, and arguably some pragmatist theories, can also secure this result.⁷

In lectures that were delivered in 1910–1911 and published later as *Some Main Problems of Philosophy*, Moore went on to reject metaphysical primitivism in favour of a correspondence theory of truth. Though he doesn't identify the above-mentioned problems with his earlier argument for metaphysical primitivism, Moore offers two additional concerns for the view, which respectively concern his account of the facts to which true beliefs refer and the analysis of belief on which he takes metaphysical primitivism to rest (1953, pp. 262–263).

During the period in which Moore endorsed and later abandoned metaphysical primitivism, Bertrand Russell's views on truth followed much the same trajectory. In Russell (1904), the third in a trio of papers prompted by the work of Alexius Meinong, Russell's main aim is to defend the view that all judgements have "transcendent" objects, which Russell calls "propositions." This view carries a commitment to both true and false propositions, and Russell worries about whether the latter in fact exist. After wrestling with this and numerous nearby issues, Russell ultimately forwards an arresting proposal that would fit perfectly in the early work of Moore: "there is no problem at all in truth and falsehood...some propositions are true and some false, just as some roses are red and some white...[w]hat is truth, and what falsehood, we must merely apprehend, for both seem incapable of analysis" (1904, pp. 523–524).⁸

In a paper that he appears to have read to the Jowett Society in 1905, Russell is mainly concerned to argue that propositions are the bearers of truth and falsity and that true propositions are facts. Along the way, he twice (1994, pp. 493–494, 504) maintains that *truth* is indefinable, offering an argument that is strikingly similar to Frege's treadmill, which we'll consider below.

A pivotal juncture in Russell's thought about truth is his 1906/7 paper 'On the nature of truth.' This paper consists mostly of a critical discussion of the 'monistic theory of truth,' which Russell attributes to the British idealist Harold Joachim. Having thoroughly criticised the monistic theory, Russell aims in the paper's final section to offer some positive remarks about the nature of *truth*. Here, his mind is clearly divided between two views. The first is a primitivist theory according to which (i) the bearers of *truth* are complex, non-mental entities, which Russell calls 'propositions;' (ii) *facts* are true propositions and *fictions*, or *objective falsehoods* false propositions; and (iii) "[t]ruth and falsehood... are ultimate, and no account can be given of what makes a proposition true or false" (Russell, 1906/1907, p. 48). The second view is a correspondence theory of truth according to which (i) the bearers of *truth* are beliefs; (ii) facts are the only non-mental complexes, so that objective falsehoods don't exist; and (iii) true beliefs are those which correspond to facts. Russell suggests (1906/7, p. 49) that both of these theories "seem tenable" and leaves the decision between them to future work.

That decision comes in Russell (1910). Here, Russell rejects metaphysical primitivism for three reasons. First, the metaphysical primitivist takes the primary bearers of *truth* to be propositions. Russell assumes that the primitivist will take 'that' clauses such as 'that Charles I died on the scaffold' to refer to propositions, and he infers that the primitivist is committed to taking 'that' clauses to be referential. However, Russell is highly sceptical of referential analyses of 'that' clauses, suggesting that a 'that' clause "has no complete meaning by itself, which would enable it to denote a definite object as (e.g.) the word 'Socrates' does" (1910, p. 175).

Russell's second and third concerns for metaphysical primitivism, which he takes to be "more fatal" (1910, p. 176), arise from the facts that the metaphysical primitivist posits objective falsehoods and takes *truth* and *falsity* to be primitive properties. Russell finds objective falsehoods ontologically problematic, given that they would exist independently of minds, yet "we feel that there could be no falsehood if there were no minds to make mistakes" (1910). An additional concern is that insofar as it entails that *truth* and *falsity* are primitive, metaphysical primitivism renders the distinction between *truth* and *falsity* highly mysterious, whereas the correspondence theory that Russell has in mind can arguably shed a great deal of light on this distinction (1910). We will revisit this concern in Section 3.1, as it has continued to worry philosophers up to the present day.

This shift in Russell's thinking about truth away from primitivism and towards correspondence proved to be permanent. Russell's endorsement of the view that *truth*—or more specifically, the truth of empirical beliefs and sentences—consists in correspondence persisted for the remainder of his life, though he articulated this view in various importantly different ways.⁹

The third early analytic philosopher to endorse primitivism was Gottlob Frege, and unlike Moore and Russell, he remained an enduring advocate of the view. Perhaps the most well-known argument for primitivism is Frege's *treadmill*, which Frege articulates as follows:¹⁰

Can it not be laid down that truth exists when there is correspondence in a certain respect? But in which? For what would we then have to do to decide whether something were true? We should have to inquire whether it were true that an idea and a reality, perhaps, corresponded in the laid-down respect. And then we should be confronted by a question of the same kind and the game could begin again. So the attempt to explain truth as correspondence collapses. And every other attempt to define truth collapses too. For in a definition certain characteristics would have to be stated. And in application to any particular case the question would always arise whether it were true that the characteristics were present. So one goes round in a circle. Consequently, it is probable that the content of the word "true" is unique and undefinable. (Frege, 1918, p. 291)

It is easy to appreciate the thrust of the argument as it is articulated here. The basic idea is that if one tries to define the concept TRUTH, then one is confronted very quickly by a question whose content involves TRUTH which (i) one must answer to complete the definition but (ii) to answer which one needs a prior definition of TRUTH. This means, says Frege, that if we try to define TRUTH, then we will find ourselves caught on a definitional treadmill. As a result,

Frege concludes that TRUTH is “unique and indefinable,” thereby advocating the view that TRUTH is a primitive concept, which we'll call *conceptual primitivism*.

Frege elsewhere offers other articulations of the treadmill, and scholars have been divided on how, exactly, the argument should be interpreted. The main issue is whether we should take it to involve an appeal to an allegedly vicious regress or allegedly vicious circularity.¹¹

Whichever way the treadmill is interpreted, it looks to suffer from some significant problems. To illustrate, suppose that I offer the following simple definition of TRUTH:

(1) For all x : TRUTH applies to $x =_{df}$ x corresponds to a fact.

If I want to know whether a particular entity a is true, then (1) suggests that I should ask whether a corresponds to a fact. Frege will claim that to know whether a corresponds to a fact, I must *first* ask whether it is true that a corresponds to a fact and that to answer the latter question, I need a prior definition of TRUTH. However, this claim isn't especially plausible. To know whether a corresponds to a fact, I presumably need to know only the following things: (a) which entity a is; (b) what the correspondence relation C is; (c) what facts are; and (d) whether there exists a fact f to which a stands in C . This isn't to deny, of course, that the proposition that a corresponds to a fact is logically equivalent to the proposition that it is true that a corresponds to a fact. Yet even if these propositions are logically equivalent, that doesn't show that the latter is epistemically prior to the former.¹²

2.3 | Where we are: Davidson, Sosa, Merricks, Patterson, and Asay

As debates about truth raged on in the 20th and the first few years of the 21st century, the most visible advocates of primitivism were Donald Davidson (1990, 1996, 2000, 2001) and Ernest Sosa (1993a, b, 2001), who both defended versions of conceptual primitivism.¹³ Davidson's advocacy of primitivism was heavily informed by his admiration for the work of Alfred Tarski (1983) and his sense that Tarski had proven that the concept TRUTH is indefinable. In a much-cited passage, Davidson (1996, p. 264) suggests that¹⁴:

For the most part, the concepts philosophers single out for attention, like truth, knowledge, belief, action, cause, the good and the right, are the most elementary concepts we have...Why then should we expect to be able to reduce these concepts definitionally to other concepts that are simpler, clearer, and more basic? We should accept the fact that what makes these concepts so important must also foreclose on the possibility of finding a foundation for them which reaches deeper into bedrock.

Using a primitive concept TRUTH, Davidson went on to develop a programme in semantics whose influence cannot be overstated, a central idea of which is that the meaning of a linguistic expression consists in its contribution to the truth-conditions of the sentences in which it occurs.

A significant concern for Davidson is that while Tarski's work on truth undoubtedly marks a watershed moment in debates about truth, it is not at all clear that Tarski *proved* that TRUTH is a primitive concept. Of course, even if this is so, Davidson's understanding of the import of Tarski's work may still point us in the right direction. A notable view in the vicinity of Davidson's is that while Tarski didn't exactly prove that TRUTH is primitive, Tarski's views about truth fit more naturally with conceptual primitivism than with other theories of TRUTH, such as correspondence or deflationary theories.¹⁵

Sosa (2001, p. 659) sided with Davidson in holding that “[t]ruth is a primitive concept and has no illuminating definition or Moorean analysis.” Sosa's ambition was to offer an account of truth that (i) is compatible with a *truth-centred epistemology* according to which epistemic concepts such as KNOWLEDGE and EPISTEMIC JUSTIFICATION must be analysed in terms of TRUTH and (ii) is compatible with *external realism*, according to which “external reality...is not

dependent on human thought, and might have been just as it is now even in our absence, and even in the absence of any contingent thinkers whatever" (2001, p. 643). He argues for conceptual primitivism by elimination, offering various concerns for competing theories of TRUTH such as noncognitivist, pragmatist, and correspondence theories. Interestingly, Sosa's conceptual primitivism is meant to align in a number of respects with Horwich (1998)'s minimalist conception of TRUTH, though only with what Sosa (2001, p. 656) calls a "weak interpretation" of minimalism.¹⁶

In the 21st century, primitivism has received three main defences.¹⁷ Trenton Merricks (2007, chap. 8) has put forward a notable variety of metaphysical primitivism according to which *truth* is a monadic (i.e. non-relational), non-intrinsic property that cannot be analysed, at least when it is exemplified by its primary bearers.

Merricks offers two reasons for taking *truth* to be a monadic property. The first is that *truth*, according to Merricks, cannot be a relation between a *truth-bearer*, for example, a proposition or a belief, and some other entity or entities.¹⁸ Merricks supports this claim by offering a systematic case for the view that some truths lack *truthmakers*, that is, that some truth-bearers are true even though they are not true in virtue of standing in a relation to a certain entity or entities. A running example is *negative existential* propositions, such as the proposition that hobbits do not exist, which Merricks argues cannot be made true by any existing entity or entities.

While Merricks denies that *truth* is a relation, he nevertheless argues (2007, § V) that *truth* exists by presenting two concerns for a deflationary view according to which it fails to exist. Combining his denial that *truth* is a relation with his affirmation of *truth's* existence, Merricks concludes that *truth* must be a monadic property. An interesting wrinkle is that while Merricks takes *truth* to be monadic, he also insists that *truth* is non-intrinsic, given that "whether a proposition exemplifies [*truth*] is often a matter of how things are around it" (2007, p. 182). For instance, Merricks would hold that even though *truth* is not itself a relation, the truth of the proposition that apples are solid is determined not just by the nature of that proposition but also by the solidity of apples.

Having concluded that *truth* is monadic, Merricks suggests that if *truth* were analysable, then it would have to be analysable in terms of monadic properties that are exemplified by all and only the true truth-bearers. Yet he takes the latter hypothesis to be highly dubious, pointing briefly to a characteristic remark by Russell (e.g. 2001, p. 70) to the effect that the truth of a belief cannot be plausibly taken to consist in intrinsic properties of the belief such as its "vividness." This leads Merricks to infer that *truth* is not analysable and is thus a primitive property.

While it is sharply formulated, Merricks' argument for metaphysical primitivism proceeds a bit too quickly. In particular, it is worth noting that the remark by Russell which Merricks uses to motivate metaphysical primitivism concerns beliefs' *intrinsic* properties, rather than their monadic properties. Since Merricks takes some monadic properties to be non-intrinsic, an appeal to this remark looks to be out of place in Merricks' argument.

Merricks' response to this concern might very well be concessive, given that he suggests that "[t]he monadicity of [*truth*] is the main point here. Its primitivity is not essential to the other claims about truth made in this chapter or, indeed, in this book" (2007, p. 183). These remarks show that Merricks sees metaphysical primitivism, in contrast to the view that *truth* is monadic, as a highly negotiable aspect of his overall views on truth and truthmaking.¹⁹

The second twenty-first-century defence of primitivism has come from Douglas Patterson (2010), who offers a distinctive take on conceptual primitivism. As Patterson (2010, pp. 13, 21) uses the term, the *conception* of the concept TRUTH is the set of claims about truth that anyone who has beliefs that some entity or entities are true must be at least disposed to accept upon consideration. Patterson's conceptual primitivism has it that the conception of TRUTH is *circular*, in that all of the claims that constitute TRUTH's conception themselves involve TRUTH. Extending Davidson's metaphor, we can say that Patterson's core contention is that the conception of TRUTH does not reach deeper into bedrock, insofar as its conception is shot through with instances of TRUTH.

Patterson offers two main motivations for his variety of conceptual primitivism.²⁰ The first (2010, pp. 21, 26) is the hypothesis that when asked 'What is truth?' ordinary speakers will not be disposed to offer non-circular responses to this question. This, Patterson argues, suggests that the concept TRUTH that ordinary speakers possess has a circular conception. Upon reflection, it should be clear that Patterson's hypothesis here is an empirical hypothesis that must in turn be tested empirically. To my knowledge, the only extant empirical data which bear on Patterson's hypothesis

are the qualitative data that were reported by Arne Næss (1938a, b). Further work would be needed to determine whether Næss' data confirm or disconfirm Patterson's hypothesis.

Patterson's second motivation for his conceptual primitivism is that every extant theory according to which TRUTH has a non-circular conception is highly problematic (2010, § 2). Summarising very briefly, Patterson takes *deflationary* theories of TRUTH (more on these theories just below) to be unsatisfactory insofar as they invite either the *problem of necessity* or the *problem of paradox* (2010, pp. 14–16). He takes minimalist theories of TRUTH such as that of Horwich (1998) (which he takes to be distinct from deflationary theories) to be unsatisfactory, insofar as they cannot deliver a satisfying account of what it is for a sentence or an utterance to 'express' a proposition (1998, p. 18). He takes traditional *substantivist* theories of TRUTH—for example, correspondence, coherence, or pragmatist theories—to be problematic because they either turn out to be circular or to misidentify the intension, and in some cases the extension, of TRUTH (1998, pp. 18–19). Finally, Patterson takes *pluralist* theories of TRUTH to be inadequate as they either inherit the problems with deflationary theories or they misidentify TRUTH's intension (1998, pp. 20–21).

Patterson's criticisms here are all highly nuanced, and they deserve extended consideration. One issue that should be flagged, though, is one that dovetails with the shortcoming in Patterson's first motivation for conceptual primitivism. A claim to the effect that TRUTH (or any concept, for that matter) has such-and-so intension or extension, or that a given theory misidentifies TRUTH's intension or extension, would seem to be empirical in nature. Accordingly, while armchair reflection on a hypothesis of either of these sorts may lend it some initial credibility, it must ultimately be evaluated in light of empirical evidence regarding how ordinary thinkers (or ordinary English speakers, or whoever the target population are) think about truth.

The final primitivist theory of truth that we'll examine is that of Jamin Asay. Over an extensive body of work, Asay (2013a, b, c, 2014, 2016, 2021a, b) has developed the most thorough and nuanced defense of primitivism to date. Traditionally, primitivism has been seen as a rival of one of the most popular approaches to truth, known as *deflationism*. Horwich, for instance, is the most prominent contemporary defender of deflationism, and we've seen (Section 1) that he clearly wants nothing to do with primitivism.²¹ In essence, deflationism is the view that truth is *insubstantial* in that (i) we can't say anything very interesting about its nature and (ii) it lacks explanatory power.²² With the concept-property distinction in view, we can easily see that there are at least two levels, so to speak, at which one might be a deflationist: one might be a deflationist about TRUTH, or one might be a deflationist about *truth* (or both).

For his part, Asay argues that we should accept a version of deflationism about *truth* while firmly rejecting deflationism about TRUTH, opting instead for primitivism about TRUTH. Asay, then, is a conceptual primitivist and a metaphysical deflationist, so it is useful to call his theory of truth *primitivist deflationism*.

Primitivist deflationism consists of four core theses²³:

Fundamentality: TRUTH is *fundamental*—it cannot be analysed in terms of more fundamental concepts

Explanatory Indispensability: TRUTH is *explanatorily indispensable*—we must use TRUTH to explain certain phenomena

Omnipresence: TRUTH is a structural component of every propositional thought

Insubstantiality: The property *truth* is a non-primitive, but nevertheless insubstantial, property.

With regard to *Fundamentality*, the initial idea is that we can think of our concepts as being arranged in a *dependence structure*. To possess a concept that is higher up in this structure, one must possess one or more concepts that are lower down, though not vice versa. To say that TRUTH is fundamental, then, is to say that TRUTH resides at the ground level of this structure—that there is no concept C such that to possess TRUTH, one must possess C but not vice versa.

Explanatory Indispensability sets up a link between Asay's views and those of Davidson. Both Asay and Davidson reject deflationism about TRUTH insofar as they take TRUTH to have explanatory power. That is, they hold that there are phenomena that we just can't explain without using TRUTH. One of these phenomena is linguistic meaning. Davidson (1984, cp. 2020) maintained that a declarative sentence has a certain meaning because it has certain truth-conditions, and Asay (2013c, § 8.4) is inclined to agree. According to this way of thinking, the sentence 'Atlantis is 300 miles

TABLE 1 The landscape of primitivist truth theories

Philosopher	Conceptual primitivism	Metaphysical primitivism
Early Moore		✓
Early Russell		✓
Frege	✓	
Davidson	✓	
Sosa	✓	
Merricks		✓
Patterson	✓	
Asay	✓	

south of Kolkata' means that Atlantis is 300 miles south of Kolkata because it is true iff Atlantis is 300 miles south of Kolkata. If this is right, then it seems that in explaining the nature of linguistic meaning, we cannot do without TRUTH.

Omnipresence rests on a contrast between two kinds of components of *propositional thoughts*, where a propositional thought is a state of mind such as believing, regretting, or imagining that has propositional content. According to Asay, some of the components of propositional thoughts are *aboutness-determining*, in that they (partially) determine what a propositional thought is about.²⁴ By contrast, he takes other components of propositional thoughts to be *structural*, in that they (partially) determine the structure of a propositional thought without determining what it is about. For example, we can regard the belief that stones are not liquid as being composed of the concepts STONE, LIQUID, and (PROPOSITIONAL) NEGATION. It is fair to say that this belief is about stones and liquidity, which means that STONE and LIQUID are aboutness-determining components of the belief. By contrast, it seems that the belief isn't about negation. Rather, NEGATION looks to be a structural component of the belief.

Omnipresence is the claim that TRUTH is similar to NEGATION, except that TRUTH is a structural component of *every* propositional thought. Asay (2013a, § 3, 2013c, § 5.2, 2021a, § 3.3) defends Omnipresence via the *omnipresence argument*, which is meant to be a new-and-improved successor to Frege's treadmill.

Lastly, as a metaphysical deflationist, Asay maintains that while the property *truth* isn't primitive, it is nevertheless a merely insubstantial property. His central idea here is that while *truth* does exist, this property lacks the explanatory power that is enjoyed by what David Lewis (1983) called 'sparse' or 'natural' properties. In this respect, Asay's views about *truth* are the polar opposite of his views about TRUTH.

Table 1 summarises the landscape of primitivist truth theories that we've surveyed. This table brings out two notable details: (i) that each of the main advocates of primitivism has endorsed either conceptual primitivism or metaphysical primitivism, but not both and (ii) that most primitivists (62.5%) have been conceptual primitivists.

3 | THE PROSPECTS OF PRIMITIVISM

3.1 | The mystery challenge

Having briefly surveyed the history of primitivist truth theories, I will close by offering some remarks about the prospects of these theories. First, I will consider a recurring challenge for both conceptual and metaphysical primitivism, which I'll call the *mystery challenge*. The key concern here is that if we treat truth as being primitive, then we are committed to regarding truth as being objectionably mysterious.

We saw (Section 2.2) that this challenge convinced Russell to exchange his metaphysical primitivism for a correspondence theory of *truth* and (in Section 1) that Horwich, and presumably Künne, take metaphysical primitivism to "[give] a sense of impenetrable mysteriousness to the notion of truth." Davidson displays sensitivity to the mystery challenge when he insists that TRUTH is "beautifully transparent" (1983, p. 139) and denies (1996, p. 265) that the

indefinability of TRUTH implies “that the concept is mysterious, ambiguous, or untrustworthy.” Likewise for Patterson, who argues (2010, p. 22) that “[s]aying that the conception of truth is circular doesn't imply that the concept of truth is somehow brute or inarticulate.”

A particularly cautious articulation of the mystery challenge comes from Asay (2021a, p. 526), who takes it to reveal a serious problem with metaphysical primitivism:²⁵

On my view, to say that the property *truth* is primitive is to say that it is a metaphysically basic property, something akin to how we might think about *electric charge* in physics. If truth-bearers (whether they be sentences, beliefs, propositions, or all of the above) are true in virtue of possessing a fundamental property *truth*, then there is no further question as to why a truth-bearer is true or what makes it true...One way to think about this view is that it makes the matter of which truth-bearers are true brute: there is no explanation to be given of why some sentences are true and others false, save for their possession of these two fundamental properties of the universe, *truth* and *falsehood*. I know of no philosopher who both carefully distinguishes between concepts and properties and endorses the primitiveness of *truth*. Doing so renders the matter of which truth bearers are true a massive metaphysical mystery.

The challenge looks, in essence, to proceed as follows²⁶:

- P1: If *truth* is primitive, then *truth* is fundamental, that is, *truth* cannot be analysed in terms of more fundamental properties²⁷
- P2: If *truth* is fundamental, then every fact of the form [entity *x* exemplifies/fails to exemplify *truth*] is mysterious (All facts about the (non-)exemplification of fundamental properties are mysterious)
- P3: If *truth* is primitive, then every fact of the form [*x* is/isn't true] is explained by a fact of the form [*x* exemplifies/fails to exemplify *truth*]
- P4: If every fact of form *F* is explained by a fact of form *G* and every fact of form *G* is mysterious, then every fact of form *F* is mysterious
- P5: If *truth* is primitive, then every fact of the form [*x* is/isn't true] is mysterious (P1–P4)
- P6: It is (probably) not the case that every fact of the form [*x* is/isn't true] is mysterious
- C: It is (probably) not the case that *truth* is primitive. (P5–P6)

So articulated, the mystery challenge can be resisted in at least three ways. The first bears specifically on Asay's project of defending conceptual primitivism while rejecting metaphysical primitivism. It is that if the mystery challenge raises a problem for metaphysical primitivism, then conceptual primitivism must suffer from a similar problem. The key premise here is P2. If P2 and what I take to be Asay's implicit support for it are true, then it is hard to see why a parallel premise about TRUTH wouldn't also be true:

P2*: If TRUTH is fundamental, then every fact of the form [TRUTH applies/fails to apply to entity *x*] is mysterious (All facts about the application of fundamental concepts are mysterious).

P2*, together with Asay's Fundamentality thesis about TRUTH, entails that facts about the (non-)application of TRUTH are mysterious, a result that would be costly for the conceptual primitivist.

Accordingly, if one is to sustain the mystery challenge against metaphysical primitivism while also upholding conceptual primitivism, one must do one of three things: (i) offer an alternative line of support for P2; (ii) explain why P2 is true while P2* is false; or (iii) explain why it would be problematic for the metaphysical primitivist, but not for the conceptual primitivist, to be committed to mysterious facts of the relevant sort. As things stand, none of these strategies seems particularly promising. This suggests that if a conceptual primitivist attempts to wield the mystery challenge against metaphysical primitivism, then they will be hoist with their own petard.

A second response is that the mystery challenge shouldn't convince us to give up on metaphysical primitivism. After all, it is highly probable that there are some fundamental properties. Accordingly, if all facts about these properties' (non-)exemplification are mysterious, then it is highly probable that there are some such mysterious facts. It follows that if a theory T entails that property P is fundamental and thus that there are mysterious facts about P 's (non-)exemplification, its generation of this entailment isn't an obvious vice of T . The important question, rather, will be which mysterious facts involving fundamental properties there are. And surely, to answer that question, we need to consult our best available evidence, including evidence that either confirms or disconfirms T . This means that even if we grant that *truth*'s being fundamental would render facts about its (non-)exemplification mysterious, the proper response isn't to dismiss metaphysical primitivism but to evaluate it by seeking out confirmatory or disconfirmatory evidence.

A third response—perhaps the most important one—is that in fact, *truth* could be a fundamental property even though facts about its (non-)exemplification aren't mysterious. If *truth* is fundamental, then this means that *truth* cannot be analysed in terms of more fundamental properties. But this doesn't entail that we can't say *anything* informative about the exemplification-conditions of a fundamental property *truth*.²⁸ In particular, it is consistent to hold both that *truth* is fundamental and that a property-theoretic version of one of the well-known truth schemas (or the infinite class of instances thereof) articulates *truth*'s exemplification-conditions.

This point can be illustrated using Paul Horwich (1998)'s *Equivalence Schema*, the property-theoretic version of which looks like this:²⁹

(ES_p) $\langle p \rangle$ exemplifies *truth* iff p .

Start with the fact [*Jupiter is a gas giant* is true] and suppose that, as the metaphysical primitivist maintains, this fact is explained by the fact [*Jupiter is a gas giant* exemplifies *truth*], where *truth* is a fundamental property. It's natural to read (ES_p) as having a right-to-left direction of explanation. Thus, with (ES_p) in hand, we can also say that [*Jupiter is a gas giant* exemplifies *truth*] is explained by [*Jupiter is a gas giant*]. To say this isn't to try to analyse *truth* in terms of more fundamental properties in the way that one might try to analyse *being blue* in terms of more fundamental surface reflectance properties. It is, rather, to offer information about the conditions under which a given proposition exemplifies *truth*, without holding that these conditions involve properties that are more fundamental than *truth*. Endorsing (ES_p) amounts, in effect, to claiming that we can offer this sort of information in connection with any proposition. As a result, endorsing (ES_p) looks to be entirely compatible with taking *truth* to be fundamental.³⁰

It thus seems safe to conclude that despite its ubiquity, the mystery challenge doesn't jeopardise metaphysical primitivism. Moreover, the second and third responses above can arguably be adapted to respond to a parallel challenge for conceptual primitivism,³¹ which suggests that neither variety of primitivism renders truth objectionably mysterious.

3.2 | Methodology: How to evaluate conceptual primitivism

To conclude, I want to consider an open question that pertains specifically to conceptual primitivism: what *methodology* should we use when evaluating a theory of TRUTH such as conceptual primitivism? There are three basic options here:

- The *armchair method*: Evaluate theories of TRUTH using only a priori evidence that is acquired for example, by reflecting on thought experiments or philosophical arguments such as Frege's treadmill
- The *empirical method*: Evaluate theories of TRUTH using only empirical evidence from for example, the social sciences, neuroscience, and experimental philosophy
- The *two-pronged method*: Evaluate theories of TRUTH using both a priori and empirical evidence.

For the most part, the armchair method has predominated in philosophy.³² The problem with this method, though, is that any hypothesis about TRUTH is empirical in character, insofar as it concerns a concept that is allegedly used by actual humans. It thus seems—as Arne Næss (1938a, b) emphasised long ago—that empirical evidence should have a sizeable role to play in our inquiry about TRUTH.³³

On the other hand, it would be hasty to set aside a priori arguments that are developed by philosophers thinking in a cautious and clear-headed way about how TRUTH behaves. It may turn out that these arguments rest on dubious assumptions, but this is something that we can discover only if we take them seriously as potential sources of evidence about the behaviour and nature of TRUTH. These considerations suggest that the two-pronged method is our best bet.³⁴

Given the predominance of the armchair method, our first step in following the two-pronged method should be to determine which kinds of empirical evidence can be brought to bear on the study of TRUTH. There is likely an embarrassment of riches to be discovered here, but I'll focus on just one body of evidence that looks particularly relevant to conceptual primitivism, which has emerged from research on *false-belief tasks*.³⁵

False-belief tasks are employed by psychologists to study *theory of mind*, which is our cognitive capacity to attribute mental states in attempting to make sense of the behaviour of agents.³⁶ In particular, a large number of psychologists have used false-belief tasks to determine when humans, as well as other primates such as great apes, attribute false beliefs.³⁷ In their landmark study, Heinz Wimmer and Josef Perner describe a familiar type of false-belief task as follows (1983, p. 106):

In order to test subjects' comprehension of the other person's wrong belief, stories like the following were constructed: A story character, Maxi, puts chocolate into a cupboard x. In his absence his mother displaces the chocolate from x into cupboard y. Subjects have to indicate the box where Maxi will look for the chocolate when he returns. Only when they are able to represent Maxi's wrong belief ('Chocolate is in x') apart from what they themselves know to be the case ('Chocolate is in y') will they be able to point correctly to box x. This procedure tests whether subjects have an explicit and definite representation of the other's wrong belief. Yet, there is neither a problem in framing the test question by using mental verbs (e.g., 'What does Maxi believe?') nor are subjects required to verbalize their knowledge about other's beliefs since a mere pointing gesture suffices.

The body of evidence from the false-belief task literature seems to bear directly on at least some varieties of conceptual primitivism. Consider, for instance, Asay's Fundamentality thesis. TRUTH is a fundamental concept in Asay's sense iff TRUTH is either innate or among the initial set of concepts that we acquire in the course of cognitive development. Asay (2020, p. 106) puts this point crisply when he remarks that "truth is among our most basic and fundamental concepts, a concept without which, as Davidson aptly claims, 'we would have no concepts at all' (1996, 264)." Thus, if the body of evidence on false-belief tasks strongly supports either of the hypotheses at issue here, then it supports the Fundamentality thesis in turn and to that extent, supports conceptual primitivism.

Our current data should be at least somewhat encouraging to advocates of Fundamentality. Baillargeon et al. (2018, p. 112) point out that "[t]here are now over 30 published reports, spanning 11 different methods, providing convergent evidence for false-belief understanding in children ages 6–36 months" If these studies are on the right track, then it looks as though very young children are able to attribute false beliefs. An advocate of Fundamentality might fairly reason as follows:

Since very young children can attribute false beliefs, they must possess the concept FALSITY. Moreover, it is highly probable that if they possess FALSITY, then they also possess TRUTH. So unless we have compelling counterevidence that children acquire TRUTH in virtue of possessing more fundamental concepts, the body of false-belief task evidence supports Fundamentality.

This line of argument is interesting, and it certainly deserves serious consideration; however, properly evaluating it will require attention to a number of issues. One is whether we should follow researchers such as Baillargeon,

Buttelmann, and Southgate in offering a *mentalistic* interpretation of the false-belief task data, according to which they indicate that young children are able to attribute mental states like belief. Tyler Burge (2018) has recently offered an alternative, non-mentalistic interpretation of the data, and the jury is out on which of these (and a number of other) interpretations is the best.³⁸

Another relevant issue is whether, as Peter Carruthers (2020, § 4) has argued, infants can represent beliefs while lacking an *explicit*—detachable, symbolically represented—concept TRUTH (as well as, presumably, an explicit concept FALSITY). Carruthers' hypothesis suggests that passing some false-belief tasks, for example, the active helping task used by Buttelmann et al. (2009), may require possession of TRUTH, whereas passing others, for example, the change-of-location task of Wimmer and Perner (1983), may not. Accordingly, it may be that only some of the false-belief task data lend support to Fundamentality.

4 | CONCLUDING REMARKS

In the course of this brief discussion, I have aimed to convey the historical significance of primitivist theories of truth and to provide two reasons for being optimistic about the prospects of these theories. The latter, I think, show that contra Horwich, primitivism need not set us on a path that terminates in intellectual disappointment. In particular, in reflecting on how false-belief task data can be brought to bear on conceptual primitivism, I hope to have pointed towards a promising *cross-disciplinary* avenue for the evaluation of the view. We have every reason to expect that cross-disciplinary debates about conceptual primitivism—and cross-disciplinary debates about TRUTH more generally—will remain robust, stimulating, and productive for years to come.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Wolfgang Künne (2003, p. 18) echoes the misgiving.
- ² I'll use small caps to denote concepts and italics to denote properties (and for emphasis). For further discussion of the concept-property distinction, see Alston (2002), Asay (2013c, chap. 1, 2021a, b), Bar-On and Simmons (2007), Edwards (2018, chaps. 1–2, 2021), Eklund (2021, § 2), Lynch (2005, 2009, chap. 1), Scharp (2021a, b), and Wyatt (2018, 2021a).
- ³ On the history of primitivism about truth in Chinese philosophy, see Brons (2018) and McLeod (2018). See also Saunders (2022).
- ⁴ This essay was largely extracted from Moore's 1898 dissertation 'The metaphysical basis of ethics,' for which see Moore (2011).
- ⁵ See also Moore (1901–2). Moore (1899, p. 182) also says that "our conclusion is that truth is itself a simple concept; that it is logically prior to any proposition," which initially suggests that Moore also takes the concept TRUTH to be primitive. However, we must bear in mind that the notion of a concept which Moore uses in this essay is rather different from the basic notion of a concept that is now standard within analytic philosophy (Section 2.1). In particular, Moore explicitly denies that concepts, in his sense, are mental, saying that "[t]he concept is not a mental fact, nor any part of a mental fact"

- (1899, p. 179). See Baldwin (1990, chap. 1–2) for a detailed discussion of Moore's early work in metaphysics, including his notion of a concept.
- ⁶ See for example, Künne (2003, chap. 3).
- ⁷ Wright (1998, pp. 68–71), for instance, sketches a coherence theory of pure arithmetical truth.
- ⁸ Russell seems to accept essentially the same view in *Principles of Mathematics* (Russell, 2010, § 52), though the view is inchoate there.
- ⁹ See Russell (1912/2001, 1914/2009a, pp. 43–44, 1918/2009c, chaps. 3, 4, 6, 1921/2005, 1927/2009d, 1948/2009b, Part II, chaps. 8–11, 1946/2004, pp. 867, 869, 871, 873, 1950/1995, chs. XVI, XVII, and XXI, 1959, pp. 63–64, 132, 151, 157, 213, 220, chap. XV).
- ¹⁰ Moore (1899, pp. 181–182) offers a similar circularity argument (though see Baldwin, 1990, chap. II, sec. 1; for discussion), and much earlier, Descartes (1991, p. 139) offers a compact argument for the conclusion that “no logical definition can be given which will help anyone to discover [truth's] nature.”
- ¹¹ See Frege (1979, pp. 128–129, 134). For discussion, see Asay (2013a, § 3–4, 2013c, chaps. 2, 5–6, 2021a, § 1, 3.3, 2021b, § 4.1.1), Baldwin (1997), Johnston (2021), Heck and May (2018, § 5), Kim (2020, 2021), Sluga (2002), and the references therein.
- ¹² For an especially nice articulation of this concern, see Asay (2013c, § 5.1).
- ¹³ See also McGinn (2000, pp. 104–8) and Savery (1955, p. 514). Additionally, on identity and primitivist theories of truth, see Candlish (1999, n. 22), Candlish and Damnjanovic (2007, § 1.2), Cartwright (1987), Engel (2001, p. 446), Hornsby (1997), and Johnston (2013, §§ 2.3, 5.2, nn. 2, 4).
- ¹⁴ See also Davidson (1977, p. 216, 1983, p. 139).
- ¹⁵ For a defence of this view and this criticism of Davidson, see Asay (2013b, 2013c, chap. 7).
- ¹⁶ For a critical discussion of Sosa's views about truth and its role in epistemology, see McGrath and Fantl (2013).
- ¹⁷ See also Armstrong (2004, p. 17), Boghossian (2010, pp. 562–3), Khatchadourian (2011, pp. i–ii, 2–3), Lowe (2007, p. 259), Nulty (2007, 2008), and Schaffer (2008, p. 309). Additionally, on axiomatic and primitivist theories of truth, see Halbach (2011, chap. 1).
- ¹⁸ Note the parallel with Moore (1899)'s metaphysical primitivism.
- ¹⁹ For an additional response to Merricks on behalf of truth pluralism, see Edwards (2018, chap. 9). See also Griffith (2015) and Rasmussen (2014, § 1.4.4, chap. 6).
- ²⁰ For a third motivation that I lack the space to discuss here, see Rasmussen (2014), p. 24.
- ²¹ For further discussion of deflationism and primitivism, see Dodd (2008, chap. 5, n. 14), Edwards (2013, pp. 9, 14), Fisher (2014), Greimann (2000), McGrath (1997, pp. 84–5), Merricks (2007, chap. 8, § V), Salis (2019), Sosa (1993a, b, § D, 2001, § 5), and Wyatt (2016, pp. 380–1).
- ²² See Edwards (2013, 2018, chap. 2), Eklund (2021), Scharp (2021a, § 5, 2021b, § 10), Wyatt (2016, 2021b), and the references therein.
- ²³ Another striking thesis that Asay (2021b) defends is that TRUTH is the ability to have propositional thoughts. He motivates this view using his Omnipresence thesis, so it is fair to regard the latter as a core thesis of primitivist deflationism, whereas the former is a derivative component of the view. Thanks to Jamin Asay for discussion of this point.
- ²⁴ He (2021b, p. S617) calls these “subject matter” components; cp. 2021a, p. 533.
- ²⁵ Cp. Asay 2013c, pp. 75, 87–88. Though I can't go into the details here, I take the premises of the mystery challenge to be importantly different from those in Asay's more general arguments against metaphysical substantivism in Asay (2013c, chap. 4, 2014). If the latter arguments are sound, then they raise problems for all substantivist views of truth, including metaphysical primitivism, but those problems are distinct from the problem that is putatively raised by the mystery challenge.
- ²⁶ '[p]' denotes the fact that p. In fleshing out this argument, we needn't presuppose any particular theory of the nature of facts; rather, we only need to suppose that facts can stand in explanatory relations to one another.
- ²⁷ Cp. Asay's Fundamentality thesis about TRUTH.
- ²⁸ Cp. the following insightful remark from Asay (2013c, p. 85) regarding conceptual primitivism: “The fact that TRUTH cannot be analyzed into further concepts does not entail that nothing significant can be said about the notion. There is plenty of interest to be said about truth that does not involve its conceptual decomposition.”

- ²⁹ 'p' denotes the proposition that p. Note that I don't mean to suggest that Horwich does or should take *truth* to be fundamental, only that one could do so while also endorsing (ES_p).
- ³⁰ For a similar line of argument, see McGinn (2000, pp. 104–106), and cp. Merricks (2007, pp. 186–187) and Sosa (2001, pp. 654, 659–660). Fisher (2014, pp. 291–296) offers a concern for Merricks' version of this response. While I think that Fisher's concern is on target, it only affects primitivist theories such as Merricks' which entail that the primitiveness of *truth* involves its being a non-relational property. As Fisher (2014, p. 293) intimates, it is open to a primitivist to grant that *truth* is relational in the way that (ES_p) exhibits while also holding that *truth* is fundamental.
- ³¹ Cp. Asay (2013c, p. 75), Davidson (1996, p. 265), Künne (2003, p. 13), and Patterson (2010, p. 22).
- ³² Though any attribution may be controversial, I count among the many adherents to the armchair method Alston (2002), Horwich (1998), Lynch (2009), Wiredu (1985, 1987, 2004), and Wright (1992, 2013).
- ³³ Recall (Section 2.3) that this point bears directly on Patterson's case for conceptual primitivism.
- ³⁴ To his credit, Asay (2021b, § 5) indicates that his hypotheses about TRUTH are meant to be empirical and that evidence from psychology can thus be brought to bear in evaluating them. I take it, then, that Asay is also an advocate of the two-pronged method, despite the fact that his defences of conceptual primitivism have relied almost exclusively on a priori evidence. See also Davidson (1996, p. 278, 2005, p. 69).
- ³⁵ Asay (2021b, pp. S627–S628, § 5) briefly discusses these data and points to other relevant work by Barsalou (1999). Nulty (2008) provides a cautious discussion of how these data bear on conceptual primitivism. von Heiseler (2020) also offers an interesting, empirically-informed hypothesis about the origin of TRUTH, and Burge (2018, pp. 425–427) describes other potentially relevant lines of psychological inquiry. See the references in Wyatt (2018) to other sources of empirical evidence concerning TRUTH, and see Ulatowski (2017) for a book-length treatment.
- ³⁶ Cp. Spaulding (2020, p. 1).
- ³⁷ On humans, see Baillargeon et al. (2018), Barone et al. (2019), Barone and Gomila (2020), Burge (2018), Dudley (2018), Newen and Wolf (2020), Phillips and Norby (2019), Poulin-Dubois et al. (2018), Scott and Baillargeon (2017), and the references therein. On non-human animals, see Horschler et al. (2020), Krupenye and Call (2019, § 2.2–2.3), and the references therein.
- ³⁸ For criticism of Burge's interpretation, see Carruthers (2020) and Jacob (2020). See also Barone et al. (2019), Barone and Gomila (2020), Newen and Wolf (2020), and Phillips and Norby (2019).

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