

**PHIL 470: Seminar: Metaphysics & Epistemology  
Truth and Reality**

**Handout (13)**

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**Paul Horwich: The Deflationary View of Truth**

**Discussion Questions:**

1. What is the deflationary theory of truth? In what sense is it “deflationary”? What is the advantage of proposing a deflationary theory?
2. What is Horwich’s minimalist theory of truth? To what things does he apply the notion of *truth*? How does he analyze the truth predicate?
3. What is Horwich’s proposed “adequacy condition” for a theory of truth? Does his own theory meet this condition in your opinion?
4. What is the main difference between the minimalist theory of truth and the redundancy/performative theory of truth? Why does Horwich argue that the latter must be rejected?
5. How is Horwich’s deflationary theory of truth different from Tarski’s theory of truth? Can one claim that Tarski’s theory of truth is a form of deflationary theory too?

**Paul Horwich:  
The Deflationary View of Truth**

**§ [The deflationary theory]**

**\_\_\_ Truth is not a normal property and that traditional investigations into its underlying nature have been misconceived. We do not need a theory that articulates general conditions for its application (such as ‘a statement is true iff it is *satisfactory to believe*’; ‘a statement is true iff it *optimally coheres with the perfected data base*’).**

People are misconceived in thinking that ‘true’ is like ‘magnetic’ or ‘diabetic,’ which designates a special property that philosophical or scientific investigations could uncover.

In fact, the truth predicate exists solely for the sake of certain logical need. It enables the construction of another proposition, intimately related to the one we can’t identify, which is perfectly appropriate as the object of our attitude (propositional attitude).

- e.g. (1) “What Oscar said is true.”  
 (2)  $x$  is F (F = true).  
 (3)  $x$  = the proposition that  $p$ .  
 (4)  $p$ .

**§ Of what kinds are the entities to which truth may be attributed?**

- \_\_\_ (a) utterances  
 \_\_\_ (b) sentences  
 \_\_\_ (c) statements, beliefs, suppositions (individual, localizes actions or states of mind)  
 \_\_\_ (d) propositions (the things that are believed, stated, supposed, etc.; the contents of such states)

**\* Horwich: I shall follow ordinary language in supposing that truth is a property of propositions.**

**§ Horwich’s Minimalist Theory**

**\_\_\_ The theory of truth should contain *nothing more than instances of the equivalence schema.***

**⇒ ‘minimal’**

The traditional theories of truth are not *false*; they are simply *inadequate*. They cannot meet the explanatory demands on an adequate theory of truth. Specifically, none provides a good account of why it is that instances of the equivalence schema are true. Minimalism involves a reversal of that explanatory direction. Every fact about truth can be naturally derived from those biconditionals. Therefore it is they that should constitute our basic theory of truth.

\* [The adequacy condition for a theory of the meaning of “truth”]:  
 \_\_\_ that it is capable of explaining all pertinent linguistic behavior – all our ways of  
 deploying the term “true”.

### § The fundamental principles of the minimal theory of truth

*The axioms of the minimalist theory are propositions like*

(1) <<snow is white> is true iff snow is white>  
 and

(2) <<Lying is wrong> is true iff lying is wrong>;

that is to say, all the propositions whose structure is

(E) The proposition <*p*> is true iff *p*.

or

(E\*) <<*p*> is true iff *p*>.

NOTE: the symbol ‘E’ stands for equivalence.

Any of the axioms contains two elements:

[1] the part that is itself a proposition, which appears twice.

[2] the propositional structure (E\*): <<*p*> is true iff *p*>.

NOTE: the brackets <*p*> is the propositional content expressed by ‘*p*’.

### \* Horwich’s Assumptions:

1. We don’t need a universal principle that states the unique truth condition for all sentences [ $(\forall x)(x \text{ is true iff } \dots)$ ]; what we need is to have infinitely many T-style biconditionals for each proposition [*p*’ is true iff *p*; *q*’ is true iff *q*....]
2. In this way we explain how the predicate of “true” is used in each sentence, without assuming that all sentences *share* a particular property.
3. This explanation of the truth predicate is actually how we understand the word ‘true’ in our daily discourse: we are interested in when a sentence is *true*, not in what *property of truth* each sentence has.

### § The Minimalist Conception of the Truth Predicate

1. Truth is not a naturalistic property; instead, it can be viewed as a logical property.
2. Applications of the truth predicate engender *statements* about the propositions to which it is applied.

**\* Minimalist theory of truth vs. the redundancy theory of truth**

**Q: What is the difference?**

\_\_\_ The redundancy theory of truth states that

- i)  $P$
- ii) It is true that  $p$

Have the same sense. Therefore it treats the truth predicate as “redundant.”

**Horwich:**

\_\_\_ The redundancy theory has nothing to say about the sense of sentences such as

- iii) Oscar’s claim is true.

**§ Objections to the Minimalist Theory of Truth and Replies:**

[1] *It seems unlikely that instances of the equivalence schema could possibly suffice to explain all the great variety of facts about truth.*

[Horwich’s reply]:

\_\_\_ According to the minimalist thesis, all of the facts whose expression involves the truth predicate may be explained in such a way: namely, by assuming no more about truth than instances of the equivalence schema.

These explanations will confirm the minimalist thesis that no account of the *nature* of truth, no principle of the form ‘ $(\forall x)(x$  is true iff... $x...)$ ’ is called for.

[2] *The minimal theory must be incomplete, for it says nothing about the relationships between truth and affiliated phenomena such as verification, practical success, reference, meaning, logical validity and assertion.*

[Horwich’s reply]:

\_\_\_ The virtue of minimalism, I claim, is that it provides a theory of truth that is a theory of nothing else, but which is sufficient, in combination with theories of other phenomena, to explain all the facts about truth.

In other words, we still need theories of reference, of meaning, of verification, etc. Minimalist theory of truth is only part of a larger project of semantics.

[3] *Even if the minimal theory is, in some sense, ‘adequate’ and ‘pure,’ it is nevertheless unsatisfactory, being so cumbersome that it cannot even be explicitly formulated.*

[Horwich's reply]:

1. We should not expect to contain all instances of the equivalence schema within a finite formulation: an infinity of axioms is needed.
2. And since this would seem to be an unavoidable feature of any adequate theory of truth, it should not be held against MT.
3. Therefore we must acknowledge that the theory of truth cannot be explicitly formulated. The best we can do is to give an implicit specification of its basic principles.

[4] *If there were really no more to a complete theory of truth than a list of biconditionals like "the proposition that snow is white is true if and only if snow is white," then since one could always say "p" rather than "The proposition that p is true," it would be inexplicable that our language should contain the word "true": there would be no point in having such a notion.*

[Horwich's reply]:

\_\_\_ For some sentences the predicate of truth is indispensable. The notion of *truth* is still a useful notion.

[5] *The minimal theory fails to specify what is meant by attributions of truth. It fails to provide necessary and sufficient conditions for the applicability of the truth predicate.*

[Horwich's reply]:

\_\_\_ A definition does not need to offer necessary and sufficient conditions for the term defined. It can be (a) *atomic definition*; (b) *contextual definition*; (c) *implicit definition*; or (d) *use definition*. The definition of "truth" is of type (d).

**Caution: on the liar's paradox**

\_\_\_ We don't apply (E) to sentences that would generate the liar's paradox. Those sentences are *excluded from the axioms* of the minimalist theory.

## § Conclusion

The minimal theory is *the* theory of truth, to which nothing more should be added.

Its single unattractive feature is its infinite list-like character.

The minimalist conception of truth in itself will not engender realism or anti-realism; rather; it will make it easier for us to see that the central aspects of the realism debate have nothing to do with truth.