

The elusiveness of concordance: political inquiry and the nature of political truth

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Lynch's concordance account of political truth

- Lynch (2025, p. 6): “Political propositions are true when they are part of a concordant vision of human political and social practices—a vision that holds together internally but also concords with the facts *outside of politics*.”
 - *Political propositions* are “those we arrive at when explicitly considering what society should do (or do with the aid of state power) in the face of collective problems” (Ibid., p. 28)
 - *Examples*: the proposition that universities should not implement DEI programs, the proposition that Western countries should allow large numbers of refugees to reside within their borders



Lynch's concordance account of political truth

- *My main aim:* to explain why concordance is an *elusive* property, in the sense that it is impossible to directly determine whether a political proposition satisfies the individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for concordance
 - The elusiveness of concordance appears to jeopardise the concordance account of political truth, as it indicates that concordance cannot play a significant role in political inquiry



Lynch's concordance account of political truth

- To start: I'll review the main components of the concordance account of political truth
- Lynch takes *coherence* to primarily be a property of *frameworks*, which are “system[s] of warranted propositions available to the members of a responsible epistemic community.” (Ibid., p. 166, italics removed)
- He contends that the coherence of a framework *F* is determined by the degree to which *F*, on balance, exhibits the *coherence-making features*



Lynch's concordance account of political truth

- The coherence-making features include:
 - *Mutual explanatory support*: a framework's propositions are mutually explanatory at a stage of inquiry to the extent that (a) they are explanatorily compatible, none acts as a defeater for another; and (b) they are explanatorily connected: each proposition with the framework is positively supported, either inductively, abductively, or deductively by the others in the system
 - *Predictive power*: a framework, at a given stage of inquiry, has predictive power to the extent that it reliably predicts what propositions will be warranted to believe at later stages
 - *Simplicity*: a framework is simple to the extent that the framework's explanations are neither ad hoc nor needlessly complex
 - *Completeness*: the framework contains, for every proposition of the relevant kind, either that proposition or its negation
 - *Consistency*: propositions within the framework are not logically inconsistent



Lynch's concordance account of political truth

- He also defines coherence for individual propositions and for (propositional) reasons to believe those propositions:
 - (Coh_p) Proposition p coheres with a framework F iff including p in F would, on balance, make F more coherent
 - (Coh_R) Proposition q is a coherent reason for believing proposition p iff q is a consideration in favour of believing p and q coheres with some framework F



Lynch's concordance account of political truth

- On the back of (Coh_p) and (Coh_R) , Lynch explains what it means for a proposition to be *supercoherent*
 - $(SuperCoh) p$ is supercoherent iff there are available coherent reasons $R_1, \dots, R_n$ to believe p at some stage of inquiry that remain coherent without defeat at all successive stages and improvements of the framework F with which they cohere
- *Note:* This definition applies to all propositions, including propositional reasons to believe other propositions



Lynch's concordance account of political truth

- Drawing on (SuperCoh), he explains what it means for a proposition to be *concordant*:
 - (Con) p is concordant iff there is a framework F of supercoherent reasons $R_1, \dots, R_n$ to believe p and $R_1, \dots, R_n$ are true
- Lynch's *concordance account* of political truth: a political proposition p is true iff p is concordant
 - *Note:* The actual account is a bit more nuanced, but for present purposes, this formulation will suffice



The elusiveness of concordance

- With the machinery of the concordance account on the table, I want to canvass a serious problem for the account
 - Say that a person A *directly determines* whether an entity x satisfies the individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions $y_1, \dots, y_n$ for having property P iff (i) A determines whether x satisfies $y_1, \dots, y_n$ and (ii) it is not the case that A first determines whether x has P and then infers on that basis that x does/doesn't satisfy $y_1, \dots, y_n$
 - The root of the problem: one cannot directly determine whether a political proposition satisfies the individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for concordance
 - In this sense: concordance is an *elusive* property



The elusiveness of concordance

- My argument for the elusiveness of concordance is based on three plausible assumptions
- *Assumption #1* concerns the nature of consistency and is based on the fact that truth occupies centre stage in Lynch's views about logic (see Lynch (2009), Shapiro and Lynch (2021)):
 - (A1) Propositions p_1 and p_2 are consistent iff it is possible that both p_1 and p_2 are true



The elusiveness of concordance

- *Assumptions* #2 and #3 concern the *reasons* that a person A must consider when trying to directly determine whether a political proposition satisfies the individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for concordance
- For instance: suppose that A wants to know whether d = the proposition that universities should not implement DEI programs satisfies these conditions
- According to the concordance account, A will need to draw on the following consideration:
 - (1) d is concordant only if there is a framework F of supercoherent reasons $R_1, \dots, R_n$ to believe d [Con, biconditional and conjunction elimination]



The elusiveness of concordance

- *Assumption #2* (cf. Lynch (2025, p. 160)):
 - (A2) $R_1, \dots, R_n$ include some political reasons
- For instance: one such reason might be that universities should admit students based only on their academic and extracurricular achievements, not e.g. their racial, sexual, or gender identities



The elusiveness of concordance

- Having noted this, we can continue with $\mathcal{A}$'s investigation into whether d is concordant, which will proceed as follows:
 - (2) $R_1, \dots, R_n$ are supercoherent iff there are available coherent reasons $R_1^*, \dots, R_n^*$ to believe $R_1, \dots, R_n$ at some stage of inquiry that remain coherent without defeat at all successive stages and improvements of the framework F^* with which they cohere [SuperCoh]
- *Assumption #3* is:
 - (A3) $R_1^*, \dots, R_n^*$ include some political reasons
- For instance, two such reasons might be that:
 - i. The core mission of a university is to further educate motivated, academically capable young people and
 - ii. That university admissions officers should only consider whether applicants are likely to contribute to the university's core mission



The elusiveness of concordance

- Let's continue once more with $\mathcal{A}$'s investigation:
 - (3) $R_1^*, \dots, R_n^*$ are coherent reasons to believe $R_1, \dots, R_n$ iff $R_1^*, \dots, R_n^*$ are considerations in favour of believing $R_1, \dots, R_n$ and $R_1^*, \dots, R_n^*$ cohere with some framework F^* [Coh_R]
 - (4) $R_1^*, \dots, R_n^*$ cohere with some framework F^* iff including $R_1^*, \dots, R_n^*$ in F^* would, on balance, make F^* more coherent [Coh_P]
 - (5) Including $R_1^*, \dots, R_n^*$ in F^* would, on balance, make F^* more coherent iff including $R_1^*, \dots, R_n^*$ in F^* would result in F^* exhibiting the coherence-making features, on balance, to a greater degree [Account of coherence]
 - (6) Including $R_1^*, \dots, R_n^*$ in F^* would result in F^* exhibiting the coherence-making features, on balance, to a greater degree iff including $R_1^*, \dots, R_n^*$ in F^* would result in F^* exhibiting mutual explanatory support, predictive power, simplicity, completeness, and consistency, on balance, to a greater degree [Account of coherence-making features]
 - (7) Including $R_1^*, \dots, R_n^*$ in F^* would make F^* exhibit consistency to a greater degree iff including $R_1^*, \dots, R_n^*$ in F^* would increase F^* 's ratio of pairs of consistent propositions to pairs of inconsistent propositions [Definition of consistency]



The elusiveness of concordance

- In connection with (7): recall (A1) and (A2)
- Given (A1) and (A2): when $\mathcal{A}$ gets to (7), there will be at least one political reason R_i^* in $R_1^*, \dots, R_n^*$ about which $\mathcal{A}$ must consider whether:
 - (8) For each proposition p in F^* , it is possible that (R_i^* is true and p is true)
- Since R_i^* is a political reason: R_i^* is true iff R_i^* is concordant
- As a result: when $\mathcal{A}$ gets to (8), $\mathcal{A}$ must consider for each of the relevant propositions p whether:
 - (9) It is possible that (R_i^* is concordant and p is true)



The elusiveness of concordance

- Moreover, to determine whether the possibility mentioned in (9) is a genuine possibility, $\mathcal{A}$ must consider whether:
 - (10) It is possible that (there is a framework F^{**} of supercoherent reasons $R_1^{**}, \dots, R_n^{**}$ to believe R_i^* and p is true) [Con, biconditional and conjunction elimination]
- Let $R_1^{***}, \dots, R_n^{***}$ be the potentially available and potentially coherent reasons to believe $R_1^{**}, \dots, R_n^{**}$ that potentially cohere with framework F^{***}
- Let R_i^{***} be the relevant political reason in $R_1^{***}, \dots, R_n^{***}$
- Lastly: let p' be one of the propositions in F^{***}
- $\mathcal{A}$ will then eventually be led to the question whether:
 - (11) It is possible that (R_i^{***} is concordant and p' is true)



The elusiveness of concordance

- This line of inquiry clearly results in an infinite regress
- For that reason: it will never yield an answer to the question whether d satisfies the individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for concordance
- As a result: it is impossible for $\mathcal{A}$ to directly determine whether d satisfies these conditions
- Moreover: since d was arbitrary, this result generalises to all political propositions, which shows that concordance is an elusive property



The elusiveness of concordance

- Given that concordance is elusive, it seems that considerations about concordance cannot play a significant role in political inquiry
 - Provided that political propositions can be true or false, one of the central tasks of political inquiry is to separate the political truths from the political falsehoods
 - We've seen is that one can make no progress on this task by first determining which political propositions are concordant
 - More generally: given that concordance is elusive, it isn't clear how considerations regarding concordance could play a significant role in political inquiry
 - In short: when it comes to political inquiry, concordance seems to be an idle wheel



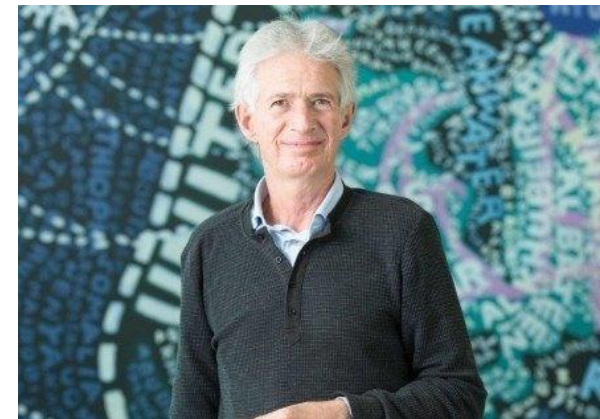
A potential way forward: deflating political truth

- To close: I want to briefly detail a way forward that I take to be promising
- The impetus for my preferred strategy is a version of *methodological deflationism* (See Field (1994, p. 263))
 - The core claim of *deflationary* theories of truth is that truth doesn't have a complex underlying nature
 - According to methodological deflationism: to keep our theories of truth as simple as they can be, we should carry this deflationary idea as far as we can



A potential way forward: deflating political truth

- My suggestion: a deflationary view of political truth may be more compelling than Lynch recognises
- In short: this deflationary view has it that Horwich (1998)'s *Equivalence Schema* tells us all that we need to know about the truth-conditions of political propositions:
 - (ES) The proposition that p is true iff p





A potential way forward: deflating political truth

- Lynch rejects Horwichian deflationism about political truth, but I don't think that he has strong reasons for doing so
 - He reaches a rapprochement with Horwich regarding truth's normativity, and he also grants that the property *truth* is “rather uncomplicated” (Lynch 2025, p. 154)
 - Moreover: Horwichian deflationism about political truth doesn't saddle us with elusive properties that play no role in political inquiry
 - Instead: deflationism tells us that if e.g. one wants to know whether the proposition *d* is true, one should aim to determine whether universities should implement DEI programs
 - If they should, then *d* is false, and if they shouldn't, then *d* is true
 - The epistemic project here is not simple, but it is focused on issues that look more tractable than whether a political proposition exemplifies an elusive property



A potential way forward: deflating political truth

- Lynch does take the concordance account to have some notable virtues:
 - It is compatible with the fact that political truth is ‘epistemically constrained;’
 - It secures the distinction between a proposition’s being true and its being justified by purely political reasons; and
 - It secures the result that the truth of political propositions is not independent from human political practices
- However: I expect that the deflationary account can do the same
 - As usual: these consequences will flow from (ES) and a suitably detailed theory of the political states of affairs that are mentioned on the right-hand sides of the relevant instances of (ES)
- In short: the deflationary proposal is that if any metaphysical work is needed when we think about politics, it will be in our theory of political reality, not our theory of political truth



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Kia ora/thanks!



Some possible responses

- *Response #1*: this argument breaks down at (A3), since there may be cases in which $R_1^*, \dots, R_n^*$ include *moral* reasons but don't include political reasons
 - Alternatively: even if $R_1^*, \dots, R_n^*$ include some political reasons, there will be *some* stage in $\mathcal{A}$'s inquiry at which $\mathcal{A}$ needs to consider moral reasons to believe certain political reasons but doesn't need to consider political reasons to believe the latter



Some possible responses

- *Reply:*
 - This suggestion is plausible enough (though again, see Lynch 2025, p. 160)
 - However: it doesn't show that concordance is not elusive
 - This is because the moral reasons at issue are moral propositions, and Lynch (2009) also endorses a concordance account of moral truth
 - As a result: if at some stage of $\mathcal{A}$'s inquiry, $\mathcal{A}$ needs to consider moral reasons to believe certain political reasons, then $\mathcal{A}$ will face a problem similar to the one that we've considered



Some possible responses

- *Response #2:*
 - $R_1^*, \dots, R_n^*$ could be wholly or partially *identical* to $R_1, \dots, R_n$, and similarly for $R_1^{**}, \dots, R_n^{**}$ and $R_1^*, \dots, R_n^*$ etc.
 - This indicates that $\mathcal{A}$'s inquiry into whether d is concordant needn't spark an infinite regress



Some possible responses

- *Reply*: There are two possible cases to consider here, and in both of them, concordance proves to be elusive
- We can construe identity extensionally, so that a set of reasons S_1 is *wholly/partially identical* to a set of reasons S_2 iff S_1 and S_2 have all/some but not all of the same members
- Case #1 is the *partial identity case*:
 - In this case: $R_1^*, \dots, R_n^*$ are partially identical to $R_1, \dots, R_n$, $R_1^{**}, \dots, R_n^{**}$ are partially identical to both $R_1^*, \dots, R_n^*$ and $R_1, \dots, R_n$, etc.
 - A gets caught in an infinite regress here because the set of reasons at each level is partially distinct from the sets of reasons at all lower levels



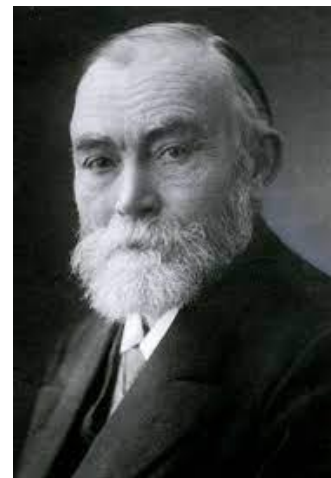
Some possible responses

- Case #2 is the *identity case*:
 - In this case: the set of reasons at a particular level v_i is wholly identical to some set of reasons at a lower level v_j
 - For this reason: $\mathcal{A}$ doesn't get caught in an infinite regress here
 - Nevertheless: $\mathcal{A}$ won't be able to determine whether d is concordant
 - This is because: when $\mathcal{A}$ considers whether the reasons at level v_i (say, $R_1^{***}, \dots, R_n^{***}$) are coherent, $\mathcal{A}$ will in effect be returning to the (unanswered) question whether the reasons at level v_j (say, $R_1, \dots, R_n$) are coherent
 - As a result: $\mathcal{A}$ will have made no progress in their inquiry into whether d is concordant



Some possible responses

- When thinking about A 's predicament in the identity case: it is helpful to repurpose a metaphor from Frege's 'treadmill argument' for the indefinability of truth
- In the identity case: "we should be in the position of a man on a treadmill who makes a step forwards and upwards, but the step he treads on keeps giving way and he falls back to where he was before."
Frege (1979, pp. 128-129)





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