Truth and Assertion

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Introduction

This thesis argues that the most profitable way to understand the concept of truth is to understand what takes place in the process of interpreting another speaker’s assertions. In the process of discerning what another speaker means and believes we are not only compelled to find ourselves and our interlocutor to be for the most part correct about the world, but are also inevitably alerted to the possibility of perspectives on the world that differ from, and perhaps even surpass our own. Approaching truth by investigating the process of interpretation thus allows for the inherent tension between two major intuitions regarding truth to be explored and accounted for.

The thesis can be divided into roughly two halves, each comprising two chapters. The first half of the thesis provides an overview of the different ways in which truth has traditionally been approached, and then pursues an alternative explanatory strategy in constructing an account of truth. The second half of the thesis then raises some potential objections that could be made to this way of approaching truth, and responds to them in turn.

Chapter One introduces the major intuitions surrounding truth with which we will be concerned. These intuitions have traditionally arisen within the broader philosophical project of explaining precisely what it is that makes a true belief to be true. In this regard, correspondence accounts have focused on the intuition that a belief could be justified but nevertheless not true, and concluded that truth must therefore consist in an indiscernible relation between belief and reality. The pragmatist backlash to this account, on the other hand, has tended to focus on the intuition that we generally take a belief to be true due to its explanatory power, empirical adequacy, or the way in which it helps to guide us around the world, and has therefore concluded that truth must be tangible and discernible. As a consequence of this, it has sometimes seemed as if pragmatist accounts argue that a belief is true if it is successful, well justified, or accepted by a group of peers.

The first chapter of this thesis therefore ends up uncovering a dilemma. Attempting to provide a formula which states what truth consists in seems to leave one in a position in which one can either do justice to the epistemic or the non-epistemic features of the concept of truth, but not both, and satisfying one set of intuitions inevitably results in clashing with the other. The resulting deadlock has arguably only furthered the cause of more recent deflationary treatments of truth, which argue that attempting to provide an account of the property which all true beliefs possess was, after all, a
misguided exercise from the start. While welcoming this rejection of the traditional terms in which philosophical discussions of truth have been framed, Chapter One concludes by arguing that we should not abandon philosophical interest in our conflicting intuitions about truth, but rather provide an alternative philosophical explanation of how these intuitions have arisen and how they are related to one another.

Chapter Two takes up the challenge of accounting for and explaining these conflicting intuitions, and in doing so presents the account of truth which is defended for the rest of the thesis. Here, it is argued that the concept of truth and the inherent tension it contains are best understood as arising from the process of interpreting other speakers’ assertions. A major influence behind the argument that is presented in this chapter is the work of Donald Davidson. This may perhaps seem problematic, since Davidson has insisted on numerous occasions that truth is “transparent” and “primitive”, and thereby has seemed to imply that very little more can be said about it. However, in this chapter it is argued that by placing less emphasis on Davidson’s truth-conditional semantic project and taking up instead his discussions of radical interpretation as they apply specifically to assertions, a great deal can be revealed about truth. In the process of discerning what another speaker means and believes we not only find ourselves and our interlocutor to be correct for the most part about the world, but also come to be aware of the possibility that a belief which is justified and rationally arrived at may be mistaken.

In Chapter Three, a first set of possible objections to this account is considered. These objections centre on the concern that truth shouldn’t be explained in terms of the relationship between interlocutors but rather in terms of the relation between a subject and the world. The first and more radical criticism that is considered in this chapter is that our account ignores the possibility that we could all be fundamentally wrong about the world, despite being in general agreement. It is suggested that this form of scepticism is best counteracted in a manner broadly in line with the pragmatist tradition. However, this then brings us to a second and more tempered objection, which is that the classical pragmatists’ emphasis on navigating one’s own environment and responding to recalcitrant experience might provide an explanation of the distinction between true and false beliefs which is superior to, and therefore renders redundant, an emphasis on linguistic communication. The chapter concludes by arguing that it is indeed enlightening to think of the concept of truth as arising out of assertoric exchanges after all, for these exchanges provide an awareness of the complex web of related beliefs against which specific beliefs can be isolated and found wanting.
The fourth and final chapter of this thesis then goes on to investigate roughly the opposite concern to that considered in the preceding chapter; namely that neither navigating one’s environment in an intelligent way nor engaging in the interpretive process of comprehending the beliefs of others is sufficient to give rise to the concepts of truth and falsehood. More specifically, this chapter considers Huw Price’s claim that an additional norm must supplement assertoric discourse in order for divergent expressions of opinion to be seen as bearing upon one another. It is argued in response that the concept of truth is still playing a primitive role in the community that Price describes as lacking a “third norm”, for without it the speakers described would not be exchanging meaningful assertions with one another. However, what Price appears to be describing is a community in which tenacity and narrow-mindedness has come to dominate assertoric exchanges, and in which interlocutors are only willing to entertain as true those contributions that confirm or are in accord with their already formed views.
Chapter One

What Makes All True Things to be True?

Philosophy has a long tradition of asking after the underlying essence of seemingly familiar concepts. When Socrates pushes the rather earnestly pious Euthyphro to provide an explanation of what piety amounts to, for instance, he makes it clear that he does not wish to discuss examples of pious action, but rather is searching for an account of what “makes all pious things to be pious.”

Euthyphro’s confident evaluations of the actions of those around him is thus undercut not by directly challenging any specific claim that he has made, but by requesting an explanation of the nature of the concept that he is applying. Socrates’ request for an account of the essence of piety signals a turn away from a rather familiar form of evaluative deliberation that Euthyphro is used to engaging in - “Is this person acting piously?” – and towards a far more confounding form of questioning - “What is piety?”.

Similarly, when Socrates presses Theaetetus to provide an account of what knowledge amounts to, he makes it very clear that what he is requesting is an explanation of what all cases of knowledge have in common. Socrates does not want to hear about any of the “many and diverse” instances of knowledge that Theaetetus can name and elaborate upon, but to be provided with an explanation of the one simple nature that unites them all. Arguing that an appropriate response to the question “What is clay?” is an explanation that it is “moistened earth”, rather than an enumeration of instances of clay (potter’s clay, bricklayer’s clay, etc.), he suggests that an adequate answer to the question “What is knowledge?” will be an explanation that analogously provides something like the ingredients that together constitute knowledge.

In these Platonic texts, a rough template is thus set out for what it is to explain a concept philosophically. What we are searching for is an account of the necessary and sufficient conditions that underly the concepts that we apply in our everyday life. This account is not to be constructed by concerning ourselves in any great detail with the plentiful examples of how, why, and when we apply the concept (for it is exactly these applications which we are seeking to ground philosophically), but instead by considering the essence of the concept itself in abstraction. This

search for underlying essences has come to provide a powerful paradigm for philosophical reflection. The history of epistemology, however, shows at the very least that the question “What is knowledge?”, when approached in this way, proves rather difficult to answer.3

In this thesis we are concerned with a concept which, while not explicitly addressed in the Socratic dialogues, has nevertheless traditionally been approached in the same essentialist spirit that emerges so provocatively there. The topic of our investigation is truth, and this chapter is concerned with the attempts that have traditionally been made to answer the Socratic question “What is truth?” precisely by providing an identificatory analysis of what it is that unites all true beliefs. While the broad aim of this work is to move away from this form of philosophical reflection, it is important to begin by looking at such theories. Not only do they illustrate how this initially compelling philosophical approach ends up leading to difficult tensions and intractable disagreements, but in doing so they illustrate the two sets of competing intuitions surrounding truth that any philosophical reflection on this concept will have to account for.

The story of this chapter is therefore the story of two sets of responses to the question “What is truth?”. The first response to this question argues, very roughly, that truth is correspondence between belief and reality. The second, in contrast, argues that a true belief is that which guides us around the world well, given our other beliefs. Each of these divergent attempts to clarify the substantial property that unites all true beliefs has a distinct intuitive appeal. Unfortunately, however, the intuitive appeal of these respective responses is in each case largely tied to the fairly decisive objection it presents to the other.

The response that truth is correspondence between belief and reality rests on the observation that a belief may fulfill every conceivable criteria we have available for evaluating it and nevertheless be false. It is not at all difficult to imagine scenarios which show that a given belief could be maximally justified, lead to repeated success, achieve consensual agreement, etc. and nevertheless still not be true. Analysing truth as a correspondence between a belief and an external reality about which we could, despite our most diligent investigative efforts, end up being radically wrong seems therefore to be rather fitting. According to this response, the epistemic standards and practical considerations

we employ when evaluating a belief should be removed from the picture when we seek to describe what truth is, for it is of the utmost importance to acknowledge the gap between truth and justification.

The view that a true belief is that which guides us around the world well, in the light of our other beliefs, amounts to something of a backlash against precisely these intuitions. This alternative response rests on the observation that it is only against a background of true beliefs that we are able to isolate and identify the falsity of any other belief, and that the standard by which we conduct these evaluations of truth and falsehood is quite simply that of how well beliefs complement, fit in with, and make better sense of other beliefs. Given that the distinction between truth and falsehood only has a footing in our practices insofar as precisely these justificatory issues are at play, it would seem mistaken to take the essence of truth to not involve them at all. Accordingly, this second attempt to analyse the property that we are attributing when we call a belief true then goes on to tie the essence of truth directly to our epistemic practices of justification.

This latter response, of course, seems in danger of clashing with the intuitions which originally motivated correspondence accounts, and so a rather unsatisfying deadlock is reached. This chapter is in the first instance dedicated to providing an overview of this deadlock and exploring how it has come about. The major contention of this chapter is that it is both responses’ shared commitment to providing a pithy analysis of what it is that makes all truths true that leads to this dissatisfying state of affairs. However, the fierceness with which the debate between the two sides rages is testament to the power of the intuitions at play; intuitions which will need to be taken up and addressed by the alternative philosophical approach that we aim to construct in the following chapters.

This opening sketch of the lay of the land when it comes to contemporary philosophical treatments of truth would be incomplete, however, without acknowledging that the quest to undermine essentialism has itself come to form a significant portion of current scholarship. Indeed, over the last century the idea that truths share no substantial or interesting property in common has gained considerable traction. The final task of this chapter is therefore to introduce these “deflationary” treatments of truth which attack the legitimacy of the Socratic form of reflection which has traditionally framed debate in this area.

Frequently, the aim of these attacks on essentialism has been to simply “deflate” the issue. The goal, it often seems, is to produce an argument which shows philosophical concern about truth to be
predicated on a simple misunderstanding of grammatical constructions and therefore to amount to a non-issue. The argument of this chapter, however, is that merely rejecting the essentialist question need not exhaust what can be said philosophically about truth. Instead, this rejection should offer encouragement to engage with the intuitions that it provokes in regard to truth in a different way. While concurring with the deflationist suggestion that our philosophical reflection on truth is misled insofar as it seeks to provide an account of what all truths, known and unknown, have in common that makes them all truths, it is argued that a new avenue must therefore be found for exploring the two competing sets of intuitions about truth that the essentialist project has uncovered.

This opening chapter therefore broadly touches on what have come to be the most prominent schools of thought with regards to truth in the contemporary analytic tradition, with the hope that this overview will provide the motivation for approaching truth in a new manner. Such an alternative approach will take heed of both the essentialist suggestion that there is something more substantial to be said about truth than some deflationists might acknowledge, and the deflationist insistence that essentialism has been misled into providing an inadvisable account of the essence of truth.

Russell and Correspondence

It seems hard to deny that the greatest impetus for treating truth as a substantial property, the essence of which can be helpfully clarified, is provided by the grammatical constructions in which the term appears. Superficially, “x is true” resembles the simple subject-predicate form of sentences such as “Gold is highly conductive”, “Paris is the capital of France”, and “John is tall”. Our ability to assess if a predicate such as “tall” has been applied appropriately rests on a firm understanding of what the property “tall” entails - roughly, being of a comparatively large height in relation to the rest of the population. To ascertain if the property “tall” is indeed correctly attributed to John, we therefore measure his height and compare it to that of the rest of the population. We similarly have a working understanding of the properties “conductive” and “the capital of France” and so electric currents can be run through gold to assess its conductivity, and the seat of the French government can be located in order to determine whether or not Paris is the national capital.
In the same vein, one could perhaps be led to think that a clear understanding of what the property “true” entails is in principle attainable, and that such an understanding would provide firm grounding for the important human task of distinguishing true beliefs from false beliefs. What is hoped for, following this line of thinking, is an understanding of the property that is possessed exclusively by all beliefs $b$, for which “$b$ is true” holds. This is certainly the order of priority established in the Euthyphro dialogue for, in requesting an account of what “makes all pious things to be pious”, Socrates demands “Tell me what is the nature of this idea, and then I shall have a standard to which I may look, and by which I may measure...”.

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, it is exactly this sentiment, too, which we find when Russell turns his attention to truth in *The Problems of Philosophy*. Here, Russell insists that the task of philosophy in this domain is first and foremost to answer the fundamental question “What is truth?”. Again, it is Russell’s hope that “a clear answer to this question may help us to obtain an answer to the question [of] what beliefs are true” - an order of priority which mirrors precisely that which is found in the Socratic dialogues. On this understanding, the fundamental philosophical task is to explicate the essence of truth, just as Socrates challenged us to explicate the essence of piety and knowledge.

It is in the writings of Russell and Moore that the foundations of modern accounts of truth as a relation between belief and reality are generally accepted to have been established. The influence of their views is evident even in the very name of this tradition, for there is a tendency to group relational accounts together under the general banner of “correspondence” theories, a reference to Russell’s influential claim in the *Problems of Philosophy* that “a belief is true when there is a corresponding fact, and is false when there is no corresponding fact.” The same sentiment is expressed and perhaps even elaborated a little further by Moore when he states that “To say that [a] belief is true is to say that there is in the universe a fact to which it corresponds; and to say that it is false is to say that there is not in the universe any fact to which it corresponds”. Although the precise nature of what a ‘fact’ is and what is meant by ‘the universe’ would admittedly require further clarification, the general thrust of these claims seems relatively clear. Both suggest that truth is a property possessed by beliefs which stand in the right relation to reality, while reality itself is

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4 Plato, Euthyphro. (p 80)
6 Although this is not investigated in any great detail here, it must be noted that the views of these two philosophers varied over the years. For a brief overview of some of these developments, see Burgess, A. G. and J. P. Burgess (2011). *Truth*, Princeton University Press., (p 70-73)
7 Russell, Truth and Falsehood (p 75)
understood precisely in terms of its independence from belief. The important feature of ‘facts’ and ‘the universe’ is that they are entirely independent from however we happen to believe them to be.

Understanding truth to consist in a relation between thought and reality in something like this way seems to have a long and rich history. This intuitive picture of truth could perhaps even be traced back to Aristotle’s infamous formulation “To say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false, while to say of what is that it is, or of what is not that it is not, is true”. Although Aristotle here makes no explicit mention of truth consisting in a relation between a belief and a reality which is outside of belief, the distinction which he draws between what is and what is said could perhaps appear suggestive of this kind of divide.

A more explicit evocation of the idea that truth consists in a relation between belief and reality seems to appear in Aquinas’s De Veritae, in which truth is characterized as “the adequation of thing and intellect”. Here truth is spelled out in terms of a relation between some form of cognition on the one hand, and an external reality on the other. Although the characterisation of truth which is thereby provided appears to focus on individual objects rather than, for instance, composite facts or states of affairs, and is expressed in terms of cognition generally, rather than explicitly in terms of beliefs, sentences, or propositions, it seems, in spirit, to express much the same picture of truth as the views which have come to be highly influential in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Russell’s pithy description of truth in terms of a correspondence between belief and fact may therefore indeed seem to capture something like a long held and fundamental intuition. However, almost all of the elements of his original formulation have subsequently come to be the subject of serious revision. There has, for instance, been considerable debate up to the present day as to whether “facts” are indeed the most viable candidates for the entities which make truths true, and whether correspondence is in fact the proper way of characterising the relation between the bearers of truth and those features of reality which make them true. One ongoing concern has been the status of negative facts such as “There are no unicorns in India”, for the absence of unicorns does not seem properly speaking to be a concrete feature of reality. The idea of such non-presences

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10 It must be noted, however, that this formulation could perhaps equally be seen to express a deflationary view of truth. Donald Davidson, for instance, has argued that Aristotle’s formulation “ought not to be considered as giving comfort to serious partisans of correspondence theories” because it doesn’t “introduce entities like facts or states of affairs for sentences to correspond to” Davidson, D. (1996). “The Folly of Trying to Define Truth.” Journal of Philosophy 93(6): (p 268)
constituting ‘facts’ in the world was the cause of considerable discomfort for Russell himself, and continues to be a matter which is much discussed today.

Further difficulties are encountered when it comes to understanding how a fact would correspond with disjunctions like “John is wearing either a blue shirt or blue pants”, because postulating an extensive realm of disjunctive facts with which beliefs of this kind could correspond makes for a rather strange picture of reality. Worries of this sort eventually led Russell in his later work to abandon talk of truth in terms of a one-to-one "correspondence" with a fact in the world. In order to allow for the role of logical relations in constituting truths, the reference to correspondence was avoided in favour of a picture in which a single fundamental feature of reality could make more than one truth true, and a single truth could similarly be made true by more than one feature of reality.\footnote{12}

Consequently, instead of understanding truth in terms of a strict one-to-one correspondence with a fact, many now seek to express the core intuition which underlies the correspondence account by turning to the \textit{truthmaker principle} that every truth is made true by some feature of reality. However, the strong links between this view and the classical correspondence account can be clearly seen in David Armstrong's highly influential work concerning this truthmaker principle, which presents itself as a continuation of the Russellian tradition, and explicitly sets out to retain the core of what he feels must be preserved in the correspondence theory of truth.\footnote{13}

In the wake of abandoning the picture of truth as one-to-one correspondence with fact, debate in contemporary truthmaker literature now turns on a major disagreement between those who, following Armstrong, construe truthmakers as \textit{states of affairs} (configurations of objects within which particulars possess certain universal properties) and those who argue that \textit{tropes} (particularized properties) best fulfill the role of truthmakers.\footnote{14} In either case, however, the very broad thesis that truth is best understood in terms of some kind of relation with reality remains intact. For the overall thrust of this chapter these further details and controversies need not therefore be of immediate concern, as it is this far broader thesis with which we seek to grapple, rather than the minutiae of any one particular account.\footnote{15}

\footnotesize{\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{12} For more details see Burgess and Burgess Truth, (p 70-75)
\item \textsuperscript{13} Armstrong, D. M. (1997). \textit{A World of States of Affairs}, Cambridge University Press., (p. 128-9)
\item \textsuperscript{14} The classic account of tropes put forward in opposition to Armstrong is to be found in Mulligan, K., et al. (1984). "Truth-Makers." Philosophy and Phenomenological Research \textbf{44} (3): 287 - 321.
\item \textsuperscript{15} It is, however, important to acknowledge at this point the suggestion, made by David Lewis, that a commitment to the truthmaker principle need not necessarily commit one to a relational theory of truth at all. Instead, Lewis claims that the truthmaker principle merely expresses an ontological commitment; a
\end{itemize}}
One further clarification is necessary, however, before proceeding any further. Until now we have generally been speaking, with Russell, in terms of beliefs being true or false. Conducting our discussion in these terms is a fairly intuitive way of initially approaching the issue, for we commonly speak of beliefs being true or false in our everyday lives. However, it must be acknowledged that we also speak of utterances and remarks, assertions and declarations, or statements and conjectures as being true or false. Consequently, contemporary philosophical literature has sought to develop an account of the primary bearer of truth, from which all of these other bearers of truth could be understood as derivatives.

Currently, debate rages as to whether either sentences or propositions (roughly, the meaning which is expressed by a sentence) occupy this role, there being “no serious candidates for the role of fundamental truthbearers beyond [these]”. However, given that the whole purpose of this chapter is to suggest that we move away from reflecting on truth by asking what it is that all bearers of truth hold in common which makes them all true this matter of identifying fundamental truthbearers need not concern us overly much. For the purposes of simplicity, we will therefore continue to follow Russell’s terminology in speaking of beliefs being true or false, as this seems the best way to establish the very broad dialectic with which we are concerned.

Despite these myriad technical controversies, the general thrust of the correspondence account that we are concerned with critiquing in this chapter is that a) something can helpfully be said about what makes all true beliefs true and that b) what can be said about all true beliefs is that they stand in a certain relation to reality. The major focus of this account is accordingly on the independence of

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commitment which doesn’t imply any significant thesis about the content or nature of truth (Lewis, D. (2001). "Forget about the ‘Correspondence Theory of Truth’." Analysis 61(272): 275–280.) If this is indeed the case, then it is not so clear how directly this particular tradition falls within the scope of this work. It must be noted, however, that Lewis’s view has drawn significant dissent from many commentators. Gerald Vision, for instance, sees truthmaking intuitions as fundamentally presupposing a substantive theory of truth in the spirit of the correspondence theory. (Vision, G. (2005). "Deflationary truthmaking." European Journal of Philosophy 13(3): 364–380.) Furthermore, in the introduction to a recent compendium on truthmaker theory, it is suggested that Lewis is seriously mistaken in his verdict and that the “attachment to an ontological thesis...commits one to a conception of truth as correspondence” - although it is acknowledged that this matter is highly controversial (Beebee, H. and J. Dodd (2005). Truthmakers: The Contemporary Debate, Clarendon). While exploring the nuanced ties between metaphysics, ontology, and theories of truth in any detail is well beyond the scope of this work, it is hard to deny that a general picture of truth as a relation between thought and reality is a very influential picture within wider philosophical discussion. It is this very general theory of truth with which we will be concerned in this opening chapter.

\[16\] Burgess and Burgess note that Truth, Princeton University Press., (p 14) Burgess & Burgess note that the view in favour of propositions is generally the most common today.
reality from belief. With this broad outline in place, we are now in a position to immerse ourselves in a deeper discussion of the compelling intuition that motivates such an understanding of truth.

Correspondence as a Radically Non-Epistemic Theory of Truth

The history of human inquiry provides us with an all too sharp awareness that a belief which holds great explanatory power, is useful and effective in its practical applications, and which appears to be adequate and correct by every available measure and to all concerned, could nevertheless fall short of truth. The Ptolemaic model of the heavens, for instance, had considerable theoretical and explanatory appeal, provided a remarkably accurate explanation of the motions of the heavenly bodies for many hundreds of years, was the object of effectively universal consensus, and yet was never true.

On the picture of truth as correspondence we can account for such a belief’s falsity, despite its apparent adequacy, by appealing to its failure to relate to an external reality in the requisite manner. While our understanding of the cosmos has changed since late antiquity, the reality of the matter and the consequent truth of geocentric beliefs have remained constant. Even if the success of a belief instils overwhelming conviction in those who believe it and establishes a stable social consensus, this does not ensure that it corresponds with reality.

This distinction between conviction and apparent adequacy on the one hand, and truth on the other, is at the heart of Russell’s analysis of truth as correspondence with reality. Russell observes that “if I believe that Charles I died on the scaffold, I believe truly, not because of any intrinsic quality of my belief, which could be discovered by merely examining the belief, but because of an historical event which happened two and a half centuries ago”.\(^{17}\) This makes it particularly clear that the truth of beliefs concerning Charles I’s execution does not depend on the psychological state of any given believer, nor the quality of the reasons which are available to her, nor the consensus of the community to which she belongs. Instead, Russell explicitly juxtaposes these internal psychological and social matters with the externalities (in this case an historical event) which make the belief true.

\(^{17}\) Russell, Truth and Falsehood (p 70)
In encouraging us to think of differing beliefs mapping onto reality in differing ways (with reality remaining unaffected by those beliefs) the correspondence account is thus able to draw our attention to some important features of the concept of truth. The picture of truth as a relation between belief and reality gives voice to two significant insights about truth; the first being that truth can be explicitly juxtaposed with our most well founded and justified psychological conviction, and the second being that truth potentially outstrips social consensus. No level of rationally justified conviction nor socially constructed consensus is able to categorically establish the truth of a belief. These are merely the “intrinsic qualities” of beliefs; truth is another matter entirely.

However, this focus on the truth of a belief not being determined by its subjective character, coupled with the desire to nevertheless state what all truths have in common, leads to an account which leaves it unclear how considerations in favour of a belief could relate to its truth at all. When Russell acknowledges that “[i]f truth consists in a correspondence of thought with something outside thought, thought can never know when truth has been attained”, 18 he is no longer merely giving voice to the observation that any given belief of ours could end up being superseded or found wanting, but expressing a new, much deeper concern about how belief in general relates to reality, and what could ever count as an indication that it does. Indeed, for Russell, philosophical reflection reveals that the question of distinguishing the general features that accompany true beliefs from those that accompany false beliefs is “a question of the greatest difficulty, to which no completely satisfactory answer is possible.” 19

The appeal of the correspondence theory appears to hinge accordingly on how comfortable one is with this picture of the conceptual relation between belief and truth. Russell himself seems to view his account as having unearthed a major insight. His bold claim is that the kinds of considerations which we commonly take to weigh in favour of holding a given belief need not generally be related to the belief’s truth at all. 20 Those favouring an account of truth along the lines of Russell’s can therefore maintain, with him, that the concept of truth simply is to be understood upon reflection as entirely unrelated to the matter of how we have come to learn, establish, challenge, and revise the beliefs that we currently hold. While this seems to indeed be an option that is open to proponents of

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18 Russell, Truth and Falsehood (p 70)
19 ibid. (p 69)
20 There are, of course, select instances, such as Pascal’s Wager, where we have never been under the illusion that the considerations in favour of holding a particular belief are related to its truth. These outlying examples, though, if anything demonstrate just how radical Russell’s apparent characterisation of truth is if it is to apply to belief in general.
such an analysis, it must be acknowledged that it clashes with some of our most basic intuitions with regards to truth.

In seeking to rigorously defend the important and fundamental intuition that neither consensus nor conviction constitutes truth, the correspondence account ends up producing an account of truth that clashes with our other intuitions in this domain; most notably that explanatory power, success, and empirical adequacy are conceptually linked with truth insofar as they are generally to be understood as indicators of its presence. The divide between thought and reality, belief and truth, which is established on correspondence accounts thus amounts to a picture of truth which Putnam has characterised as being *radically non-epistemic.*

The correspondence account, then, provides a theoretical gloss to the intuition that a belief may be warranted and useful, explanatory and highly verified and yet not be true, by drawing a distinction between these considerations which feature in our epistemic practices and the fundamentally separate matter of the belief’s relation to reality. In doing so, however, it leaves it unclear how our epistemic practices are related to truth-seeking or truth-discovery at all. The result is a pressing and open possibility that we could be radically mistaken about the most general relation in which we stand to reality. Crispin Wright has characterised this radically non-epistemic feature of the correspondence account in terms of its embracing the possibility that there could be an “uncrossable divide between reality and our cognitive activity”. What falls out of this concept of truth is therefore the possibility that we could be “somehow so situated as not to be enabled to arrive at the concepts which fundamentally depicted the character of the real world and the nature of our interaction with it.”

Although it was the all too familiar cases in which some of our beliefs *turn out* to be false that initially motivated us to understand truth in terms of correspondence with reality, accounting for truth in this way now seems to lead to serious concerns about how we could legitimately recognise that any of our beliefs are true. Concerns with the apparent disconnect between thought and reality that emerges from the account of truth as correspondence has even featured in a recent compilation on truthmaker theory. Here, Michael Morris concludes that, if we understand truth in


terms of correspondence, “we seem to be stuck in a system of representation which cannot but represent the world in terms which are not a reflection of the world as it is in itself”.  

This leads Morris to the rather startling conclusion that “a classical correspondence theorist [such as Armstrong] ought to be an idealist” for either belief and reality are distinct in kind and the former cannot properly correspond to the latter, or they are the same in kind, in which case their correspondence consists in everything collapsing into belief. Of course, these conclusions are quite contrary to the ethos of the correspondence account as it is standardly conceived, for it generally sees itself as combatting pernicious forms of idealism by insisting on the concrete existence of an external reality with which thought comes into contact. But once a framework has been established in which one begins with a radical divide between belief and reality, there appears to be a significant worry that no amount of work will suffice to link the former up with the latter in the way that was initially intended.

Pragmatism as a Radically Epistemic Theory of Truth

Traditionally, the alternative to taking truth to consist in an indiscernible relation between belief and reality has been to tie truth much more closely to our epistemic practices. Dissatisfaction with the way that the correspondence account seems to deny that the concept of truth is implicated in and bound up with our processes of inquiry has thus tended to result in an attempt to equate truth with the accessible considerations in favour of holding a belief. Extending Putnam’s characterisation of correspondence accounts in order to characterise this countervailing trend, Donald Davidson has suggested that we think of these attempts as radically epistemic theories of truth.

If one is worried that the correspondence account makes the truth of a belief in principle indiscernible, then taking truth to consist, for instance, in the explanatory power of a belief, or in the

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24 Morris, “Realism Beyond Correspondence” (p 65)
25 Interestingly, a very similar argument is to be found in Frege, G. (1956). "The Thought: A Logical Inquiry." Mind 65(259): 289-311
successful actions that the belief enables, or in how well it coheres with other beliefs allows for truth to be a quality which is in principle far more perspicuous to a believer. Characterising truth in this way certainly has its own intuitive appeal, for we do indeed take a belief to be true on the grounds of precisely these sorts of considerations. It is, after all, tangible qualities such as explanatory power, success, and empirical adequacy that inform the distinction that we draw between beliefs that have turned out to be false, and those that appear to be true.

For those committed to honouring this intuitive feature of our dealings with the concept of truth, equating truth with the presence of these sorts of properties may therefore seem an appealing option. It may very well appear to be the only other option, so long as there remains in the background a suppressed assumption that an adequate explanation of truth must explicitly state what all true beliefs have in common. In this case, rather than equating truth with an indiscernible relation between belief and reality, the other option would seem to be to equate truth with discernible features of belief like those mentioned above.

In apparently seeking to rectify the lack of attention that correspondence accounts grant to our epistemic practices, accounts of this latter sort tend nevertheless to run into the opposite problem. Inevitably, they seem to fail to adequately acknowledge the way in which truth can sometimes be juxtaposed with justification or success. The intuition with regards to truth that the correspondence account was so keen to emphasise is therefore lost sight of. A brief overview of the pragmatist tradition, and the way in which its sustained criticism of the correspondence account has often led to difficulties of this sort, is a good way of illustrating the dilemma.

A deep concern that the characterisation of truth provided by correspondence accounts does not adequately acknowledge how the concept of truth is implicated in our practices of evaluating beliefs was, significantly, one of the driving forces behind C.S. Peirce’s objection to it. The thrust of Peirce’s argument is that “if truth is defined as correspondence with [the] world, no expectations can be derived from “H is true”. If we do not know what correspondence with the world would be like, we cannot know what to expect of hypotheses which so correspond”.27 The point here, it seems, is that if the considerations of inquiry are not considerations which bear upon the concept of truth at all, then it is not clear what significance this concept has at all to our practices, nor is it clear how or why we would have come to possess it.

27 This summary of Peirce’s objections to correspondence theories of truth is provided by Cheryl Misak in (2004). Truth and the End of Inquiry: A Peircean Account of Truth, Oxford University Press (p 40)
Taking up this line of argument, Cheryl Misak contends that the “the leap from speaking in terms of empirical adequacy and explanatory power, for instance, to speaking in terms of truth and falsity must inevitably be an utter “leap of faith” on the picture of truth as correspondence”. The trouble is, however, that those who have taken up this criticism and sought to provide an alternative account of what truth amounts to have also found their endeavours to be seemingly riddled with potential objections.

William James’s attempts, for instance, to take up the spirit of Peirce’s critique led, perhaps unfairly, to him being lampooned for suggesting that truth is simply that which is “expedient in the way of our thinking”. To see why equating truth with expediency would indeed be problematic, we need only think of a medieval brewer who believes that sweet, malty water can only be made to turn into beer if an oak wood paddle is dragged through it. It is the specific properties of oak wood, the brewer believes, that creates beer. Holding such a belief undoubtedly brings the brewer considerable practical success. The yeast culture which, unbeknown to him, has adhered to his wooden paddle only multiplies and thrives further each time he uses it, and the liquid he stirs with it thus reliably turns into beer every time. But of course the expediency of believing in the special powers of oak wood does not make this belief true. It is the yeast that causes the fermentation, and any way of getting the yeast into the concoction would have worked equally well.

While no doubt James was trying to get at a much larger point in his work, namely that we are only in a position to judge that the brewer’s beliefs about oak wood are false because of our own further inquiries into yeasts and funguses, inquiries that themselves proceeded in terms of explanatory power, success, and empirical adequacy, this apparently simple equation of truth with expediency has been fairly widely seized upon and criticised. The temptation to try to find in any philosophical discussion of truth an explicit statement of what it is that makes a belief true is clearly quite strong, and pragmatist discussions of truth such as those of James have at times failed to adequately guard against this interpretation.

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Perhaps precisely because of this threat, Dewey, for his part, sought in the main to avoid discussing truth entirely, eschewing talk of truth in favour of talk of warranted assertibility. While this provided a platform for focusing on the way in which beliefs are exchanged within a community of inquirers, it largely seemed to leave the matter of truth unaddressed. Dewey’s preference for discussing warranted assertibility certainly acknowledged the difficulty of directly characterising truth, but by changing the topic it also indirectly illustrated just how different the concepts of truth and warranted assertibility are from one another, and appeared to provide no firm alternative treatment of truth in the wake of pragmatist criticisms of the correspondence theory.

Dewey’s move towards focusing on evaluations of warrant within a community of speakers certainly came to form a major theme in the work of Richard Rorty, however, and Rorty addressed the issue of truth frequently and with great vigour. In fact, the subsequent chapters of this work arguably take up a certain way of approaching truth that is at times hinted at by Rorty, when his emphasis is on how such a concept may fall out of the relationship that exists between speakers who share assertions with one another and their evaluations of one another’s beliefs and justifications.\(^{30}\) Once again, however, this aspect of Rorty’s work has often been largely overlooked, and his view is instead frequently taken to have been encapsulated on those occasions when he appeared to simply equate truth with “what your contemporaries let you get away with”.\(^{31}\) Given the temptation to treat philosophical discussions of truth as attempts to specify what all true beliefs have in common, it is perhaps unsurprising that Rorty’s work has often been received in this way.

Rorty’s rather polemical style did not always help in this regard either, and the explicit recognition that pragmatism is drawn into difficulties precisely by appearing to equate truth with some other property did not come until later in his writing.\(^{32}\) Consequently, Rorty is still often taken to have offered a radically epistemic account of truth by collapsing truth and warranted assertibility together. Since it seems intuitively plausible that a community could consider a particular belief warranted, and yet that such a belief could nevertheless not be true, this apparent account of truth has not been well received. Furthermore, given the negative reception that this suggestion has received from Rorty’s contemporaries, it is argued that his apparent account of truth has been

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\(^{30}\) This account is provided in Chapter 2, while the relation between this account and Rorty’s views is discussed throughout Chapter 3.


proven false even by its own lights.\textsuperscript{33} Again, this does not seem a particularly fair or charitable reading of Rorty, but it does illustrate the pitfalls associated with appearing to equate truth with a discernible feature of belief.

A final group of accounts within the pragmatist tradition, however, seem to provide an account of what all true beliefs have in common that avoid at least these more obvious difficulties. Instead of focusing on actual agreement or concrete expediency, accounts of this sort tend instead to equate truth with \textit{idealised warrant or projected} future agreement. In this way such accounts seem to provide an account of truth that links this concept to our epistemic practices, while avoiding the more immediate objections considered above.

This way of approaching truth again has its origins in Peirce’s work. After criticising correspondence accounts for making truth an indiscernible feature of belief, Peirce then attempts to associate truth with the active considerations that bring investigators into agreement, without ever thereby suggesting that a belief is true if and only if it is agreed upon. Instead, he suggests that a belief is true if it is “the opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate.”\textsuperscript{34} Because this distances truth from actual agreement (we may agree now, but it may not be the opinion we will eventually arrive at after further consideration) it appears to avoid the more immediate problems associated with other epistemic accounts of truth. Consequently it has been perhaps the most influential and widely discussed “theory of truth” to emerge from the pragmatist tradition, and is still rigorously defended in some form or other by many contemporary figures such as Cheryll Misak.\textsuperscript{35}

A similar trajectory of thought is also, however, to be found in the work of Hilary Putnam. When attacking the radically non-epistemic nature of correspondence accounts of truth, Putnam draws heavily on Peircian arguments.\textsuperscript{36} When he then goes on to offer an alternative, however, the suggestion that he appears to make is that truth amounts to “rational acceptability under sufficiently good epistemic conditions.”\textsuperscript{37} This stipulation that epistemic conditions must be “sufficiently good”

\textsuperscript{35} See Misak, Truth and the End of Inquiry
\textsuperscript{36} Putnam, "Realism and Reason." (pp. 489)
\textsuperscript{37} Putnam, "Why Reason Can’t Be Naturalized." (p 5)
seems again to allow one to avoid the obvious downfalls of associating truth with acceptability. It allows us to account for the intuition that we may sometimes rationally come to find a belief acceptable, and hence call it true, when it is not in fact true, because in such an instance we have mistaken the epistemic conditions which we are in.

Although these accounts thus avoid the difficulties associated with tying truth too closely to our current epistemic practices, they do so by re-introducing an element that transcends our awareness, and consequently threaten to return to the same difficulties with indiscernibility that they initially wished to avoid. These accounts therefore illustrate better than any others considered so far the back and forth pull that is exerted by epistemic and non-epistemic intuitions about truth. Putnam himself has acknowledged that a central feature of his account is that, “we cannot really attain epistemically ideal conditions, or even be absolutely certain that we have come sufficiently close to them.”\textsuperscript{38} It is similarly difficult to imagine how we are to conceive of the Peircian notion of an End of Inquiry, or what expectations are to be derived from understanding truth in these terms. Accounts of this sort consequently do not seem to provide a yardstick by means of which we can establish our grasp on a great many truths, and yet this appears to have been the major motivation for abandoning the correspondence account in the first place.

Claiming that a true belief is a belief that brings practical success and fits well within our broader system of thought, or that a belief is true when we all come to agree upon it, captures a great deal of our intuitions about truth such as our sense that a great many of the beliefs that we hold are true, that the truth of these beliefs is related to the successful way in which they guide us around the world, and that the considerations which generally inform our evaluations of belief are considerations which latch on to their truth. However, by making this equation, we lose sight of the opposing intuition that we might come to agree with regards to some particular belief and might have compelling reasons for doing so, yet nevertheless might fall short of the truth.

Attempting to provide a formula which states what truth consists in seems to therefore leave one in a dilemma; one can do justice to either the epistemic or the non-epistemic features of the concept of truth, but not both, and satisfying one set of intuitions inevitably results in clashing with the other. What is really needed, then, is a new approach to explaining truth that allows for both of these sets of intuitions to be elaborated upon and drawn together in a singular, coherent story.

Deflationism and Anti-Essentialism

We have seen that, insofar as it is viewed as simply equating the concept of truth with accessible features of belief, the pragmatist tradition does not seem to offer a promising avenue towards understanding truth. Robert Brandom, however, has argued that this is a misunderstanding of what the pragmatists were getting at. In Brandom’s eyes, the aim of the early pragmatists was more than anything to change the type of explanation that we expect from a philosophical account of truth. Rather than trying to understand what is being ascribed when we call a statement, sentence, or belief true, what the pragmatists were really interested in, according to Brandom, is what we are doing when we are ascribing truth. While he acknowledges that many of the proponents of pragmatism did not always see this particularly clearly, and hence at times seemed to consider themselves to be providing accounts of the kind of property that truth is, Brandon argues that they were in the main pursuing this deeper, and in his opinion far more interesting, explanatory strategy.

According to Brandom, the major insight of the pragmatists was to note that in calling a belief true we are “doing something more like praising it than describing it”. In providing an interpretation of pragmatism along these lines, it is clear that Brandom is consciously attempting to link this tradition up with a deflationary approach towards discussing truth that has become quite prominent in the twentieth and twenty-first century. Leaving aside for now the question as to how accurate this is as a characterisation of the intentions of the leading pragmatists, the turn away from treating truth as a property that is ascribed to beliefs, and towards analysing the kinds of speech acts in which the word “true” features, is a significant development that needs to be acknowledged. In fact, this deflationary approach is particularly interesting for our purposes given that it directly rejects the assumptions behind the Socratic question with which we began. Consequently, it casts doubt on the advisability of attempting to provide an account of the common property that makes all true things to be true.

Arguably the most significant feature of deflationist approaches to truth is the suggestion that it is a mistake to understand the locution “b is true” as attributing the property “truth” to an entity b, which is the bearer of this property. If we grant that it is a mistake to interpret this piece of language in this way, it may therefore seem unsurprising that attempts to explain what this property amounts

40 Ibid. (p 76)
to have resulted in a significant dilemma. Following this line of reasoning could perhaps lead one to conclude that truth does not merit the level of philosophical puzzlement with which it has generally been met, nor the sort of extended theorising that has so far occupied us in this chapter. Rather than understanding the insights of deflationism to be closing off further discussion of truth in this way, however, it is more helpfully seen as opening up the possibility of pursuing the intuitions that featured in the first half of chapter without feeling bound to provide a definitive answer to the Socratic question with which we began.

Deflationary views of truth are commonly understood to have originated with Frank Ramsey, rather than the pragmatists. Ramsey’s work seems to suggest that the word ‘true’ could be eliminated from our language or analysed away without any loss in content, an exercise which would seem to illustrate the vacuousness of philosophical controversies regarding truth.\(^4^1\) Ramsey’s suggestion in this regard is driven by the general insight that attributing truth to an assertion does not add any significantly new content to that assertion as it originally stood. This is famously illustrated by his example that “It is true that Caesar was murdered’ means no more than that Caesar was murdered, and ‘It is false that Caesar was murdered’ means no more than that Caesar was not murdered’.\(^4^2\) In both of these instances, the attributions of truth and falsity have not introduced any significantly new content to what is being expressed.

The truth (or falsity) of statements such as these therefore does not seem to be an additional property that can be investigated separately from the content of the original statement – namely the question of whether Caesar was murdered. The apparent superfluity of mentioning truth or falsity at all in such cases consequently leads to a deep suspicion that truth might not be a concept that has any substantial weight behind it. Due to his subsequent claim that “there is really no separate problem of truth but merely a linguistic muddle”\(^4^3\) Ramsey is therefore commonly taken to have advocated a “redundancy theory” of truth, although it must be acknowledged, that his writing on the matter is rather brief, and more suggestive than strictly doctrinal.\(^4^4\) Nevertheless, his central


\(^{42}\) Ramsey, "Facts and Propositions." (p 153) It is interesting to note that something very like this observation is already to be found in the earlier writings of Frege, who observes that “I smell the scent of violets” has precisely the same content as the sentence “It is true that I smell the scent of violets” in "The Thought: A Logical Inquiry." (p 293)

\(^{43}\) Ramsey, "Facts and Propositions." (p 157)

\(^{44}\) For the argument that Ramsey did not in fact hold the redundancy view which is commonly attributed to him see Le Morvan, P. (2004). "Ramsey on Truth and Truth on Ramsey." British Journal for the History of Philosophy 12(4): 705 – 71
claim that controversy regarding truth boils down to a linguistic muddle has had a profound influence on subsequent discussions of truth.

There are certainly cases in which talk of truth does not seem to be quite as straightforwardly superfluous as Ramsey’s initial example. The following exchange, for instance, contains a mention of truth which might not be quite so easily eliminated:

A: Caesar was murdered
B: That is true

Here, the mention of truth cannot be simply shaved off B’s response as it stands, for doing so would in this case fail to leave us with any intelligible locution at all. Nevertheless, an analysis along the lines suggested by Ramsey remains a compelling option once we recognise that B’s locution simply refers to and re-asserts A’s initial statement. A fairly natural re-interpretation of what B expresses is therefore:

B*: “Caesar was murdered” is true

and in this case, Ramsey’s initial observation again applies, for the mention of truth does not seem to be adding any significant content to A’s initial assertion. Accordingly, it seems that we could provide a satisfactory re-interpretation of the entire conversation while once again avoiding any mention of truth at all. The content of what is expressed in the exchange, then, essentially boils down to:

A: Caesar was murdered
B**: Caesar was murdered

It must be acknowledged, however, that even if substituting B** into the original exchange allows for much the same content to be captured, such a response comes across as extremely jarring given standard English conversational norms. Although he did not discuss these issues in any great detail, Ramsey was perhaps aware of this, for he concedes that “is true” and “is false” are “phrases which we sometimes use for emphasis or for stylistic reasons”.\(^45\) In the case we just considered, for

\(^45\) Ramsey, "Facts and Propositions." (p. 157)
instance, these phrases seem to allow for a previous assertion to be explicitly acknowledged and endorsed, while avoiding the repetition of this statement.

Subsequent developments in the deflationist tradition have tended to further elaborate on these latter, practical functions which mentions of the word “true” can serve in our everyday language. Additional suggestions in this vein were made by Strawson in his famous debate with Austin, in which he elaborated on many of Ramsey’s insights. Here, Strawson is intimately concerned with the preconditions that are necessary for mentions of truth to arise naturally, and the forms of speech acts which these attributions of truth are bound up with. Instead of seeking to tell us what truth is, Strawson, too, offers to explain what it is that we are doing when we talk as if we are ascribing such a property. While talk of truth often looks like the ascription of a property, he argues that it is in fact a device used for specific acts such as endorsement and corroboration.

Due to his interest in the specific acts that are undertaken when mentions of truth and falsity are made, Strawson’s emphasises that in such instances we are “making an assertion in a way in which we could not assert it unless certain conditions were fulfilled”. For instance, talk of truth allows us, as we have already witnessed, to engage in the act of endorsing by expressing agreement with a statement which has already been asserted by another speaker. But it also serves further functions such as conceding on a particular matter (while it is true that x, I nevertheless maintain...), granting a point (that’s true, but...), and considering the specific consequences of an assertion (if that’s true, then...). All of these practical, linguistic functions allow for a particular stance to be adopted in relation to an already established assertion. Strawson’s suggestion is that ‘...is true’ and ‘...is false’ have significant jobs of their own to do linguistically, although of course these do not involve ascribing a substantial property.

This suggestion was then developed into a far more comprehensive theory by a group of philosophers associated with the University of Pittsburgh. The thrust of their approach is to identify the precise semantic function that is played by mentions of truth. Specifically, truth is understood in terms of its role in forming prosentential constructions – constructions which allow

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for reference to be made to entire sentences. This analysis proceeds from an analogy with *pronouns* (he, she, it) and other *proforms* such as *proverbs* (do) and *proadjectives* (so), which all function grammatically by referring anaphorically to an antecedent.\(^{49}\) For instance, in the following sentences:

a) “Mary wanted to buy a car, but she could only afford a motorbike” – “she” is a pronoun which refers to Mary.

b) “Mary ran quickly, so Bill did too” – “did” functions as a proverb which refers to the verb “ran”

c) “Make them happy and keep them so” – “so” is a proadjective which refers to the adjective “happy”

All of these *proforms* simply express the meaning of the word to which they anaphorically refer. In a similar manner, it would be useful if one were able to refer to and express, rather than a single word, an entire sentence that is elsewhere specified. However, there is no singular word in our lexicon which fulfills this *prosentential* role. Instead, the contention of the Pittsburgh School is that this role is performed by the constructions “that is true” and “it is true”. These phrases offer a succinct way of expressing an entire sentence, which they refer to anaphorically.

On this analysis, the word ‘true’ is merely one part of a larger prosentential unit which has a clearly specified, practical role in communication. The constructions “that is true” and “it is true” are valuable semantic tools for expressing the content of an antecedent and acknowledging an original claim while avoiding repetition. The deflationary analysis therefore provides us with an account of truth in terms of the linguistic role which the word fulfills. This rather modest analysis, however, has wide ranging implications for our philosophical approach to truth.

Deflationary analyses of truth have therefore taken on a variety of different forms, each focusing on a particular function that talk of truth serves. For instance, another practical role that talk of truth plays is in constructing statements such as “Everything that John says is true”, which is a far more concise and eloquent way of expressing the quantificational proposition “For all \(p\), if John asserts \(p\), then \(p\)”. Using “true” in this way allows for rather sophisticated assertions to be expressed in

\(^{49}\) The technical term *antecedent* threatens to be a little confusing here, for it can also occur chronologically after the proform is employed, as in “He’s a good man, my father.”
ordinary English while avoiding complicated logical notation. This insight has been significantly expanded upon by figures such as Paul Horwich, who focuses on the possibility that this provides for asserting sets of as yet unknown propositions, as in; “Goldbach’s conjecture is true”.\(^{50}\) In this instance, even though the precise propositions that are being asserted cannot be specified, they are nevertheless asserted, whatever they turn out to be. Similarly, talk of truth can also be used to assert a set of statements, the precise content of which has been forgotten, or to assert a potentially infinite set of statements. Here, once again, talk of truth plays a particular practical role within our language.

In other developments within the deflationist tradition, W.V.O Quine has focused on how talk of truth allows for the transition to be made between directly making an assertion and mentioning a sentence that was uttered on a particular historical occasion.\(^{51}\) Observations that can be made about the linguistic entity “Caesar was murdered” include that it is a well-formed English sentence, that it contains 17 letters, and that it is true. In the case in which one observes that “Caesar was murdered” is true, the quotation marks surrounding “Caesar was murdered” signify that one is concerned here with a linguistic entity; a specific sentence spoken in a specific language at a specific time. The transition from making an ordinary assertion about the Roman politician to making an observation about a particular sentence can be effected by adding quotation marks and the epithet “. . . is true”, while the reverse is achieved by dropping the quotation marks and offsetting this by removing the epithet. Hence the significance of truth is the “disquotation” role it plays in allowing for the transition to be made between cases in which we are talking about instances of language, and cases in which we are using instances of language to talk about the world.

This distinction between a specific piece of language which is being referred to, and an overarching language within which the truth predicate occurs, is of course originally to be found in Tarski’s work in formal semantics. For its part, Tarski’s work contends that truth can be understood as a device which allows for the characterisation of an object language to be couched within a broader metalanguage. By constructing T-sentences of the form “Schnee ist weiß” is true if, and only if, snow is white for every valid sentence of an object language (indicated in this case in German), a comprehensive theory of truth for every sentence of that object language can be provided in a meta-language (indicated in this case in English).\(^{52}\)

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\(^{52}\) A Tarskian theory of truth is specifically concerned, however, with formal languages containing a finite set of valid sentences and not natural languages which contain a potential infinitude of sentences. For Davidson’s
As long as the predicates “...is true” and “...is false” are understood as devices which belong to a metalanguage, rather than belonging to the object language itself, a significant paradox with regards to truth can thus be avoided. While it previously may have seemed problematic that a sentence such as “This statement is false” cannot be either true or false without contradiction, this is now understood not to be a valid sentence to which truth or falsehood can be assigned, since it features the device “is false”, which is exclusively a feature of a metalanguage, and the fragment “This statement” is itself not a properly formed sentence. The distinction between object language and metalanguage therefore allows for all valid sentences of an object language to be provided with a truth value without paradox, and in this way for a finite formal language to be exhaustively characterised in the terms of a metalanguage.\(^{53}\)

Whilst Tarski thus shows that truth can be understood as a device for formally characterising an object language in terms of a metalanguage, he does not attempt in any way to explicate the ordinary notion of truth that we possess. More specifically, he is not concerned to say anything about how we investigate and determine whether snow is indeed white, or whether Lee Harvey Oswald indeed assassinated John F. Kennedy, or how the conclusion of any such investigation may be accompanied by an awareness that the resulting firmly formed belief is potentially open to being surpassed. Tarski’s work consequently does not answer to the intuitions surrounding truth with which we are concerned any more than other deflationary treatments of the truth predicate.

Common to all of this broadly deflationary work, then, is a shift of focus towards what we do or what we can do by using the word “true”, and away from characterising the property that all true beliefs possess. As a consequence of this move, a radically new interpretation is given to the Socratic question with which this chapter began. Understanding what truth is now seems to involve understanding the role that constructions containing the word “truth” play in language. What at first blush may have appeared to be property attributions can actually be understood as constructions which facilitate very particular linguistic acts.

Insofar as they succeed, deflationary treatments of truth appear to steer us away from attempting to characterise the property that all and only true beliefs possess. Since, however, it was precisely in

\(^{53}\) Tarski, A. (1936). The Concept of Truth in Formalized Languages. Logic, Semantics, Metamathematics, Oxford University Press: 152-278
the context of attempting to explain the nature of the property that all truths have in common that the conflicting intuitions which formed the topic of the first half of this chapter arose, it may seem that in the wake of deflationism we should simply cease to concern ourselves with these intuitions. Our entire initial discussion could thus be dismissed as the result of a “linguistic muddle” and the quest to uncover the nature of truth abandoned because deflationary treatments of truth have revealed that “truth has no nature”. 54 Is this the inevitable conclusion that must be drawn from studying deflationary treatments of truth, though?

Conclusion

There certainly has been a tendency in some quarters to view deflationary treatments of truth as heralding the end of serious philosophical concern with truth.55 This conclusion seems only to arise, however, given a prior assumption that uncovering the common essence of all truths is the only substantial philosophical task that could ever be worth pursuing in this domain. Given this assumption, it would indeed seem to be the case that deflationary treatments of the truth predicate, if successful, exhaust what could be said philosophically about truth. To follow this line of reasoning is, however, to still be largely in the thrall of the Socratic form of questioning with which we began, albeit in a somewhat indirect and less obvious manner. It amounts to a failure to think of any other conceivable way of providing an explanation in response to the question “What is truth?”, once it has been suggested that attempting to characterise the property that all truths have in common is a misguided endeavour.

Deflationist treatments of the truth predicate therefore only signify the end of philosophical interest in truth if one accepts that the essentialist approach of attempting to uncover what makes all truths true is the only means of saying something substantial in this domain. The suggestion that we shall be taking up in the next chapter of this work is that there is, to the contrary, a far more productive approach available to explaining and clarifying the intuitions that arose in the context of traditional

55 Roughly such a sentiment seems to be expressed by Marian David when he comments that “deflationism exhibits that well-known taste for dry and desert landscapes”. Correspondence and Disquotation (p 4)
accounts of truth. This approach involves investigating how the inherent tension within the concept of truth arises out of our attempts to make sense of the meaning of one another’s assertions and the content of one another’s beliefs. This new approach allows for a lot more to be said with regards to the concept of truth and the role that it plays in our disagreements and debates, shared pursuits and communal inquiries, while avoiding the dilemmas and apparent dead ends with which we have been confronted in this first chapter.

Pursuing these intuitions in this manner does not seem to be out of step with the deflationary treatments of truth that we have just investigated. If anything, it simply takes up the warning against seeking to characterise a property that all and only true beliefs possess, and pursues an alternative way of explaining truth. Indeed, Ramsey himself acknowledges that many weighty philosophical concerns remain to be addressed even after a deflationary analysis of truth has been conducted. He simply shifts their direct significance slightly, claiming that “the problem is not as to the nature of truth and falsehood, but as to the nature of judgment or assertion”.56 Rather than continuing to ask after the exact nature of the property that true beliefs possess, the remaining chapters of this work are therefore dedicated to arguing that an enlightening and explanatory treatment of the intuitions that we encountered in the first half of this chapter is best provided by investigating our practices of exchanging assertions and considering one another’s judgments.

This work is not alone in using deflationary treatments of the truth predicate as a springboard in this way. Huw Price, for instance, while acknowledging that one of the major functions of the truth predicate is to make a shorthand reference to a previous utterance and endorse it, is also keen to press home the significance of the fact that “That’s true!” has a much more constricted realm of application than, for instance, an endorsement such as a hearty “Amen!”57 The exclamation of “Amen!” could variously endorse another speaker’s questions, commands, requests, assertions, or any other form of utterance. Mentions of truth, by contrast, arise specifically in relation to assertions – to expressions of judgments and beliefs. By paying attention to the “ordinary limits of their application”, we can thus see that the significant interest that we have in the locution “That’s true!” specifically, rather than “Amen!” more generally, is reflective of an interest in the way that we form, evaluate, and share assertions together.

56 Ramsey, “Facts and Propositions.” (p 158)
This suggestion that the intuitions involved in traditional philosophical controversies about the nature of truth need not be disregarded, but instead need to be reinterpreted and reinvestigated, is precisely what we have been working towards in this chapter. The specific conundrum that we have uncovered, and which now needs to be approached afresh, runs roughly as follows. In making judgments and sharing assertions, our commitments rest on the evidence and reasoning available to us; on considerations of the explanatory power, success and consistency of a particular belief compared to other available alternatives. It can only be these considerations, and nothing more, that are in play when we choose to endorse another speaker’s judgment or assertion, when we note “I’d never thought of it that way before, but it’s true what you’re saying”. This way in which we are willing to call true any judgments that seem satisfactory by available measures is what is latched on to by radically epistemic accounts of truth.

We use mentions of truth to not only endorse a belief, however, but also to caution against overconfidence or settling complacently upon a belief. For instance, we may warn “All evidence suggests that what you’re saying is correct, and I can’t conceive of any alternatives, but it still might not be true”. In cases such as this, we are in fact juxtaposing the truth of a belief with all of the available measures for evaluating its merits. This is more or less the feature of our practices of judgment and assertion that radically non-epistemic accounts of truth wish to draw attention to.\textsuperscript{58}

The juxtaposition between these two uses of the term “true” leads us fairly quickly to the heart of what has caused so much difficulty for the project of characterising what all and only truths have in common. Our judgments are formed and our assertions evaluated on the basis of available evidence and reasoning, and yet tied to this process of sharing assertions and making judgments is an awareness that our judgments and assertions may be flawed or lacking in a way that is not yet apparent. For this reason, the concept of truth, or rather our practice of exchanging assertions and making judgments, seems to be mysteriously Janus-faced. One face is turned towards the past – it is concerned with available standards of justification and the success and explanatory power that a belief holds. But the other face is turned towards the future, and towards the potentially unappreciated or as yet unconsidered possibilities that may lie there.

\textsuperscript{58} Rorty draws attention to these two seemingly disparate uses of the word “true” in Pragmatism, Davidson and Truth (pp. 334-5).
Chapter Two

What is an Explanation of Truth?

This chapter provides a radically different kind of explanation of truth from those examined in the opening chapter. Instead of responding to the question “What is truth?” with an analysis of the necessary and sufficient conditions under which a belief is true, the central claim of this chapter is that we understand truth when we fully understand the interpretive relation that exists between recognising assertions, assigning meaning, and attributing belief. The suggestion is that the characteristics of truth that have puzzled us in the first chapter can be best explained by examining the interpretive activities undertaken by speakers who engage in meaningful assertoric exchanges with one another. Investigating the conceptual links between assertion, belief, and meaning is to satisfactorily answer the question “What is truth?”, rather than elude it.

How could a discussion of truth be explanatory when it eschews entirely the project of specifying when a particular belief is true? We can begin to allay this concern by noting that there are many different forms that an explanation can take. The idea behind this chapter is that in our desire for an account of truth we are in a position similar to a child who, after buying ice cream at the corner store with her pocket money, wishes to know what money is. Like such a child, we already have some kind of basic though blurred grasp of the relevance that the concept of truth has to our lives, but desire a fuller and more cohesive understanding of what it amounts to. The form of explanation that such a child seeks is not a neat account of the necessary and sufficient conditions under which a given object constitutes a unit of money, but is of a more subtle form. Similarly, we want an account of how the concept of truth emerges, and why it takes the form it does.

Of course, were the question “What is money?” to be posed by a very young child who is holding a banknote inquisitively in her hands, pulling at its edges, and placing it between her teeth, a fudged account of the kind of things that are money might be appropriate. For this child’s question, an adequate response may simply be “Money is either very thin but tough sheets like that, or small, round pieces of metal”. This resembles an (albeit flawed) schema for identifying instances of money. This is not, however, the kind of question that interests us in this chapter with regards to truth.
Instead, the more interesting form of the question “What is money” is the one that the child poses a few years later, when she wants to know (roughly) why it is that she can hand over a banknote at the local store and then take an ice cream from the fridge. This child of course has no difficulty identifying instances of money. She knows how to use it to buy ice cream, can recognise the different denominations and make the calculations necessary for its everyday use; she may even have pocket money stashed away in her own bank account. Nevertheless, in asking this question she is indicating that she wishes to find out more about it.

After many years of such inquisitive questioning, the child may grow up to eventually possess an account of what money is that broadly relates an understanding of basic trading needs between individuals and societies with an understanding of the sophisticated modern institutions that have come to underpin such systems of exchange. What she has come to possess, then, is an account that delves into human practices of exchanging goods, and explores how money is bound up with these. When fully fleshed out, a story of roughly this sort is surely the best response that her original question “What is money?” could have hoped for.

The best way to determine whether the account that is offered here provides a satisfactory response to the question “What is truth?” is therefore to consider how well the story it provides addresses our intellectual curiosity. A good yardstick for measuring this, it would seem, is how well the account addresses the concerns and confusions that motivated the discussions of truth in the first chapter of this work. In this chapter we will be seeking to account for why truth is felt to be something that can be pursued, attained, defended, and progressed towards, and yet conversely why it also seems that the truth of any particular matter can potentially transcend the beliefs that we have arrived at. The light that our account can cast on this Janus-faced character of truth should be the criteria by which it is judged, for this is precisely what was driving our traditional attempts to answer the question “What is truth?”.

There are, however, important disanalogies between asking about what truth is and asking about what money is. Money is, for the most part, disseminated and regulated by public decree and fulfils its role of being money only insofar as it is trusted, respected, and recognised by those who use it. The concept of truth, on the other hand, does not seem to have been explicitly decided upon or instituted in this sense at all. It is not at all clear, either, whether it is even possible to be a rational
agent and coherent conversational partner while lacking the concept of truth entirely. Consequently, our account of truth differs quite dramatically from an account of money, for the claim of this chapter is that truth is both presupposed in and emerges from meaningful assertoric interaction itself. The kernel of the concept of truth comes hand in hand with the existence of this kind of interaction between speakers.

This is tied up with the second striking disanalogy between the two cases. While it is relatively easy to imagine forms of human life that lack any type of monetary system, it is much harder to imagine a human form of life that lacked the concept of truth completely. Life without any form of money certainly tends to be more restricted and localised, involving perhaps bartering and self-sustenance, but it is also recognisably similar to our own in many significant ways. In contrast, this chapter argues that our communicative practice of exchanging assertions would be utterly inconceivable were the concept of truth to be absent, and that a huge swathe of human life would therefore be inconceivable without it.

A third and final significant difference between the case of money and that of truth is that once we possess a sophisticated account of what money is (including, for instance, an in-depth understanding of the minting processes and anti-counterfeiting measures involved in its material manufacture) this account would help in some scenarios to settle once and for all whether a given object is a (legitimate) instance of money. The deeper and more detailed our understanding of what money is becomes, the better we therefore are at discerning whether certain objects are money. In contrast, coming to find out more about what the concept of truth is in this chapter will not provide any illuminating and definitive schema by which to determine whether any given belief actually is true or not. To the contrary, our account seeks to show precisely how and why the concept of truth is tied to an awareness of perspectives that conflict with and possibly surpass our own, and hence to an openness to continually revising our beliefs.

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59 Despite “post-truth” being chosen as Oxford Dictionaries’ Word of the Year in 2016, it does not seem that we have now entered an era entirely lacking the concept of truth. There is certainly a breakdown in productive consultation between increasingly deeply divided viewpoints, but the ferocity and persistence with which both sides insist on the misrepresentations of the other shows that they are, at least nominally, concerned with portraying their own messages as the truth.
Assertion in the State of Nature

The constructive account of truth contained in this chapter is inspired by ideas gestured towards in the work of Bernard Williams and Donald Davidson. Taken together, both the work of Williams and that of Davidson could be seen to suggest that the interpretative resources necessary for understanding and exchanging assertions shape the form that the concept of truth takes. The method by which Williams sets out to illustrate this is by considering how assertions could for the very first time have been exchanged and interpreted in a hypothetical “State of Nature”. In this hypothetical case, both speakers are utterly unfamiliar with one another’s beliefs, and no previous linguistic interaction has taken place to establish a recognised vocabulary between them.  

This need not, importantly, be a historically accurate picture of how assertoric language actually emerged. It seems eminently plausible, for instance, that other proto-linguistic interactions took place out of which more complicated forms of language such as the exchange of assertions gradually evolved. In this case, speakers would not have been starting from scratch linguistically when they first came to exchange assertions with one another, nor would they have been wholly unfamiliar with the beliefs of those around them. It does not seem that Williams’s story, however, is intended to be taken as a speculative claim about the actual historical emergence of assertoric language. Rather, it is a method for highlighting what is involved in interpreting assertions. When these exchanges are considered outside of their usual comfortable familiarity, as they are when we seek to imagine assertion in a State of Nature, we may be in a better position to see clearly what they fundamentally involve.

When encountering and seeking to understand assertions in such a postulated State of Nature, speakers are therefore called upon to make sense of a rush of words, none of which are familiar. Not only this, however, but they are at the same time also seeking to establish the content of their interlocutor’s beliefs. The task of interpreting another speaker’s assertions, then, is always a task of balancing assignments of meaning with attributions of belief. If we grant that each speaker has a basic recognition that their interlocutor is aiming to directly express a belief through an assertion, then the task of unravelling the precise meaning of the utterance in question amounts to the task of relating the speaker’s words to a specific belief that they hold.

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Williams’s suggestion is that, with nothing else to go by, each speaker would begin this process by taking the other speaker to hold the same seemingly mundane and uncontroversial beliefs about the immediate environment which they themselves do, i.e. by taking the other speaker to hold beliefs which they themselves find to be trivially true. This basis of apparently trivial shared judgments therefore forms the bedrock upon which the mutual comprehension of the terms and structures of one another’s language can be constructed. The mutual comprehensibility of assertions, this account points out, is always therefore predicated on significant agreement in judgments.

As the basis of linguistic mutual intelligibility increases, however, speakers become able to share with one another beliefs about features of the world that are either not immediately apparent or not in the immediate vicinity, and therefore convey new information and perspectives with one another. It is here that Williams takes more complex issues of truth to arise out of the trivial concept of truth that is primitively implicated in the interpretation of assertoric discourse. At this stage, speakers are able to transmit beliefs which call for evaluation in terms of being more or less well justified, and are even able to use assertions to deceive one another, leading to concerns about sincerity. It is these latter issues which primarily interest Williams.61

For the purpose of this chapter, however, it is to the much more basic story of assigning meaning and attributing belief that we wish to return. More specifically, we are concerned with the discovery of clashes in judgment which are bound to emerge fairly soon after any assertoric exchange begins, and the interpretational choices these throw up. By investigating the difficulty that these clashes in judgment pose, we can begin to explain how the concept of truth possesses the internal tension that it does.

Williams work, however, does not discuss these matters in any great detail. Rather, it is to the work of Donald Davidson that we will need to turn to in order to find many suggestive insights about this feature of linguistic interpretation. Williams himself indeed cites Davidson’s work favourably and acknowledges that his discussion of communication in a State of Nature owes a significant debt to it.62

61 These concerns are discussed further in Chapter Four, where Williams’s arguments are presented in contrast to Huw Price’s account of truth as “convenient friction”
62 Williams, Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy (p 63)
Davidson’s discussions of radical interpretation offer a prominent and sustained investigation of the interpretive stance taken by an interlocutor who is seeking to make sense of both the meaning of a speaker’s utterances and the content of her beliefs. It has not always been entirely clear, however, exactly what kind of insights these discussions provide into the concept of truth. This is a particularly difficult matter to discern given that Davidson’s work is often associated with a wide-ranging theory of meaning and not with any particularly theory of truth at all, and furthermore that he often appears to be rather pessimistic about what can be fruitfully said about truth.

Davidson’s Theory of Meaning

In large part the difficulty in extracting from Davidson’s work a very specific insight about the relation between assertion, meaning, belief, and truth is due to this work being commonly associated with a much broader project of constructing a theory of meaning in general. In order to proceed, we therefore need to separate the less helpful and more contentious elements of Davidson’s discussions of meaning from the aspects of his work that we wish to endorse and which are directly relevant to our project of providing an explanatory account of truth. It is therefore necessary to set the stage by introducing the theory of meaning for which he is perhaps best known.

The theory of meaning with which we are concerned is that which is first set out in Truth and Meaning in 1967. In this paper, Davidson contends that a theory which is able to specify the conditions under which every actual and potential sentence of a language is true is a theory which successfully captures the meaning of that language. A theory of meaning for German, for instance, would be able to generate T-Sentences of the form “Schnee ist weiß” is true iff snow is white which would link all of the potentially infinite range of sentences that can be produced from differing arrangements of this language’s finite component words to the conditions under which these sentences are true.

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64 Here the second half of the T-Sentence, which is specified in English, is intended to describe truth conditions in the world.
A major motivation for approaching meaning in this way is to explain the generative nature of our grasp of natural languages – i.e. to explain the fact that speakers are able to produce and interpret utterances that they have never before encountered. In the hope of explaining this, Davidson contends that a theory of meaning is first and foremost holistic; it functions by systematically relating a broad swathe of actually encountered sentences with attendant truth conditions according to the T-Schema established above. Out of this holistic relation of sentences then emerges a picture of the way in which individual words contribute to the truth conditions of the sentences in which they variously feature and, conversely, the way in which the truth conditions of sentences are determined by the words out of which they are constituted.

In this way, Davidson contends that the theory provides the resources required for interpreting novel utterances, for it is essentially a formal theory of a language’s vocabulary and grammar. When coming across a sentence containing familiar terms but in a novel combination such as “Schnee ist weiß aber nicht wenn ein Bär darauf gepinkelt hat” for the very first time, possessing a theory of meaning for German would allow one to derive the truth conditions of this sentence from the words out of which it is composed, and in the process incorporate this sentence, too, into the theory as a further data point. In this particular case, a theory of meaning for German would be able to produce the T-Sentence “Schnee ist weiß aber nicht wenn ein Bär darauf gepinkelt hat” is true iff snow is white, but not when a bear has urinated on it.

This method of accounting for linguistic understanding has been extremely influential and is clearly rather compelling. It does, however, rest on a number of assumptions which have been the subject of serious contention. For one, it seems to imply that individual words each have a rather fixed meaning or set of meanings, and therefore deny that the meaning of words is to some extent fluid and evolving with use. Furthermore, the theory seems most plausible when explaining assertions, but is less clearly applicable to explaining how speakers understand, for instance, commands, exclamations, and requests.

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65 In this case “aber nicht” is very similar grammatically to the English construction “but not” in which the theory of meaning is being specified. However, we could imagine languages with wildly different grammatical structures to express this logical relation.
67 We will examine this objection as it appears in Huw Price’s work in the next section.
Truth as a “Transparent” and “Primitive” Concept

The former suggestion, however, that understanding what a given sentence means on any particular occasion is a matter of possessing a sort of algorithm which spits out an interpretation based on the fixed meanings of its component terms, seems to have come in for fairly serious revision in Davidson’s later work. Here he came to argue that understanding another speaker cannot simply be a matter of possessing a theory of meaning of the sort outlined above for the natural language that they speak. Significantly, he argued that idiolects vary so considerably between speakers that “no two people actually do speak the same language” and that linguistic understanding therefore requires careful individual attention to the communicative intentions and idiosyncrasies of one’s interlocutor.  

Even more radically, perhaps, his consideration of malapropisms and other deviations from stock use led him to suggest that understanding linguistic meaning is a matter of imaginatively and flexibly adjusting one’s interpretation of utterances on a sentence by sentence basis, an ability that cannot be understood in terms of a “machine”-like theory which “when fed an arbitrary utterance [...] produces an interpretation” as he earlier appeared to propose. Davidson’s views regarding the basis upon which mutual comprehensibility rests thus appear to have evolved over his career. While familiarity with the way that another speaker tends to employ certain words may facilitate mutual comprehension, Davidson seems to have come to acknowledge that it does not entirely replace attentiveness to context nor exhaust the ability to discern what a speaker is communicating. When drawing from Davidson’s work in discussing the links between interpretation and truth, then, we need not be endorsing or proceeding from the assumption that linguistic understanding is based on words having strictly fixed and context invariant meanings.

Regardless, however, of the attentiveness and imagination that he came to deem required in order to interpret another speaker’s utterances, the project of grounding all linguistic meaning in the discernment of truth conditions certainly seemed to remain a central theme throughout Davidson’s

work. It is this strict association of truth with meaning in general that we most pressingly need to distance ourselves from before we can proceed.

Not only does associating the grasping of meaning with the discerning of truth conditions seem to be potentially strained and unconvincing when it comes to forms of language such as commands, exclamations, and requests, but it also ends up, perhaps surprisingly, making truth seem like a somewhat uninteresting concept about which very little can be said. This is because Davidson can be found on many occasions emphasising that truth is a “beautifully transparent” and “primitive concept” by means of which the complicated concept of meaning can be explained.71

The suggestion in Davidson’s work is that associating the grasping of linguistic meaning in general with the discerning of sentential truth conditions provides the advantage of explaining a puzzling phenomenon (meaning) in terms of a concept that we already have a much better grasp on (truth). So long as the task at hand is explaining meaning, this may seem a remarkable feat. Given, however, that our aim is to provide an illuminating account of truth (which it must be said does not seem, at least thus far, to be a particularly transparent concept) it does not appear to be so helpful.

It is not difficult to discern why Davidson’s suggestions about the transparency and primitiveness of truth are problematic for the project in which we are engaged. Following this aspect of Davidson’s theory of meaning would be to both take for granted precisely what it is that we wish to explain, and then dismiss the possibility of saying anything more about it. Davidson’s work would thus not seem to offer us any insights into the intuitions surrounding assertion and judgment that we are interested in. With regards to truth specifically, it would imply that no philosophically illuminating work is possible, or necessary.

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70 Davidson always was, of course, well aware that there are many forms of language which are not straightforward declarative assertions, and that there are furthermore many meaningful linguistic constructions that appear within even declarative utterances which do not seem to directly impinge on sentential truth. On numerous occasions, particularly in his early work, he therefore set out to show how these other forms of language, too, could nevertheless be made amenable to a truth-conditional account of meaning with a requisite amount of logical analysis and grammatical manipulation. See particularly “On Saying That”, “Quotation”, and “Moods and Performances”, all collected in Davidson, D. (2001). Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation: Philosophical Essays, Oxford University Press.

Can Davidson’s Work Reveal Anything About Truth?

Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, Davidson’s work has not often been taken to illustrate anything particularly substantial about truth. Huw Price has even gone one step further, and explicitly dismissed the possibility that Davidson’s work reveals anything about truth at all. If we wish to make use of Davidson’s discussions of interpretation when unravelling the intuitions that surround truth, we will therefore need to respond to these sorts of criticisms and establish just how we take his work to be relevant. The crux of the matter, it seems, goes once again back to Davidson’s claim to have explained meaning in general in terms of truth.

For Price, Davidson’s focus on meaning in general leads us away from addressing the concept of truth. Instead of taking linguistic meaning to consist of the discerning of truth-conditions, Price contends that understanding linguistic utterances in all of the many uses to which they are put is a matter of identifying and appreciating the communicative intention of a speaker and recognising what they are doing by speaking. In a direct repudiation of Davidson, Price thus argues that possessing a theory capable of deriving interpretations of any and all sentences of a language cannot possibly be a matter of understanding the conditions under which sentences are true, but instead must involve understanding when they are appropriate things, broadly conceived, to say. Knowing the meaning of “Wilkommen!”, for instance, must have something to do with recognising it as a greeting appropriate for welcoming those to whom it is addressed, knowing the meaning of “Gib mir bitte das Salz” with the recognition that this is an appropriate way to request someone to pass the salt, and so on.

The primary emphasis on this alternative account of language rests on an interpreter’s ability to recognise a speaker’s broad communicative intention. It is only given that we are able to identify

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72 Price argues that the “theorems of the radical interpreter’s so-called truth theory do not have to mention truth at all; and if they do mention it, need only the disquotational property - the equivalence principle - in terms of which the truth predicate can be extended trivially to utterances of any kind.” Price, H. (1988). Facts and the Function of Truth, Basil Blackwell. (p 203)
73 According to Price, the T-Sentences of a theory of meaning should be understood as specifying “the state of mind that would normally be considered to be evidenced by a competent speaker’s utterance of the sentence in question.”, rather than the truth conditions of the sentence. Ibid. (pp. 204)
when another speaker is making a request, issuing a greeting, or making an assertion, for instance, that we are then able to evaluate the precise meaning or significance of the speaker’s actual words. Understanding the precise meaning of any given greeting, for instance, may be related to understanding whether the greeting is polite and formal, or friendly, colloquial, and intimate. Understanding the precise meaning of a given assertion, on the other hand, may be related to understanding the conditions under which the assertion would be true or false.

Even Price himself, then, acknowledges that the concept of truth could be relevant to linguistic interpretation and understanding in the restricted domain of assertion. Understanding the conditions under which an assertion is true could well be helpfully related to understanding the meaning of that assertion because, of course, a factor of vital importance in understanding what an assertion is doing is understanding the belief or truth-commitment that it expresses. There seems to be no objection, then, on Price’s part to hypothetically investigating the interpretive links between truth and meaning within the domain of assertion specifically. It is only insofar as Davidson’s work seems to neglect the great variety of uses to which language is put, and insist that all linguistic understanding can be subsumed under the recognition of truth-conditions that Price objects to his discussions of interpretation.

It is consequently by restricting our use of Davidson’s discussions of interpretation precisely to the domain of assertoric discourse that we will seek to avoid the problematic claims that are associated with his broader theory of meaning. In the account of truth that proceeds we will thus be casting aside as tangential Davidson’s claim that meaningful linguistic interaction in general is to be explained in terms of truth-conditional propositional content. In the context of interpreting assertions specifically, however, it will be argued that Davidson’s discussions of interpretation end up yielding the insight that balancing assignments of meaning and attributions of belief so as to minimise the amount of disagreement that we perceive to exist between our own judgments and those of our interlocutor accounts for the form that the concept of truth takes.

Davidson’s apparent insistence that nothing of any substance can be said about truth therefore actually seems to do a disservice to the significant constructive contributions that his work could be seen to make to the task of fleshing out the way that the concept of truth is implicated in the interpretation of assertions. Indeed, at some points in his later work Davidson himself seems to have

74 See Price’s acknowledgement that “there seems to be something to be said for the claim that to know the meaning of an assertoric sentence P is to know when its use would be correct…in other words, to know its truth conditions” Ibib. (p 204)
begun to move away from his earlier insistence that it is helpful to think of truth as a primitive explanatory notion. Instead, he suggests that philosophical accounts of concepts such as meaning, belief and truth would do well to note that all of these concepts are intimately and inseparably related when interpreting another speaker, with no one concept occupying an explanatory role any more fundamental than any other.\footnote{See, for instance, Davidson’s insistence that we “cannot hope to underpin [the concept of truth] with something more transparent or easier to grasp” (such as for instance, the relation between belief and reality) but that we can nevertheless say something revealing about truth by “relating it to other concepts”, all of which can be examined in terms of the process of interpretation. Davidson, D. (1996). “The Folly of Trying to Define Truth.” \textit{Journal of Philosophy} 93(6) (p 265)}Taking one of these concepts to be primitive and fixed, and explaining the others in terms of it, is therefore not as illuminating as explaining all of these concepts together and in terms of one another. Explaining the concept of truth by exploring its interpretive relationship with meaning and belief, rather than seeking to equate it to correspondence with reality or ideally justified belief, is therefore, if we are to emphasise this latter aspect of his work, in line with Davidson’s thinking.

“Plain Truths”

We have now distanced ourselves from many of the major presuppositions that accompany Davidson’s discussions of linguistic interpretation. The aspect of his work that will prove to be helpful for our purposes, however, is the way in which it suggests that we approach the concept of truth from the perspective of a field linguist attempting to simultaneously make sense of both the beliefs and language of the speaker whose assertions they are seeking to understand. The suggestion that can be gleaned from this aspect of Davidson’s work is that the concept of truth is intimately related to the process of attributing comprehensible beliefs to others, and hence finding meaning in their assertions.

It is easy to see how this interest in how we could come to understand another speaker’s assertions and beliefs is echoed in Williams’ attempt to ground his discussion of truth in considerations of linguistic interaction in a State of Nature. Here, too, we are to imagine that speakers are encountering one another’s assertions for the very first time, sharing no pre-established vocabulary or linguistic conventions. Although Williams himself does not pursue the matter in any great detail,
it is clear that speakers in this position are also attempting to piece together both a picture of what each other believes and what each other means in the way that Davidson envisions.

Let us begin to unravel the relation between the concept of truth and the practice of interpreting assertions, then. Suppose, to follow the general spirit of the kind of account that Williams and Davidson are proposing, that our very first encounter with an utterly foreign speaker involves her gesturing towards a fresh snowdrift and uttering the assertion “Der Schnee ist weiß”.76 Both Williams and Davidson suggest that it would be appropriate and reasonable in these circumstances to entertain the hypothesis that in asserting this sentence, the speaker means to express the belief that the snow is white. This is the foothold from which our investigating of the concept of truth shall begin.

Both Davidson and Williams start out, then, by considering how an interpreter can come to understand the meaning of clear, deliberate assertions about obvious, commonly accessible features of the environment. Williams refers to these as assertions of “plain truths”. By this he wishes to pick out instances in which a speaker asserts “something that the hearer can observe as easily as the speaker can”; instances in which “there is no question of [the speaker] having a positional advantage”.77 Davidson, for his part, also takes these “most basic cases” to be crucially important for illustrating the process by which an interpreter can find how a speaker’s assertions express beliefs that she holds about the world.78

This talk of “plain truths” and “basic cases” of assertion may seem at first blush, however, to be putting the cart before the horse. Since we are aiming to better understand the concept of truth, beginning our account with an appeal to the notion of plain or basic truths would appear to be rather disingenuously relying on the concept that we are hoping to clarify. It would seem to be a viciously circular account. The important feature of these cases, however, is not that they reveal a distinct ontological category of foundational truths that is immune to further analysis, nor that certain beliefs are indubitable, nor that some beliefs are in some other sense true in a uniquely

76 This example may be a little misleading, given that many of the terms and structures of the German language are already familiar to us as English speakers. However, for the sake of continuity and ease of explanation we will continue to use German as the example of the language being interpreted, even though one could imagine a language far less closely related to English
77 Williams, Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy (p 49)
78 Davidson, A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge. (p 151)
privileged way. Rather, both Williams and Davidson simply take this to be a good way of illustrating how an interpreter is able to fumble towards an understanding of the meaning of another speaker’s assertions. If we cannot understand the meaning of the assertions that a speaker is making about what we take to be uncontroversial and obvious features of the immediate environment then it is unlikely we can understand any of her assertions, so it seems a good place to begin.

It may, however, be helpful to translate this concern into a scepticism regarding why our initial hypothesis as to what the speaker means takes the form that it does. Why should we as interpreters set out to make sense of a speaker by making the tentative initial hypothesis that her assertion “Der Schnee ist weiß” might express the belief that the snow is white? Why not begin, for instance, with the hypothesis that the speaker means to convey with the assertion “Der Schnee ist weiß” the belief that owls are much more dangerous than polar bears? It is, after all, perfectly possible that the speaker believes this, for we don’t know anything about her beliefs at all.

There are two major reasons why this would not seem to be a productive way to set out. The first is that it is apparently unrelated to the communicative conditions in which we and the speaker find ourselves. There are (as far as we can tell) no owls or polar bears around, we have not expressed an interest in the threat posed by different animals in the area, and, as a complete newcomer to the speaker’s language, we are unlikely to be able to latch on to the meaning of anything other than deliberately simplified assertions. At this point in the conversation, then, this would be an odd belief for the speaker to choose to express when addressing us. If a speaker’s utterances were always issued on a completely random basis such as this, with no discernible relation to conversational context, that speaker would never make any sense to us. Consequently, interpreting a speaker’s assertions as if they were completely unrelated to the conversational context does not seem to be a productive way to seek to understand her at all.

The second reason why this would not be a productive way of setting out to understand another speaker is that it would attribute a belief to the speaker that we take to be rather absurdly mistaken. Again, we are starting off on the wrong foot if we proceed under the assumption that the beliefs which a speaker expresses are inexplicably and catastrophically wrong, for this is just another way of assuming that the speaker will never make any sense to us. In attempting to interpret a speaker, we are therefore seeking to find out how her assertions are expressive of beliefs which we take for the

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79 The plainness of a truth could even be relative to a technology being at hand. For instance it could be plainly true that there is a circle drawn on a surface if both speakers are looking at it through a magnifying glass. See Williams, Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy (p 49)
most part to be right. Even though there is nothing in principle stopping us further down the line from being informed by the speaker, much to our surprise, that the owls in the vicinity are particularly vicious and the polar bears relatively harmless, we would never arrive at a point where we could make sense of the speaker enough to be informed by her of such dangers if we interpreted her from the very beginning as expressing beliefs that we found to be ludicrously mistaken.

By discussing these considerations in turn in the next two sections we will therefore be attempting to flesh out what Davidson means when he insists that extending “charity” to another speaker is not a choice but a requirement of interpretation.80 The underlying claim is that it is only on the condition that we find another speaker’s assertions comprehensible from our own perspective (and therefore find their beliefs to broadly hang in some kind of alignment with ours) that we are able to determine how and where many of their specific beliefs depart from or conflict with ours. To allow these two considerations to guide our interpretation of what another speaker means is therefore not to project our own view of the world onto others to the detriment of ever properly appreciating their own beliefs. Instead, it is the only way of proceeding if we wish to recognise how these beliefs differ from our own.

Communicative Intent and Conversational Co-operation

To take the speaker in this imagined situation to mean by “Der Schnee ist weiß” that the snow is white, rather than taking her to mean that owls are more dangerous than polar bears, is in an important way to prioritise an interpretation of the speaker that assumes her to be making assertions that are discernibly related to the communicative context in which we find ourselves.

Taking her to mean that the snow is white is to consider her to be expressing a belief that is relevant to the here and now, given the immediate, snow-covered environment in which we find ourselves. This would not be so appropriate as an initial hypothesis, for instance, if the speaker was uttering her first assertion to us while in a drought-ridden desert. Not only does this hypothesis take the

80 See Davidson’s claims that “charity is not an option, but a condition of having a workable theory” and that “Charity is forced on us; whether we like it or not, if we want to understand others, we must count them right in most matters” in (2001). On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme. Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation: Philosophical Essays, Oxford University Press. 2 (p 197)
speaker’s assertion to be related to the immediate physical environment, but it is also in line with taking the speaker to be speaking within the broader context of attempting to induct us into her language. Although we are taking her to be making a very obvious observation about the snow, given that we have just arrived in a strange land and her language is utterly foreign to us, it would make sense for the speaker to illustrate elements of her vocabulary and grammar in this way in order to build up mutual linguistic understanding.

In allowing these considerations to play a part in our interpretation of the speaker, we are, of course, relying on a great number of similarities obtaining between the two of us. In the most basic sense, we are assuming that the speaker is a speaker who uses language to directly express beliefs she holds about the world, that she makes these assertions with the aim of being understood, and finally that we as an interpreter are able to identify where and when she is doing is. Furthermore, we are relying on the fact that we share with the speaker a mutual recognition as to what constitutes an appropriate use of assertion in any given context. In this particular instance, we take it that certain assertions are more appropriate than others for the purpose of helping us to master the fundamentals of the natural language that she speaks, and we take her to recognise this as well.

While the case at hand is very specific, it is illustrative of the far broader significance of assigning communicative intention and assuming conversational co-operation when interpreting what other speakers are asserting and when discovering the beliefs that they hold. In the case with which we are concerned, it has been assumed that when attempting to converse for the first time with a foreigner and gesticulating towards a fresh snowdrift, it would not be salient to make an assertion comparing two animals that are not present. Consequently, as an interpreter we should steer away from interpreting a speaker as doing this, because it would lead us down the path of finding all of her assertions unrelated to the communicative context in which they occur, which would be to fail to find her assertions intelligible at all.

The relevance that we discern in a speaker’s assertions, however, need not always be so closely bound up with our immediate physical surroundings. Indeed, as the basis of linguistic understanding

81 Perhaps most simply, we are relying on the fact that the speaker utilises rudimentary gestures in instances in which she wishes to indicate the feature of the immediate environment that she is talking about and that we as interpreters are able to recognise this intention and follow it rather than, for instance, being utterly bemused by the gesture of pointing, or following the line of the index finger in the opposite direction (See Wittgenstein, L. (1963). *Philosophical Investigations*. Oxford, Oxford University Press. (p 39))

82 While this may not perhaps seem like a very Davidsonian consideration, it is in line with the qualifications made in the previous sections.
increases and the conversations we engage in with one another become more complex and interesting, it is to be expected that interpreting what a speaker means by a specific assertion will be influenced far more often by what has previously been said in the conversation, by our relation to and knowledge of one another, and by what is going on in the social and political world in which we live. From this very first assertoric interaction, and in increasingly subtle and nuanced ways in all of our subsequent interactions, understanding the beliefs that a speaker’s assertions express is always related to the context in which they occur.

Agreement in Belief and Judgment

Let us return, however, to the case at hand. Given the assumption that we are in the presence of a co-operative speaker, it is much easier to make sense of why the speaker might be telling us simple things about the snow than complex things about the comparative danger posed by different animals which do not seem to be in the vicinity. There are, however, a number of different, simple beliefs that she could be expressing about the snow. She could be saying that the snow is slippery (hence be careful!) or pretty and soft (touch it, it’s beautiful!), or simply telling us that the snow is white (this is how I use words like “Schnee” and “Weiss” and this is my grammatical structure for predication).

Obviously it is going to take more familiarity with the speaker’s vocabulary to differentiate between these different assertions. But before we go on to discuss that process, it is important to note that all of these intuitively plausible hypotheses not only take the speaker to be asserting something about the snow, but take her to be asserting something about the snow which is in agreement with our own beliefs as interpreters. Why not begin, however, by hypothesising that the speaker is expressing the belief that the snow is purple, that the snow is sad, or that the snow is her grandmother reincarnated? Even if we are working upon the assumption that we are in the presence of a fairly co-operative speaker, and even if we harbour a strong though defeasible suspicion that she is making a claim about the snow, why should we not set out by systematically hypothesising that she holds beliefs about the snow which wildly diverge from our own?
Indeed, it is certainly possible that the speaker holds some beliefs that are radically different from our own. Even in this specific instance she could, for instance, be in the throes of vivid hallucinations or be expressing animistic religious beliefs to us which are of the utmost significance to her. The important thing to note, however, is that we will never be able to establish with any confidence if either of these is the case, never develop a sophisticated and nuanced understanding of where, why, and how specifically the speaker’s beliefs differ from our own, if we as a rule and from the outset hypothesise that all of her assertions radically contravene our standards of good sense.

Even being able to pinpoint the potential divergences in belief highlighted above with any confidence requires producing an explanatory background that situates these beliefs. And being able to situate these beliefs in this manner involves taking the speaker to be comprehensibly similar to us in a great many other ways. When interpreting a speaker, setting out by taking her beliefs to be utterly scattershot, completely mistaken, and lacking in any discernible rational structure is, on the other hand, to guarantee that we will find the speaker unintelligible.

Discovering meaningful differences in belief between ourselves and our interlocutor therefore rests upon us having found precisely where we are in agreement about many other things. It involves having established a background of beliefs held in common, a background which could include, quite plausibly, that the snow in front of us is white, that it fell this morning, and that it is soft and powdery. This is all that our initial hypothesis with regards to the meaning of the assertion “Der Schnee ist weiß” is supposed to illustrate. Taking the task of interpreting another speaker seriously is to take the speaker’s assertions to express beliefs that are largely logically consistent and in the main in agreement with our own.83

Put another way, beginning to suspect (after sustained interaction with a speaker) that her assertions express beliefs which are utterly random and ridiculously wrong is an indication that our interpretation of the speaker has failed. Either we must start again at this stage, or we must conclude that there are no beliefs to be found here and that we are in fact faced with a barrage of noises that do not express beliefs at all. Given that our aim as interpreters is to understand other speakers, to always attribute to their utterances what we take to be nonsense would be an unproductive way to proceed, for this only guarantees that they will turn out to be incomprehensible to us.

83 Of course our own beliefs and those of the people around us with whom we communicate every day are notoriously riddled with logical inconsistencies. Perhaps we should therefore say here “roughly as logically inconsistent as ours, but not radically less so” instead of “largely logically consistent.”
So, it would be comically counterproductive for an interpreter to systematically hypothesise that another speaker’s assertions express beliefs which the interpreter herself takes to be wildly and chaotically mistaken. If we are to find the speaker intelligible, interpreting the meaning of her assertions involves taking them in the main to be expressions of beliefs that are correct about the world. And of course finding a speaker to be correct about the world in the most part in this way simply amounts to finding the speaker’s beliefs to be largely in agreement with our own in the most part.

Assigning Meaning and Attributing Belief – the Epistemic Nature of Truth

Interpreting how the assertions that a speaker makes express beliefs held by her therefore involves, in essence, determining precisely how those assertions are in the main correct about the world. To suspect that virtually all of a speaker’s assertions are outrageously and incongruously mistaken is to find that we have not become acquainted with a set of beliefs at all. Even to find a speaker deeply wrong about certain matters is to find that speaker to be correct about a great deal more things besides, for it is only against such a background of mutual understanding that their mistakes could be identified with confidence; could stand out in relief.

Through considering the way that we interpret other speakers, we can thus see that the concept of belief and that of truth are intimately related to one another. There is a conceptual link between finding another speaker’s assertions to be meaningful expressions of belief and finding that speaker’s beliefs to be for the most part true. This in turn seems to bring out well the way in which the concept of truth is intimately related to our epistemic practices as investigators, for finding another speaker to express generally true beliefs essentially amounts to finding a speaker to express beliefs which we, too, have gathered evidence in favour of and hold as justified.

By focusing on the interpretation of assertions, then, we seem to have found a productive and enlightening avenue for understanding the motivation behind the radically epistemic accounts of truth that we encountered in the first chapter. These accounts did not want to give up on the sense that a great many of our beliefs are true, that the considerations that we weigh up in evaluating a
belief are generally considerations that are related to its truth, and that truth is therefore to some extent a recognisable and tangible concept. Approaching the concept of truth by investigating how we interpret one another’s assertions helps bring out these features of the concept of truth, for we are constantly adjusting our working interpretations of what other speakers mean and believe so as to understand how they are in the main correct about the world. In this vein, the general gist of Davidson’s account of interpretation is that, as we continue to encounter more of the speaker’s assertions in specific contexts, we will gradually come to confirm or adapt our tentative hypotheses as to what sentences such as “Der Schnee ist weiß” and the words that constitute them tend to mean.

Our initial hypotheses as to what a speaker’s words mean are both reinforced and expanded upon if the speaker continues to utter assertions containing the word “Schnee” which can be systemically fitted together and interpreted as expressing beliefs about snow that we take to be true in addition to that it is white. Likewise, our attribution of meaning to assertions containing the word “Weiβ” will become ever more secure as these assertions continue to speak of whiteness and white things, while these attributions will need to be altered or otherwise amended if this is not the case. In the case of “Schnee” and “Weiβ”, perhaps, we may be lucky and our initial hypothesis may come to be only ever more firmly entrenched.

On other occasions, our initial hypotheses may however need to be revised. When the two of us are confronted by an adder which has reared up and is hissing in our path, the speaker may use a word in appearing to describe it (say, “giffig”) that we have not heard before and we may therefore set out as an initial hypothesis that she is expressing the belief that the snake is aggressive. When later in the day she then, however, uses the same word when pointing at a mushroom on the side of the path we may revise our initial hypothesis and take her on both occasions to have been expressing the belief that the snake and mushroom, respectively, were poisonous. This new understanding of the speaker’s vocabulary might stick, and help us to understand her further assertions and beliefs, though on other occasions we may perhaps have to repeatedly revise and reconsider the way that we interpret the meaning of her language.

On some occasions during this process we may even ourselves come to learn new things about the world. Perhaps we were not previously much of a mycologist, and so paying close attention to the assertions made by our interlocutor helps us to discover which mushrooms are poisonous and which are not, and how to recognise the difference between them. In this way, we may often learn about
the world at the same time as we learn about the way that the speaker uses words. This rather basic feature of assertoric discourse, too, is predicated on interpreting another speaker in such a way that we find them to express beliefs that on the whole are correct and justified.

Together, this seems to give some indication of how the concept of truth is tied to belief and justification. This still leaves us, however, with the task of explaining why it is so central to the concept of truth that it can be conceptually separated from justification; of explaining where our feeling comes from that beliefs arrived at through reasoning and evidence with which we cannot find any fault could nevertheless be false. In the last chapter we found that appearing to more or less directly equate truth with well justified or unanimously agreed upon belief posed problems for radically epistemic accounts in trying to account for this feature of truth. If the concept of truth is going to be more helpfully explained in terms of the interpretive task of simultaneously assigning meaning and attributing beliefs to a speaker, we will therefore need to be able to link the story that has been provided so far with an illuminating story of how this apparently opposed feature of truth emerges.

Clashes in Judgment

Our discussion thus far has only been partially illuminating in terms of the intuitions that we have about truth. In discussing the relation between belief, meaning, and truth, we haven’t yet addressed how the task of interpreting another speaker’s assertions also relates to our sense that justification is not constitutive of truth; our sense that truth potentially transcends warrant and that a point of view arrived at through coherent and comprehensible reasoning may nevertheless be wrong.

We can begin to address this matter by noting that our effort to find a speaker’s assertions intelligible by discovering a broad swathe of commonality between the two of us has also simultaneously been an effort to reach a position from which we can discover when, how, and why the speaker’s beliefs differ from our own. More nuanced issues of interpretation such as this can

84 See, for instance, Davidson’s claim that “The method [of radical interpretation] is not designed to eliminate disagreement, nor can it; its purpose is to make meaningful disagreement possible, and this depends entirely
only arise when our rapidly expanding understanding of what a speaker means and believes leads us to a situation in which we find ourselves possibly needing to attribute beliefs to her that clash with our own in order to maintain our understanding of what she means by what she says. To stick relatively closely to our initial example, after we have become relatively familiar with the beliefs that a speaker holds and the language she speaks we may find that on some specific occasion she happens to assert “Der Schnee im Garten ist schön und hellgelb” when we ourselves take the snow in the garden to be beautiful and white, and not, as we take her to be stating, beautiful and light yellow.

On an occasion such as this, a slip in interpretation has occurred, for the way in which we have hitherto gone about interpreting the speaker’s words and beliefs at this point threatens to no longer lead us to agreement and commonality with the speaker. Davidson appears to suggest that there are two distinct alternatives available to an interpreter in instances such as this: the first option being to revise what we take the speaker to mean so as to bring their beliefs back into alignment with our own, and the second being to take this assertion to have illustrated a substantial difference in our beliefs, and therefore on this occasion to attribute a belief to the speaker which differs from our own.

Revising what we take the speaker to mean could be as simple as attributing the slip in interpretation to a slip of the tongue on the speaker’s part (she meant “weiß”, she just said “hellgelb”). Alternatively, we could quickly search to reinterpret the significance of her utterance by reconsidering the communicative context. Perhaps in this context she is trying to express a belief that is slightly different from what we initially thought. For instance, perhaps she is expressing with this assertion not that the snow in the garden is light yellow, but that the snow in the garden looks light yellow through this window, and that this has a beautiful visual effect. But let us assume that the speaker goes on to make it clear that these attempts to reinterpret the significance of her assertion are unwelcome and missing the point. Let us assume that she insists that she believes not that the snow just looks light yellow through this window, but that the snow in the garden actually is a radically different colour from the fresh snowdrifts that we have previously encountered in our travels together.

on a foundation—some foundation—in agreement.” Davidson, On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme (p 197)
At this point, continuing to attempt to attribute the slip in interpretation and loss of commonality to a mistaken assignment of meaning would start to come at an increasingly high cost. Taking ourselves to have misunderstood what the speaker means to express by her initial assertion and subsequent clarifications would involve radically reconsidering our understanding of how the speaker uses words such as “gelb”, “Garten”, and “Schnee” or how she predicates properties of objects in general, and these are words and structures which have been fairly fundamental in facilitating our understanding of the speaker up to now.

In this particular case, such a radical overhaul of our understanding of the language of the speaker does not therefore seem a particularly promising way to proceed. At an earlier stage of interpreting a speaker of an utterly foreign language, however, when our attributions of meaning are still very tentative and unstable, revisions like this are far more likely to occur. To see this, one must only think of an ill-prepared high school student sitting a German aural comprehension test. Desperately straining to pick up on the gist of what is being said, the student is open at every turn to radically revising what she takes the entire conversation to be about, and from the first to the second hearing may entirely change tack in the answers she provides.

In the case under discussion, however, we have struggled through these initial difficulties and become fairly well acquainted with the speaker and her language. In these circumstances, we are not so tempted to radically revise our understanding of what the speaker means. Instead, in order to maintain our understanding of both what the speaker means and believes, we are being led to take her to hold a belief which clashes with our own. Perhaps, then, the speaker genuinely does believe that the snow in the garden is light yellow.

Once this option is acknowledged, two subsequent possibilities open up. It is with these possibilities that we must, either way, begin to contrast justification with truth. On the one hand, we may perhaps suspect that the speaker has been genuinely tricked by the tinted windows throughout the house; windows which, subtly and utterly unbeknownst to her, make the brilliant whites outside appear a soft, muted yellow. In interpreting the speaker in this way, we are of course identifying a justificatory story behind her assertion. It is just that in this case we take these justifications to have misled the speaker. In order to make sense of the mistaken belief that she is asserting we thus need to juxtapose the evidence or justification that she possesses from the truth of the matter, for only by generally proceeding in this way can we account for our differences while continuing to find her assertions intelligible.
There is another possible way of responding to the discovery of a clash in judgments, though. This involves reconsidering or revising our own beliefs as a direct response to another speaker’s assertions, even if those beliefs otherwise appeared to us to be justified and unproblematic. In this instance, exposure to the speaker’s assertions may lead us to entertain the hypothesis that she snuck outside while we were otherwise occupied and saw that the garden actually was covered in peculiarly yellow snow, and that the tinted windows merely compound (or disguise) this appearance. In this case, attempting to understand the meaning of the speaker’s assertion leads us to entertain the possibility that we as interpreters are mistaken in our beliefs about the snow. What otherwise seemed fixed, justified, unproblematic and obvious thus becomes, through exposure to another speaker, potentially flawed and in need of revision.

To take the speaker to be expressing a belief which clashes with our own is thus to assume that we understand perfectly well what she means, and to then set about attempting to account for the differences between our beliefs in a way which is in principle explicable and comprehensible. Only in this way can we preserve our understanding of the speaker. The suggestion, then, is that drawing a distinction between true and false beliefs quickly becomes a necessity when interpreting another speaker, as we attribute justified but false beliefs variously to ourselves, or to the speaker, in different situations.

Put simply, in order to maintain a productive understanding of what others mean by their assertions we will need to be able, on occasion, to attribute explicable error to either the speaker or ourselves. Seeking to understand what others mean by what they say inevitably results in encountering and countenancing beliefs that are incompatible with our own, yet beliefs which we also recognise to be more or less rationally arrived at and warranted. Coming to recognise that our own or our speaker’s apparently secure and unproblematic beliefs could at any moment be suddenly unsettled by a confrontation with a conflicting perspective, that what otherwise may appear unshakeably justified beliefs may be mistaken, is therefore an inevitable consequence of interpreting the meaning of other speakers’ assertions.
At this point, our discussion of interpretation therefore looks as if it may have offered a promising avenue for exploring why the concept of truth can be so importantly juxtaposed with justification. From the very process of engaging in meaningful assertoric communication emerges an awareness of competing and incompatible beliefs, which despite being in their own ways coherent, justified, and comprehensible, cannot all be correct for they take different things to be true of the same part of the world. A gap between justification and truth thus opens up, a gap which appears to be exactly what motivates the radically non-epistemic accounts of truth that were discussed in the first chapter of this work. Here, however, the gap is explained in terms of an awareness that arises out of sustained meaningful communication, rather than in terms of a deep divide between thought and reality.

The general suggestion of the account that we have offered here, then, is that the conceptual gap between truth and justification drops out of the process of interpreting another speaker. Correspondence accounts of truth have typically sought to emphasise and bring our attention to this gap and, in doing so, have traditionally seen themselves as stalwart defenders of objectivity. By arguing that truth consists in a correspondence between belief and reality which is opaque to believers and a fundamentally separable matter from the reasons and justifications they consider, these accounts seem to avoid the threat of tying truth too closely to what any given person or people think.

The deep divide that correspondence accounts thus establish between beliefs and the reality which makes specific beliefs true, however, threatens to leave truth utterly unrelated to any of the considerations that guide our practices of inquiry. In other words, they seem to uncouple the concepts of truth and belief entirely. The account that has been presented here, on the other hand, has sought to explain the sense of objectivity that surrounds truth as arising out of intersubjective encounters and the discovery of clashes in judgment. The bonds between belief and truth thus need not be cut free entirely, for the story of what holds truth, belief, and justification apart is only one part of a larger story of what holds truth, belief, and justification together.

To return to the example with which we began, once we have a better working understanding of what a speaker means and believes, it may be eminently plausible to take the speaker on some particular occasion to indeed be expressing the belief that owls are more dangerous than polar
bears, perhaps when they assert “Eulen sind gefährlicher als Eisbären”. This will presumably bring us to evaluate this belief and find reasons why a speaker might hold it. Perhaps we end up determining that some spurious spiritual beliefs which we do not subscribe to have led the speaker to attribute great powers to owls, and we dismiss this belief as a consequence. But perhaps more interestingly, engaging with this speaker prompts us to inquire further into the owls in these parts and reject views that we would otherwise have considered stable and settled.

Interpreting another speaker’s assertions thus opens up the possibility of discovering things about the world that we would otherwise not have considered. The very process of finding other speakers intelligible requires the appreciation of alternative points of view on the world, and brings about an awareness of the possibility that beliefs which we ourselves hold dear may nevertheless not be true. With each encounter with another speaker comes the realisation that there are still more speakers with whom we have not yet engaged, and that even then there may be beliefs and perspectives which have not occurred to anyone but could still possibly arise. We thus understand ourselves to be in a discursive community in which many beliefs have already been shared and evaluated, and in which there are many more yet to be considered.

Conclusion

In this chapter, it has been argued that focusing on an imagined scenario in which we attempt to interpret an utterly foreign speaker’s assertions helps to bring out and explain the inherent tension within the concept of truth. The close ties between the concepts of belief, truth and our epistemic practices are brought out when we consider the way in which, in order to find such a speaker intelligible, we must balance assignments of meaning and attributions of belief so as to find her to assert for the most part what we take to be true. The potential distance that we recognise between a well-founded belief and the truth, on the other hand, is also explicable in terms of the occasions upon which we must assign false, though explicable and perhaps even warranted, beliefs to either ourselves or our interlocutor in order to account for the clashes in judgment that are revealed through slips in interpretation.
That these concepts are so intimately tied up with the meaningful exchange of assertions is not always so obvious, for in our everyday life we generally have a great deal of background familiarity to fall back on when interpreting another speaker, and the process of assigning meaning and attributing beliefs is not nearly as laborious, deliberate, or pronounced. This is not to say, of course, that we do not constantly need to attentively fine-tune our understanding of what other speakers mean and believe when engaging with them, particularly when we are debating contentious or complicated matters. In conversations in which we already share a natural language with the other speaker, however, we do not have to meticulously build from the ground up a picture of how their words express beliefs that are for the most part justified and correct about the world. Perhaps it is because of this that we can understand why the explanation provided in this chapter may be enlightening and revelatory, despite simply spelling out a process which we engage in many times a day. Focusing on an extreme example of interpretation helps to bring out what otherwise could easily go unnoticed.

The suggestion of this chapter has therefore been that the features of the concept of truth that we have been hoping to account for can be productively approached by considering how the meaningful communication of assertions takes place. In making this argument, we have sought to unite into a single, coherent narrative the intuitively compelling yet clashing features of both the radically epistemic and the radically non-epistemic accounts of truth that were considered in the first chapter. Having now presented this account of truth we can bring the first half of this thesis to a close. In the following two chapters we shall consider possible objections and alternatives to this way of explaining truth, and in the process seek to elaborate further on the benefits of focusing on the interpretive stance taken by interlocutors during assertoric exchanges.

85 Davidson does provide a number of examples, however, of how these subtle adjustments in interpretation do take place in everyday conversations. Suppose, for instance, that when strolling by the harbour our conversational partner exclaims “That is a handsome yawl” when the yacht in question is a ketch, and not a yawl. Rather than attribute a mistaken belief about the location and size of the mizzen mast, which is in plain view, to the speaker, we may simply take her to use the term “yawl” slightly differently than expected, perhaps not being careful with or interested in fine distinctions between yacht classes. This amounts to making the speaker as intelligible as possible by weighing up assignments of meaning and attributions of beliefs. 
Davidson, On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme (p 196)
Chapter Three

A “Horizontal” Account of Truth

The first half of this thesis argued that the concept of truth emerges from meaningful assertoric discourse. More specifically, the central claim was that the concept of truth can be explained in terms of the twin interpretive acts of seeking to discover a broad degree of agreement between one’s own beliefs and the beliefs that another speaker expresses through her assertions, and accounting for occasional slips in agreement when they arise. This departs from, and presents an alternative to, the tradition of approaching the concept of truth in terms of the relation between an individual subject and the world. Instead of taking the crux of the issue to be the relation between a singular subjective mind and the world it attempts to come to grips with, the discussion that we have followed thus far has proceeded by considering the way that multiple subjects interact with and understand one another. This chapter is concerned with the criticism that providing an account of this sort overlooks the fundamental and primitive importance of this relation between mind and world.

The explanation of truth provided in the last chapter was concerned in the main with the broad agreement between speakers that is discovered through mutual interpretation, and the occasional disagreements that then arise. It was argued that the tension within the concept of truth is best understood in terms of these twin features of meaningful assertoric discourse. As Richard Rorty has noted, this seems to approach the concept of truth very much in terms of our own sense as interpreters of what seems broadly intelligible, justified, or correct. Rorty has consequently provocatively championed Davidson’s discussions of interpretation, as he takes them to provide a way of discussing truth without being bogged down in metaphysical worries about the general relationship between subjective experience and objective reality. Rorty notes approvingly that:

“Davidson’s Principle of Charity seems to oblige us only to regard most of what the [speakers of an utterly foreign language] say as justified - to regard them as holding
mostly beliefs which we regard as true [...] The pattern truth makes is, in fact, indistinguishable from the pattern that justification to us makes.\(^{86}\)

When Davidson stresses that, in order for another speaker’s assertions to be intelligible to us, we must take a large part of what they assert to be true as opposed to wildly mistaken, contradictory, or incoherent, Rorty notes that all he can possibly mean is that we must take a large part of what they assert to be what we regard as true. Similarly, Rorty goes on to point out that, even when our understanding of another speaker’s actions and words brings us to attribute a belief to her that differs from our own, continuing to find a speaker intelligible involves finding her to differ from ourselves only in such a way that “we regard as reasonable”.\(^{87}\) When interpreting another speaker, the “coherent set of inferential relationships” which we detect between the “various strings of marks and the noises” they produce is by necessity a set of inferential relationships which are coherent and intelligible to us.

Rorty embraces the way in which this ties the concept of truth through the process of interpretation to our shared ways of forming beliefs as inquirers.\(^{88}\) Nevertheless, this focus on the broad agreement that obtains between speakers has unsettled many, as it appears to place the emphasis on the particular way that we happen to evaluate beliefs, while leaving the subject matter of those beliefs, the world in which we live, somewhat in the background. Steven Levine, for instance, has expressed a broad worry that Rorty’s focus on “horizontal” constraints amongst mutually intelligible speakers threatens to underplay the influence that our direct experience of the world has on the beliefs that we formulate.\(^{89}\) It is this experience of the world which Levine takes the tradition of focusing on the “vertical” relation between mind and world to rightly seek to latch on to. In order to defend the account of truth that was provided in the previous chapter, then, we are going to need to explain why it is useful and illuminating to place central explanatory emphasis on the way in which we interpret one another’s assertions rather than on our direct experience of our environment, even if the latter is still an important part of the story.


\(^{87}\) Rorty, "Is Truth a Goal of Enquiry? Davidson vs. Wright." (p 287) Emphasis added

\(^{88}\) This is a far cry from proposing an untenable and simplistic equation of truth with justification, as Rorty is often accused of doing (see Chapter One).

Two Concerns with a Horizontal Account of Truth

There seem to be broadly two ways in which the worry that our account inadequately addresses the relationship between believer and world could play out. The first and more radical criticism is that our account ignores the possibility that we could all be fundamentally wrong about the world, despite being in general agreement. The second and more tempered objection does not question our fundamental relation to the world, but instead merely suggests that true and false beliefs are most productively thought of in terms of successful and unsuccessful responses to our environment, rather than in terms of linguistic communication. In this chapter, our response to the first criticism will lead directly into a discussion of the second concern.

The first criticism seems to clearly be the blunter and less sympathetic of the two, for it amounts to the accusation that our account of truth has entirely failed to establish our relation to the world. The radical worry which this criticism raises is that we could all be massively wrong in our beliefs about our immediate environment, and indeed in most or all of our beliefs. In this case, our substantial agreement with one another would be merely an idly spinning wheel, with all of us sharing beliefs which are similarly false about the world. This criticism amounts to a Cartesian scepticism of sorts; the account of truth that has been provided is found to be inadequate because it grounds the concept of truth in our agreement about the world without addressing the worry that we are perhaps fundamentally not in a position to represent the world correctly, and yet are completely unaware of this.

The response to this criticism which is pursued in this chapter is not a flat refutation. Rather, it is argued that by revisiting our account of truth we can see that it entails a therapeutic recasting of the conceptual relation between belief, causation, and error such that scepticism of this sort does not seem such an appealing and intuitive starting point. In this regard, it is argued that the most appealing response to scepticism that can be extracted from Davidson’s work is a response which is strongly reminiscent of the dialectical strategy employed by Peirce and the classical pragmatists when addressing scepticism. However, by investigating the similarities and differences in emphasis between the classical pragmatists’ account of belief and our own, we are swiftly led to the second major challenge that we wish to consider in this chapter.
This second criticism of our account of truth amounts to the claim that focusing on intelligent, purposeful action and recalcitrant experience provides a better way of accounting for our concepts of truth and falsehood than considering communication and mutual intelligibility. This criticism simply takes exception, then, to the priority and explanatory role that is being afforded to meaningful communication on our account, with this being seen to detract from a proper appreciation of the role that our direct experience of the world plays. While this response does not radically question the nature of our most general relation to the world, it does suggest that our account reverses the appropriate order of explanation when approaching the concept of truth. It is a mistake, so the thinking goes, to understand the distinction between true and false beliefs in terms of horizontal intersubjective communication, because the fundamental importance of the distinction between truth and falsehood goes all the way back to our most basic experiences of the environment in which we eke out a living.

Discussing meaningful communication may well appear to be superfluous if all of the important intuitions that we hold with regards to the distinction between truth and falsehood can be adequately accounted for by discussing the process of adapting one’s behaviour in the face of recalcitrant experience. However, the last part of this chapter is dedicated to arguing that the meaningful exchange of assertions makes a significant difference to the form that our concepts of truth and falsehood take, and that these features of our concept of truth are not properly accounted for when our focus is restricted to considering the way in which we as organisms navigate our environment. Approaching the concept of truth through the way in which we interpret one another’s assertions doesn’t neglect the way in which we live in and interact with the world, it merely shows the important conceptual leaps that accompany discourse of this sort.

General Error

The account of truth presented in the last chapter did not address the possibility that most or all of our beliefs could be systematically wrong. Instead, it merely explained how the concept of truth could emerge from our engagement in meaningful assertoric discourse with other speakers. A certain sceptical worry might therefore arise that it has missed the point entirely. Since our account
started out by considering the way in which we must take a large part of what another speaker asserts to be true, as opposed to wildly mistaken, contradictory, or incoherent, in order to find their assertions meaningful, a sceptic could respond that this does not provide a firm enough footing at all for investigating truth. Might we as speakers all take much the same things to be true, and hence generally find meaning in one another’s assertions, and yet all be radically wrong about the world in the same way? Grounding the concept of truth in the process of finding agreement with our interlocutors comes to seem less satisfying once this possibility of radical error is raised.

This sceptical concern about radical error has up to now been granted very little attention in large part because we have been engaged in the task of consciously constructing an alternative account of what truth, belief, and error amount to, in light of which it is no longer so tempting to raise this concern. Rather than ever providing a direct engagement with, or definitive refutation of, scepticism about our general relation to the world, the hope has been that by focusing on the act of interpretation we will eventually be able to provide a plausible account of not only how we have come to possess the concept of truth, but also, among other things, how this is related to the way in which we have come to possess the concept of belief, and come to possess an awareness of the possibility of general error. Once these, too, are understood as arising out of our communication with one another, then raising sceptical worries about all of our beliefs collectively being radically in error would, we hope, no longer seem so appealing. Providing an intuitively compelling and persuasive way of approaching concepts such as belief and error that diverges from the use that scepticism makes of them is therefore the very indirect response to scepticism that is being pursued here.

Sceptical worries about radical error seem to hinge on conceiving of belief as a private, subjectively accessible mental state that stands in an opaque representational relation to an independent and potentially inaccessible reality. When belief is understood in this manner, it seems possible to drive a wedge between the totality of an individual’s beliefs (or the totality of a community’s beliefs if they are sufficiently similar) and reality. One prominent means of driving this wedge between belief and reality is by problematizing the causes of these subjective representations. Once we are in the thrall of this traditional way of understanding belief we are invited to conclude, for instance, that there is no way of ruling out that our perspective of the world has not been systematically manipulated by an evil demon, or that we otherwise are somehow not in anything like the appropriate epistemic position to accurately latch on to and represent how the world really is. This leads to the conclusion
that all or almost all of our beliefs could conceivably be false, even if we were in general agreement about them.

Raising this concern seems to assume that we can identify beliefs (for they are simply immediately accessible subjective representations) and then, as a separate and subsequent matter, begin to consider what may have caused them, or how they may relate to the way the world actually is. This is clearly radically different from the way in which the concept of belief comes to be understood when we start out by considering how such a concept might arise in the course of interpreting and interacting with other speakers. Constructing an account of how we came to develop the concept of belief through our interaction with other speakers leads us to understand issues of belief and causation as inextricably linked.

When seeking to interpret another speaker’s utterances by relating them to the shared environment in which we are interacting, the problem of determining what a speaker means and believes is always caught up with determining what has caused her beliefs. To take a very mundane example, suppose we arrive at her house together, and there is a white station wagon parked outside. She exclaims “John is home!” Consequently, we take her to believe that it was he who parked the car outside, because we take her assertion to have been prompted by seeing the car, and take her belief that John is home to have been formed on this basis. If we approach the concept of belief from the very start in terms of the way it arises from the need to interpret other speakers, we are thus led to the conclusion that, in Davidson’s words, “we can’t in general first identify beliefs and meanings and then ask what caused them”.  

As a consequence, we can also provide an account of how we came to develop an awareness of the possibility of erroneous belief through our interaction with other speakers. Suppose we have previously noted that the numberplate on John’s new car begins with the letter “L” and that the numberplate on this car starts with the letter “Y”. Although this car is the same make, model, and colour as John’s car, and could therefore easily be mistaken for it, we can see that it is not his. In this instance, we are being led by the speaker’s assertion to attribute to her the mistaken belief that John has parked outside. We thus come to be aware of the possibility of partially warranted but nevertheless mistaken belief through the interpretation of assertion.

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In the preceding example, the awareness of the possibility of a mistaken belief is closely tied to our having a superior vantage point ourselves. It is not too difficult to see, however, how sustained engagement with other speakers could lead us to an awareness of the possibility that both we and those around us could hold a mistaken belief, despite being in agreement and there being no superior vantage point immediately available. Suppose we are an experienced trekker, and have on many occasions alerted others to the existence of a bear in the vicinity when it is clear from their assertions that they have not noticed the telltale signs. Similarly, we have often overlooked certain clues ourselves and only been alerted to the presence of nearby bears by paying attention to the assertions of others. It does not seem such a stretch for us to then one night go on to entertain the abstract worry that even though our entire entourage (ourselves included) unanimously agrees that our campsite is a safe and secure place to spend the night (and, being experienced trekkers, all have extensive reasons and justification for doing so) we may all have missed the subtle warning signs of a nearby bear.

Even this concern, however, that we may be in general error about our overnight safety is a concern about a specifically located belief being mistaken. Indeed, the worry that we are in general error here can only be given content and significance provided that a majority of our other beliefs match up with our environment (for instance that we are spending the night in a part of the world where bears potentially live). The concern that we and others are in massive error about not just some specific matter such as this, but about most or simply all things, does not, however, arise so naturally from meaningful assertoric communication. Since the account that has been provided has attempted to show that the grasp we have on what it is to hold a mistaken belief or be in error has emerged out of our engaging in meaningful communication, it therefore makes the appeal to wide ranging error less alluring. For even though we obviously do hold erroneous beliefs that overlap with others’ similarly erroneous beliefs on occasion, as long as our concepts of belief and general error are understood as arising from our interpretations of one another within an environment, mutual understanding on the basis of mistaken belief “cannot be the rule”.

The Spectre of an Omniscient Interpreter

91 Davidson, A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge. (p 150)
It is unsurprising, then, that the possibility of radical, systematic error remained unaddressed up to this point in the thesis, given that the account that we have provided sought to undercut from the very beginning the way in which concepts such as belief, cause, and truth are employed in leading us to entertain systematic sceptical doubts. It should be noted, however, that at one point it did look as if Davidson himself sought to provide a much more direct refutation of the sceptical worry that our understanding of one another could be based on widespread erroneous belief.

Davidson’s argument in *A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge* begins by having us imagine a postulated “omniscient interpreter” interpreting a fallible speaker such as ourselves, and concludes that, since in the very act of understanding what we are saying the omniscient interpreter must find our beliefs to be largely consistent and correct by his own standards, our beliefs must, for the most part, simply be objectively correct. By extension, Davidson concludes that mutual intelligibility between two fallible speakers, the kind of mutual intelligibility with which we are actually familiar, must also be based on mostly correct beliefs, even if it does on occasion proceed on the basis of overlapping error.

This argument, however, does not appear to show very much more than the original move of considering issues of truth, belief, and meaning from the perspective of linguistic interpretation did, and if anything detracts from the strengths of this approach. Attempting to directly address sceptical worries by invoking the singularly privileged perspective of an omniscient interpreter diminishes the position of comparative strength that is attained by insisting that we approach the relation between belief, the causes behind belief, and the possibility of general error in terms of the way that they arise from our actual linguistic interactions. By invoking the perspective of an omniscient interpreter, on the other hand, we seem to be invited to once again conceive of objectivity and truth in terms of a direct representational relationship between a certain privileged though inaccessible perspective and the way the world really is.

Placing the emphasis on the perspective of an omniscient interpreter just seems to reinvite the question of whether our particular subjective perspective stands in anything close to the relation to the world that the omniscient interpreter’s does; of whether the omniscient interpreter really could find us intelligible at all. As an isolated argument, there does not appear to therefore be any reason why we should imagine it would sway a sceptic who has otherwise remained steadfastly committed to beginning her philosophical investigations with the worry that our beliefs may be fundamentally

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92 Davidson, *A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge* (pp. 150-1)
misaligned with the underlying structure of reality. Furthermore, in wavering over the importance it dedicates to our actual practices of engaging in assertoric exchanges with fallible speakers, it threatens to lose the position of comparative strength that can be had in providing a compelling and coherent alternative to the sceptical picture of the relationship between beliefs and the world.

In contrast to attempting to provide a knock-down argument in the face of sceptical worries about our account of truth, then, we have argued that the best response is to spell out just how the account of interpretation that has been pursued provides a therapeutic alternative to scepticism. There is some suggestion Davidson himself also came to adopt something closer to this strategy, for he later appended to *A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge* an explanatory note that his work is probably best understood not as refuting scepticism, but as presenting an alternative way of understanding concepts such as belief, meaning and truth which, if followed through, means that “scepticism could not get off the ground”.  

It is precisely this sort of indirect response to scepticism which this chapter has so far argued seems the most promising. The aim of such a response is to provide a convincing story of how we developed concepts such as belief, truth and meaning, in light of which sceptical concerns no longer appear so pressing. In this way, although it does not directly refute sceptical worries about the account of truth that has been provided, it is also not simply a flat-footed and dogmatic refusal to listen to or consider what the sceptic is saying. Indeed, in this regard Davidson came to summarise the implications of his focus on interpretation as follows:

\[
    \text{I set out not to ‘refute’ the skeptic, but to give a sketch of what I think to be a correct account of the foundations of linguistic communication and its implications for truth, belief, and knowledge. If one grants the correctness of this account, one can tell the skeptic to get lost.}\]  

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**The Peircian Response to Scepticism**

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93 Davidson, Afterthoughts to *A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge* (p 157)

94 Davidson, Afterthoughts to "*A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge*" (p 157)
The response to scepticism that has been encouraged so far in this chapter is not particularly novel, for it resembles in many regards the response to scepticism that was made by the classical pragmatists. In canonical texts such as Peirce’s *On the Fixation of Belief* and *How to Make Our Ideas Clear*, we similarly find an attempt not to directly assuage Cartesian doubt, but instead to provide an alternative account entirely of what belief and doubt amount to, in light of which scepticism no longer appears to pose such a pressing threat. It is not so surprising, then, that briefly before the quote with which the last section ended, Davidson had allowed that his approach “should properly be classed as belonging to the pragmatist tradition”. The response to scepticism that is provided by Peirce is therefore worth examining in some detail at this point, for not only will it help to illuminate the dialectical strategy that we have been pursuing up to now, but it also introduces a subtly different approach to belief which can be compared and contrasted with the approach so far taken up in this thesis.

Peirce’s response to scepticism, just like that which has been pursued so far in this chapter, involves a comprehensive re-evaluation of what belief (and doubt) amount to. However, rather than focusing predominantly on discursive interaction and mutual intelligibility, he focuses more broadly on intelligent and purposeful action. Peirce suggests that we can discover what belief amounts to, and how it is to be distinguished from doubt, by looking into the “practical difference” between the two in this domain. In this regard, Peirce initially relays an anecdote about the Assassins, who he describes as rushing into death at their leader’s least command because “they believed that obedience to him would insure everlasting felicity”. Peirce accordingly characterises belief in terms of the relation in which it stands to action; suggesting that we understand belief as an “established [...] habit which will determine our actions”.

In contrast, Peirce suggests that we can begin to see the significance of doubt by observing its opposite effects. In the case of the Assassins, for instance, Peirce notes that “had they doubted [that obedience to their leader would insure everlasting felicity] they would not have acted as they did”. Doubt, then, does not have the “active effect” that is characteristic of belief. Rather, it amounts to the hesitation and deliberation that occurs when a habit of action has been unsettled or is yet to be established. Importantly, in neither of these examples do considerations of linguistic interaction play

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95 Davidson, Afterthoughts to “A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge” (p 154). Davidson notes that he “pretty much concur[s]” with Rorty on this characterisation of his (Davidson’s) work.


97 Ibid.

98 Ibid.
a fundamental explanatory role. Rather, belief and doubt are introduced in terms of their relationship to action.

This basic way of characterising the distinction between belief and doubt is accompanied in Peirce’s work with an account of how we may move between the two. Over the course of our activities, or in the context of some particular investigation, we often come to find reason to doubt what we began by believing when recalcitrant experience forces us to reconsider some entrenched habit of action. When we find our efforts thus thwarted, we are alerted to the inadequacy of the way in which we are acting, and are therefore provided with motivation to alter this. Our standard way of proceeding is disrupted, and is replaced by doubt which is experienced as an “irritation” that “stimulates us to action until it is destroyed” and new belief attained.99

The relationship between belief and doubt is, accordingly, to be understood ultimately in terms of this process by which entrenched habitual action is interrupted by recalcitrant experience, with this prompting the search for an alternative way of proceeding, which in turn ultimately becomes a newly established habit of action.100 When Peirce therefore insists that in any investigation, be it philosophical, scientific, or mundane “we must begin with all the prejudices which we actually have” and from there wrestle with the living doubts that emerge as we encounter obstacles in our endeavours, this is not simply a forlorn entreaty, but a “must” that logically follows from the account of belief and doubt which he has provided.101 For Peirce, the difference between belief and doubt can only be properly appreciated in terms of the process by which we begin with a substantial repertoire of habitual actions and proceed to refine them as we come up against the world.

By presenting belief as a habit of action, and doubt as an interruption in action, Peirce consequently renders the sceptical move of casting doubt upon all of our beliefs no longer clearly intelligible. When he moves to dismiss the Cartesian maxim that we should begin with “complete doubt” as “a

99 Peirce, The Fixation of Belief (p 114)
100 In what follows, it is assumed that Peirce’s account of belief and doubt could therefore potentially apply to non-linguistic beings. It is not clear, however, that Peirce intended to provide an account of this sort. In a later section of On the Fixation of Belief he notes that our “social impulse” means that even the most stubborn and tenacious man will “find that other men think differently from him, and it will be apt to occur to him, in some saner moment, that their opinions are quite as good as his own, and this will shake his confidence in his belief” (p 116). It seems his discussion of the transition between doubt and belief may therefore always have been concerned with socially engaged inquirers, with the assertions that others make providing vital instances of recalcitrant experience.
mere self-deception, and not real doubt”, this dismissal is only made possible because we have been invited to adopt this very particular understanding of what doubt is, and similarly of what belief is.\textsuperscript{102}

The parallels between this Peircian response to scepticism and the response to scepticism that was provided earlier in this chapter seem fairly clear. Our earlier response similarly sought to shift the grounds of discussion and provide an alternative framework for considering concepts such as belief, error, truth and falsehood that no longer allowed scepticism to flourish. Nevertheless, Peirce’s approach to belief seems to diverge slightly from that which has been pursued in this thesis. Our account of belief and truth has been built out of considerations of assertoric communication, while Peirce seems to be focused in the first instance on intelligent action.

\textbf{A Classical Account of Belief, Action, and Truth}

The similarities between our account and the work of the classical pragmatists only appear to stretch so far. Their focus on experiencing and responding to the world in acting intelligently seems to be somewhat in tension with the approach that we have been pursuing thus far of understanding belief and truth in terms of our ways of making sense of other speakers. The second concern with our account that we need to introduce at this point, then, is whether belief, truth, and falsehood should be explained in terms of the way that intelligent organisms navigate their environment. In this case, linguistic communication would merely add an extra level of complexity upon this more primitive process, and not provide the key for explaining concepts such as belief and truth.

The way in which Peirce sometimes discusses the distinction between doubt and belief certainly tends to give the impression that these are to be approached not predominantly in terms of linguistic interaction, but in the first instance as matters of individual deliberation and the navigation of obstacles. In \textit{How to Make Our Ideas Clear} his designation of doubt as the “starting of any question, no matter how small or how great”, and belief as the “resolution” of such a question, is accompanied by a number of illuminating examples. These examples give the impression that the concept of truth need not necessarily be associated in the first instance with assertoric

\textsuperscript{102} Ibid. (p 29)
communication, and that any organism could helpfully be understood as possessing beliefs so long as it is engaged with its environment in sufficiently intelligent ways.

To illustrate the kinds of interactions with the world that doubt and belief emerge from, Peirce famously imagines that when going to pay for a ride in a horse-car he finds a “five-cent nickel and five coppers” in his purse.\(^{103}\) In deciding “while my hand is going to the purse, in which way I will pay my fare”, Peirce takes himself to have addressed the “irritation which needs to be appeased” that the appearance of these two alternative means of payment had presented him (here we are to assume that he did not have “some previously contracted habit” in such matters). It is in such a way that Peirce seeks to illustrate how belief is acquired; how it emerges from the momentary doubts that are kicked up as we go about acting in the world.

Of course, Peirce is more than aware that calling the state of indecision in which he finds himself in the horse-car “doubt” and the resolution of it “belief” seems somewhat out of place. However, although we may not frequently call the decision to pay a fare in a certain way “belief”, the significant point for Peirce is that in such an instance “I am excited to such small mental activity as may be necessary to deciding how I shall act”.\(^{104}\) Peirce’s project, it seems, is therefore to cast belief as a kind of mental activity that is in its very essence tied to our action in the world. The concept of belief is to be approached in terms of the mental activity that occurs when obstacles are encountered and decisions must be made.

The suggestion in Peirce’s work then appears to be that more abstract and sophisticated forms of inquiry are to be understood as extensions of these more basic progressions from indecision to action. To illustrate this, Peirce imagines himself in a railway station reading the advertisements on the wall “comparing the advantages of different trains and different routes which I never expect to take, merely fancying myself to be in a state of hesitancy, because I am bored with having nothing to trouble me”.\(^{105}\) In cases such as these, problems in need of solving are actively sought out and dreamed up. A “feigned hesitancy” is engaged in with the “lofty purpose” of satisfying one’s curiosity about one’s surroundings. Peirce proposes that we understand the impetus behind a great deal of scientific inquiry, for instance, in terms of these increasingly sophisticated and intelligent ways of

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104 Ibid.
105 Ibid.
engaging with the environment, moving from acting in the interest of elementary survival and sustenance to entertaining more abstract counterfactual questions.\textsuperscript{106}

The suggestion that seems to be contained in Peirce’s work, then, is that the kinds of beliefs that are involved in the collaborative enterprise of science, an enterprise that is concerned with vast swathes of propositional content and deliberative dialogue, can be helpfully placed on the same continuum as an organism’s basic responses to its environment in deciding how to act. Presumably, assertoric discourse would be helpful, and probably necessary, in allowing for more complex inquiries to be conducted and more sophisticated activities to be pursued. The underlying model for understanding belief, though, seems to remain that of a lone agent navigating her environment, making ever more complicated decisions in response to her experiences.\textsuperscript{107}

This would seem to imply that the nature of belief and the distinction between truth and falsehood are not best illuminated by investigating how speakers come to interpret and understand one another, even if their ability to communicate could play a significant role in their accumulating, disseminating, and debating beliefs. Instead, beliefs are to be understood, in Dewey’s words, in terms of the “purposive, intelligent way” in which complex organisms navigate and interact with their environment, in terms of this “distinctive way of partaking in events”.\textsuperscript{108} Not only does Dewey’s emphasis on the activities of a subject who is “part and parcel of the course of events”\textsuperscript{109} present a pointed alternative to the traditional way of conceiving of beliefs as representations produced from a removed, external perspective, but it also seems to present an alternative to conceiving of beliefs in terms of the assumptions and interpretive processes underlying assertoric discourse.

Following the classical pragmatists would thus seem to produce a subtly different conception of belief and believers, and consequently of truth and falsehood, than the account we produced by taking up Davidson’s discussion of interpretation. The classical pragmatists, on this particular reading

\textsuperscript{106} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{107} Again, this is based on the examples which Peirce provides that have just been discussed. As previously noted, Peirce places great emphasis at other times on the “social impulse” which draws inquirers to re-evaluate their views when they clash with the views of those around them. In emphasising precisely this feature of assertoric exchanges the argument presented in this chapter, and indeed the next as well, could subsequently be seen as deeply Peircian. Associate Peirce with an account of belief in terms of a lone agent navigating her environment is therefore not necessarily faithful to his broader writings, but it is useful in the context of this chapter for dialectical purposes.
\textsuperscript{109} Ibid.
of them, propose an account of belief which draws no significant distinction between linguistic and non-linguistic practices, nor between linguistic and non-linguistic beings generally.

This would seem to have significant implications for what an appropriate account of truth would look like. To see this, we need only turn to another provocative and illuminating quote from Richard Rorty. When he is in one of his more instrumentalist, Deweyan moods, rather than his more linguistically inclined neo-pragmatist moods, he is tempted when discussing truth to directly assimilate craft skills and discursive, communal inquiry:

> [...] there is an obvious advantage in dropping the idea of a distinct goal or norm called 'truth' - the goal of scientific enquiry, but not, for example, of carpentry. On a Deweyan view, the difference between the carpenter and the scientist is simply the difference between a workman who justifies his actions mainly by reference to the movements of matter and one who justifies his mainly by reference to the behaviour of his colleagues.  

Here, Rorty appears to be pressing home the idea that we should think of truth and belief in terms of the task of coming to terms with our environment. Given this, he wishes to dissolve the distinction between the discussions and arguments engaged in by a community of scientists, and the activities of a carpenter who is, for instance, constructing dovetail joints and manipulating a lathe. Both sets of activities can be fruitfully seen as more or less sophisticated habits of action developed in order to deal with the world in which we live. And since it is precisely in this way that it is proposed we understand the concept of belief, there is no further distinction to be made between the direct physical engagement with and manipulation of one’s environment, and the exchange of assertions and evaluation of arguments. Belief and truth can be understood without placing any great emphasis on the task of interpreting another speaker’s assertions or on what the conceptual implications of finding these assertions meaningful are.

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Experience and Assertions

110 Rorty, "Is Truth a Goal of Enquiry?" (p 299)
If belief is understood in terms of acting in the world in an intelligent way, then it appears that the need to appeal to linguistic communication and the task of finding meaning in another’s assertions in order to account for truth and falsehood falls away. Instead, we appear to be offered the alternative of understanding truth and falsehood in terms of the respective success or lack of success with which an intelligent being’s behaviour guides it through the world.

In order to show that the emphasis on assertoric discourse that has guided this entire thesis has not therefore been utterly misplaced, we will need to establish why, after all, it is useful and illuminating to explain truth and beliefs in terms of interpretation. However, the first thing to note is that in focusing on mutual intelligibility between speakers we need not lose sight of the importance of responding to and interacting with the world. One major advantage of characterising belief as an intelligent way of partaking in events is that it appears to directly address the significant way in which our beliefs are responsive to the world. It is sometimes precisely by being attentive to our experience of the world and being imaginative in our response to it that we come to productively form, revise, or improve our beliefs, rather than necessarily always by consulting others.

Indeed, sometimes consulting others rather than conducting our own investigations merely entrenches false opinion and perpetuates errors. Regardless of the benefits that dialogue brings, then, there always appears to be a considerable role to be played by our direct experience of the world; experience which, in Peirce’s words “jabs you perpetually in the ribs”. It would seem, for instance, that it was a sustained engagement in rigorous observation and calculation, and an imaginative response to these findings, which led to the overturning of the Ptolemaic model of the heavens, rather than investigators merely consulting the opinion of contemporaries and of those who came before them. Focusing on the way in which intelligent beings act in the world consequently serves to emphasise this way in which inquiry generally requires individual subjects to look and see for themselves.

The important thing to clarify, then, is that focusing on assertions when providing an account of belief, truth, and falsehood does not ignore the importance of our interactions with world. Explaining the concepts of belief and truth in terms of assertoric exchanges does not deny that first-hand experience continues to play an important role in shaping the conduct of linguistic beings, for there is nothing about possessing the faculty of language which, by necessity, rules out continuing to engage flexibly and imaginatively with the world, nor does possessing the faculty of language

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necessitate forming all of one’s beliefs by uncritically adopting those of others. Indeed, the actions we engage in with varying degrees of success and failure, our encounters with and in the world, play a fundamental role in shaping the content of the beliefs that we express and comprehend through language. In consulting and disputing with one another, a community of inquirers is sharing just these sorts of experiences.

While focusing on linguistic interpretation need not rule out the important role that our interactions with the world play in shaping our beliefs, it does seem that a positive reason is now required to establish why it is necessary to approach belief and truth in terms of assertoric exchanges at all. If belief and truth can be understood perfectly adequately in terms of intelligent action, then discussing assertion would seem rather superfluous to understanding truth. What needs to be established is whether accounting for belief and truth in terms of successful action and intelligent interactions with the world misses something significant that is captured by focusing on linguistic interpretation. We may perhaps be able to approach this matter by considering how fitting the concepts of belief and truth are to the activity of highly intelligent animals which nevertheless cannot engage in assertoric discourse.

Dogs, for instance, are capable of behaving in highly complex and intelligent ways. Upon walking headlong into a glass door, a dog may very well recoil, startled, and then gingerly begin to paw inquisitively at the glass. The dog may then never make the same mistake again, and always wait meekly at the threshold to be let in.\footnote{In this way we are taking as our example an animal which displays remarkably intelligent and sophisticated behaviour. We can contrast the complexity of this behaviour with that of, say, a sparrow, which tragically flies headlong into the glass again and again when trapped inside.} The dog’s apparent surprise and alarm upon running into the glass seems to be a prime example of a response to recalcitrant experience, and the modification of behaviour that follows seems like it could well be described as a newly acquired habit of action. A great deal of a dog’s activity thus takes place on the rather developed end of the continuum of intelligent action which has been introduced as one possible way to understand belief and truth. However, dogs cannot of course engage in assertoric communication.\footnote{Again, dogs are very intelligent social creatures, and so while they cannot exchange assertions, it must be acknowledged that they can partake in other kinds of linguistic interaction to a limited degree. A highly trained Border Collie, for instance, has been found to be able to carry out commands containing novel combinations of verbs and nouns that while independently familiar, have not previously been encountered in this combination. (See Pilley, J. W. and A. K. Reid (2011). “Border Collie Comprehends Object Names as Verbal Referents.” \textit{Behavioural Processes} 86(2): 184-195).} So, to what extent is the dog’s activity illuminating of the concepts of belief and truth?
It certainly seems that in many instance we find ourselves quite naturally appearing to attribute beliefs to animals such as dogs which lack assertoric language. Norman Malcolm has provided an excellent example to display this. We are to imagine that we are watching a dog chase a cat. At the last moment the cat swerves and disappears up a maple tree, leaving the dog pawing at the trunk of a nearby oak and barking excitedly. In response to this, it seems that we almost can’t help but say “He thinks [or “He believes”] that the cat went up that oak tree”.114 Furthermore, not only does it seem that the dog holds a belief in this instance, it is also fairly evident that the dog’s belief is false. Hence it would seem that the concepts of belief, truth, and falsehood are all at home here in a case in which language is not present at all.

After a little more consideration, however, it seems that taking this to be a fairly intuitive and exemplary instance of belief is not so comfortable after all. We can begin to see why this is so if we begin to probe a little deeper as to why it is that the dog holds this false belief. Does she mistakenly believe, for instance, that the cat is not fleet of foot enough to have evaded her? Or does she believe that the maple tree is too far away for the cat to have successfully reached it unseen? Or does she simply believe that the cat normally runs up oaks and never up maples? It does not seem that the dog’s apparent belief that the cat ran up the oak is related to other beliefs such as these at all.

Importantly, in saying that the dog doesn’t believe these things we are not saying that she obviously doesn’t believe them, in the sense that she believes their negation. Nor are we implying that she holds some other mutually incompatible belief. Nor is it the case that she doesn’t believe these things because, as a purely contingent matter of happenstance, she has not considered these matters sufficiently to have formed an opinion. Rather, what it is possible for a dog to believe, and how a dog’s beliefs relate to other beliefs, seems to have reached its limits rather quickly.

This may perhaps seem like a mere difference with regards to the quantity of beliefs available to be entertained by a dog, a difference which is irrelevant to the matter of whether it is helpful to consider the initial case an exemplar of belief. However, the important issue is not that the dog lacks a systematic way of differentiating oaks and maples, or that she is incapable of estimating the speed of the cat and comparing it with the distance required to make it to the maple tree. If it was merely the issue of the scope of the beliefs available to the dog that was at stake, this would also not seem to reflect directly on how helpful it is to approach the case with which we are concerned as a case of

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belief. However, the significance of wanting to refrain from ascribing true and false beliefs when describing a dog’s interactions with the world is that the complex web of related beliefs which provide the backdrop against which specific beliefs are identified and made sense of is utterly lacking here.

Although we speak rather naturally of the dog believing that the cat went up the maple, it seems to be in nothing like the same way as we take other speakers to hold beliefs, for in the latter case we are able to track the broader patterns between their way of thinking in one area and how these relate to other areas, and are be able to pick out the relevant factors that have led the thinker to hold precisely the beliefs that they do on a given matter. This seems to be because the very act of engaging in meaningful assertoric communication involves probing the links between another speaker’s assertions, and relating the arrangement of beliefs that one takes the speaker to be expressing through these assertions to one’s own. In our role as interpreters and interlocutors we are constantly working valiantly to determine when and where the beliefs of those who are talking to us differ from our own, and why this is so. Furthermore, in allowing for us to make fine distinctions between a wide range of propositions, language provides the means by which such links between beliefs can be probed.

It is out of this emerging picture of a web of beliefs that the concept of truth as an intersubjective standard against which certain specific beliefs of ours potentially fall short seems to take root. Since exchanging assertions with others inevitably leads to locating erroneous beliefs against a firmly established background of other beliefs, it seems to give rise to an awareness that any particular belief of ours may potentially be mistaken, despite fitting within a broader justificatory and rationally related system. That some particular beliefs may lead to and be involved with fairly successful actions as far as they go, but be held for problematic reasons and hence be found wanting, seems to be shown through exposure to others. From there comes the idea of truth as something which belief could fall short of, despite the belief being involved in a successful or felicitous habit of action.

Conclusion
Understanding the meaning of another speaker’s words involves being able to see how those words are expressive of the particular way in which that speaker sees the world, of how the specific assertion that she is making fits into her broader network of beliefs. The worry that we have encountered in this chapter in various guises is that in providing an explanation of the concept of truth that emphasises this feature of assertoric interaction we lose sight of the importance of the relationship between an individual believer and the world that she entertains beliefs about. The aim has been to argue to the contrary that focusing on assertoric exchanges does not lead us to lose sight of the relationship between individual subjects and the world, it merely highlights how this relationship is enriched by partaking in these exchanges.

Interpreting the assertions that other speakers make does not involve simply settling on the viewpoints that one shares with others. Rather, in encountering the beliefs of others and seeing how they fit together in a way slightly different from our own, we are invited to make corresponding modifications to our own beliefs about the world, and are alerted to the possibility of error. Appreciating the complex relationship in which beliefs stand to one another and the possibility that some of our particular beliefs may fall short seems to be closely tied to possessing language. One goes from bumping one’s way around in the world to isolating and evaluating the reason sensitive beliefs upon which one acts.

The way in which we re-evaluate our beliefs when confronted by a speaker who expresses beliefs antithetical to our own thus seems to be importantly different from the way in which we respond when a particular action is met with a frustrating lack of success. If we try to fashion a wooden stool to sit upon and it immediately collapses under our weight, then we must begin again, and we must change something about the way that we are proceeding in order to hopefully achieve a different outcome. But what exactly we should do differently and how we should do it, so long as we act entirely alone and without consulting any others, is a matter to be determined through blunt persistence; through repeatedly falling to the floor as the joints collapse and splinter under us until, after numerous fresh starts and continuing adjustments, the stool eventually holds.

This looks a lot more like the way in which a highly intelligent animal such as a dog develops complex patterns of behaviour through receiving affection and delicious treats if it acts in certain ways, while being met with reproach if it acts in others, until it develops a sophisticated ability to following commands, circle cattle, and retrieve designated objects. It has been the aim of this chapter to argue that it is precisely in exchanging assertions that a different way of engaging with the world arises,
and that the features of the concept of truth that we are concerned with are closely tied to this development.
Chapter Four

Meaningful Assertions Without Truth

The previous chapter of this thesis dealt with the concern that explaining truth and falsehood with reference to linguistic interaction fails to properly locate the significance of these concepts. There, the objection was that the distinction between truth and falsehood need not be seen as arising from the process of expressing our beliefs to and comprehending the beliefs of others, but instead could be understood in terms of far more primitive interactions with our environment. This chapter investigates roughly the opposite concern; namely that neither these interactions with our environment nor the interpretive process of comprehending the beliefs of others are sufficient to give rise to the concepts of truth and falsehood.

More specifically, this chapter considers Huw Price’s claim that the meaningful exchange of assertions is not enough to bring the distinction between truth and falsehood into force, and that an additional norm must supplement assertoric discourse in order for divergent expressions of opinion to be seen as bearing upon one another, i.e. for it to be recognised that when two opinions on the same matter differ this represents a problematic state of affairs that stands in need of addressing. In mounting this argument, Price describes truth as a third norm which could hypothetically be absent while the antecedent norms of sincerity and personal warrant nevertheless guided the evaluation and exchange of opinions. Interlocutors would in this case evaluate the opinions that one another expressed in terms of the sincerity of the speaker and their personal warrant in holding such an opinion, while failing to ever be aware that there could be a meaningful question as to whether the opinion that the speaker expresses is true.

Before being able to properly evaluate this provocative suggestion in the second half of this chapter, we will first need to briefly set out an alternative account of the relation between sincerity, warrant, and truth which is more in line with the account of truth that has been provided in this thesis. Something like such an account can be drawn from the work of Bernard Williams. As we saw in Chapter Two, Williams takes the attribution of true and false beliefs to be a central component of the task of interpreting the assertions of other speakers. Consequently, on his account it does not seem to be theoretically possible for an exchange to occur in which opinions are meaningfully conveyed and comprehended (which they would need to be in order for evaluations of sincerity and
warrant to occur) while the participants in the exchange completely fail to make any discrimination between truth and falsehood.

Williams does, however, consider how basic interpretive practices and assertoric exchanges may come to be coloured by a wariness of the sincerity or accuracy of other speakers. These discussions focus on the breach in trust and productive co-operation that is caused if one discovers that one has been misled or manipulated by other speakers. If this frequently occurs, it seems to be a fairly foreseeable consequence that, in fear of being influenced by other speakers in this way, we may come to not always afford equal credence to all of the beliefs that we encounter during assertoric exchanges. If we suspect other speakers of being frequently deceptive or insincere, or take them to be relatively untrustworthy informants, then rather than always taking the discovery of an apparent divergence from our own beliefs to be an immediate cause for re-evaluating the truth of our own opinion, we may come at times to simply dismiss without consideration the beliefs that others express.

Even though, according to Williams, understanding the meaning of other speakers’ assertions in general is still tied to interpreting them as expressing beliefs that are for the most part true, he is more than aware that if the trust between speakers is broken, then the willingness to reconsider or revise one’s own views on the basis of clashes with the beliefs expressed by others drops away. With this in mind, the argument of this chapter is that when Huw Price imagines an assertoric community which lacks a “third norm” he is not in fact imagining a community in which the concept of truth does not exist, but instead imagining a community in which no credence is granted to one’s interlocutors. The concept of truth is still playing a primitive role in the community that Price describes as lacking a “third norm”, for the speakers he describes are exchanging meaningful assertions with one another. What is remarkable about the community that Price is attempting to evoke, however, is that when assertoric discourse reveals a difference between the beliefs of a speaker and the interlocutors with whom she is engaged, this never prompts the speaker to reconsider her own views.

In this regard, speakers in such a community treat the assertions of those around them as expressions of “mere opinion”. What Price appears to be describing, then, is a community in which tenacity and narrow-mindedness has come to dominate assertoric exchanges. When this mindset predominates, interlocutors are only willing to entertain as true contributions that confirm or are in accord with their already formed views, while contributions that present a challenge to their views
are roundly ignored, even if it is acknowledged that the other speaker may be sincere in expressing these beliefs and have some kind of personally adequate warrant for doing so.

Virtues of Truthfulness

The discussion of communication conducted in Chapter Two of this work proceeded according to a number of idealising and simplifying assumptions, since the aim at that point had been merely to illustrate the relation that obtains between discerning the meaning of a speaker’s assertions and attributing beliefs to that speaker. Accordingly, simple examples were employed concerning assertions about rather obvious features of the immediate environment. Furthermore, it was assumed that the assertions in question were uttered with no ulterior motive other than perhaps to help one’s interlocutor pick up on the terms of one’s own language. Issues of reliability and duplicity consequently did not arise.

Insofar as it is assumed that other speakers are reliable informants and do not set out to deceive or manipulate, we found that when it comes to rise that they express an opinion that diverges from their interlocutor’s, this provides prima facie grounds for their interlocutor to seriously reconsider their own view on the matter. The recognition of a divergence in opinion is the catalyst for an even-handed comparison of two alternative views, even if, after careful consideration, one ends up sometimes rejecting the new proposal, and attributing explicable error to the other speaker. By extension, when another speaker conveys information of which their interlocutor is otherwise unaware, this would also seem to provide grounds for that interlocutor to incorporate this information into their own belief system. The speaker’s suggestions are again, of course, defeasible, but so long as she is regarded as a reliable informant her input is afforded considerable uptake.

Assertoric discourse, however, does not always function as such an open exchange of viewpoints, and interlocutors do not always treat one another’s ideas as just as plausible as their own. This, it would seem, is because nothing inherent to the nature of assertion ensures that the content conveyed by another speaker on any particular occasion is actually worth taking on board. Given a solid basis of mutual understanding, there is nothing to stop a speaker from professing with confidence a belief that has been negligently acquired, or from telling a lie. In order for the suggestion that a speaker makes to be taken seriously, those with whom she converses will therefore need to attribute her certain qualities as an informant that render her assertions trustworthy.
The problem, in cases in which the attribution of these qualities is withheld, is not quite that the primitive conceptual link between assertion and truth has fallen away completely when interlocutors engage with this speaker. They still recognise that her assertions are expressions of particular beliefs, i.e. expressions of takings-true. The problem is that they simply do not set any store by the beliefs that the speaker is expressing. Either they take the speaker to possibly be purposefully deceiving them in making this assertion, or they take the belief that she expresses to be poorly thought through and not worth adopting. What is at stake, in Williams’s words, is not the interpretive relation between truth, assertion, meaning, and belief, but simply the truthfulness of other speakers.

For Williams, the qualities that need to be recognised in a speaker in order for her suggestions to be taken seriously can be understood in terms of two broad “virtues of truth” – sincerity and accuracy. The virtue of accuracy is related to the care and diligence with which a speaker acquires the beliefs that she then goes on to express, while the virtue of sincerity is related to how honest and self-aware a speaker is in expressing her beliefs to those around her. Together, these virtues are cultivated by reliable speakers in order for their contributions to be taken seriously, and scrutinized by discerning listeners in order to avoid being misled.

While Williams devotes significant attention to how conceptions of these virtues have varied over historical epochs, this feature of his work will, for our purposes, sadly have to be largely glossed over. Instead, the next two sections summarise in broad brush strokes his discussions of sincerity and accuracy in turn, and trace the relation between these virtues and the credence which is afforded to the beliefs that others express through their assertions.

Sincerity

115 See, for instance, Williams’s suggestion that “truth belongs to ramifying set of connected notions, such as meaning, reference, belief, and so on” in (2002). Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press (p 63)

116 “Truthfulness is a form of trustworthiness, that which relates in a particular way to speech” Ibid. (p 94)

117 Ibid. (p 44)
Williams notes that in entering into a conversation with a primitive trust of another speaker, an interlocutor puts herself in some significant sense into a position of dependence on that speaker's words.\textsuperscript{118} This is most obvious in cases of testimony, when the speaker provides the primary source of information on a given topic for the person she addresses. When the topic of conversation is no longer about features of the world which both interlocutors have observed first hand or are equally familiar with, the possibility of deceiving through language immediately becomes a far more intelligible and consequential concern. A speaker can say what she herself does not take to be the case if this happens to be to her advantage, with there being a good chance that her audience will simply adopt the belief that she thus expresses.

The possibility of conveying information which expands one another’s horizons, then, brings with it the possibility of manipulation and deceit. In the case of deceit, the transparent goodwill that we have otherwise assumed to obtain between speakers is broken, and the words that a speaker utters are no longer simply indicative of the world that they share. The speaker’s assertions are a “pure and direct exercise of power” over their interlocutors, rather than an informative transmission of genuine belief.\textsuperscript{119} To the extent that such deceit is widely practiced, we can imagine there evolving a corresponding wariness of taking one another’s assertions at face value.

The general concern which animates Williams’s discussion of sincerity is therefore how trustful and open exchange of ideas can be maintained, given this threat. The benefits we have associated with assertoric discourse, the contemplation of alternative perspectives and the pooling of cognitive resources, are only reaped to the extent that interlocutors are willing to accept at face value what other speakers say, and do not consistently shut out the novel and the new for fear of being misled.

In this regard, Williams is critical of the line of thought in Aquinas and Kant which places significant emphasis on the distinction between an outright lie, which is to be condemned under any and all circumstances, and intentionally ambiguous and misleading language, which is acceptable in extenuating circumstances.\textsuperscript{120} For Williams, this distinction essentially misses the larger point about sincerity. What is significant is how insincerity in general threatens the fruitful exchange of assertions, rather than any distinction between the means with which deception is achieved. Since both lying and misleading through conversational implicature equally involve a deceptive intent and have deception as their outcome, they threaten to create distrust amongst speakers.

\textsuperscript{118} Ibid. (p 119)
\textsuperscript{119} Williams, Truth and Truthfulness, (p 119)
\textsuperscript{120} Ibid. (pp. 101-2)
Williams also takes exception to this tradition because he is unimpressed with the prospects of countering insincerity by demonstrating that a flat lie conflicts with the nature or purpose of assertion. Observations about the tight conceptual links between assertion, belief, meaning, and truth do not, he argues, in any way “show us how to behave when we have a choice about how to behave”.\(^{121}\) It is instead by appealing to the benefits of a community in which assertions are honestly expressed and open-mindedly received that he takes a culture of sincerity to be best fostered. Sincerity in general thus needs to be strictly scrutinized and encouraged in order for a discursive environment to be maintained in which interlocutors build up, alter and supplement their world view by exchanging assertions, rather than viewing one another with constant suspicion.

**Accuracy**

When Williams then goes on to discuss accuracy, he is concerned not with whether a speaker takes others to be honest in their expressions of belief, but rather with whether she takes her interlocutors to be epistemically reliable agents; whether she takes their beliefs to be worthy of her consideration. In particular, Williams is concerned with the possibility that one’s interlocutor may genuinely hold beliefs, which they subsequently disseminate through assertion, merely on the basis of these beliefs being convenient or agreeable to hold. There are, however, presumably other ways in which a speaker may not be a reliable informant. One’s interlocutor may, for instance, confidently form and express beliefs when they lack either natural aptitude for or education in the particular subject matter at hand. Insofar as concerns of this sort affect the regard in which a speaker holds her interlocutors, she is not necessarily going to take the discovery of divergences in opinion as cause for the revision of her own beliefs.

Of course, our entire discussion of truth hinged on the fact that there are numerous external obstacles to forming a correct belief, and that these may lead a speaker on occasion to make excusable and comprehensible errors and to express beliefs that turn out to be mistaken. This alone need not, however, lead to a breakdown in trust between speakers. Instead, what Williams is interested in is the pervasive “internal obstacles” that can hinder a speaker from being a reliable

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\(^{121}\) Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness*, (p 106)
informant. These can range from a strong tendency to believe what is personally comforting, to simple laziness, or an eagerness to impress others, leading a speaker to assert beliefs which she has little justification in believing. As a speaker, Williams notes, it is “easy to convince oneself that one has taken enough pains, when the situation is that one has some other kind of reason for not taking more”.¹²²

In an extreme case, a speaker may be particularly unreliable if the beliefs that she expresses at one moment are quite frequently inconsistent with the beliefs that she expresses at others. In order to maintain a discursive community in which one is willing to take up and adopt the beliefs that others express on any given occasion, interlocutors must therefore be encouraged not to merely believe what they find personally convenient or agreeable at any particular moment. Otherwise, a lack of faith in the accuracy of one’s interlocutors threatens to undermine the productive exchange of opinions. Speakers therefore need to determine together the expectations that they have of one another as epistemic agents and encourage certain practices of discipline and rigour so that the assertions that they make are able to be taken on board, rather than ignored out of a lack of faith in one another’s accuracy.

Again, Williams takes these to be matters which stand in need of negotiation. The interpretive relation between truth, belief, and meaning that underpins meaningful assertoric discourse does not guarantee that speakers are responsible and diligent inquirers, and hence is not enough alone to ensure that a deep trust exists between speakers, and that they treat the beliefs that one another express as regularly worthy of their attention. In this regard, Williams is particularly interested in the features of the contemporary scientific community that allow for viewpoints and insights to be so productively exchanged there.¹²³ For our purposes, though, we can radically extend this discussion by noting that the attention that is afforded to the viewpoints that others express, particularly when they clash with one’s own, is dependent on how accurate one takes them to be as epistemic agents.

So, while Williams takes the concept of truth to be implicated in the meaningful exchange of assertions, he also notes that distrusting the sincerity and accuracy of other speakers lessens the likelihood that discoveries of apparent divergences in belief will be taken as a stimulus to re-evaluate one’s own views.

¹²² Williams, Truth and Truthfulness, (p 134)
¹²³ See particularly Williams’s observation that the “international scientific inquiry offers an approximation to an idealized [marketplace of ideas], but it does this only because its actual social structure is in important respects an example of a managed market” (p 217-8)
Truth as a “Third Norm”

This all stands in stark contrast to Huw Price’s discussion of truth, which reverses the order of explanation of relation with regards to sincerity, accuracy, and truth. Price’s central claim is that a community of speakers could conceivably exchange assertions with one another while lacking any grasp on the concept of truth. Truth is, on this account, not a concept which is implicated in the very possibility of meaningfully exchanging assertions, but is instead a further norm, in addition to sincerity and accuracy, which can come to bear on this practice. Price’s work thus appears to offer a completely contrary account of truth from the one that we have been constructing to date.

Price’s account of the role that truth plays in assertoric discourse can be found in a number of his works, most notably Facts and the Function of Truth (1988), Three Norms of Assertibility (1998), and Truth as Convenient Friction (2003). Across all three texts, however, the thrust of Price’s argument remains essentially the same. We are invited to imagine a counterfactual community in which speakers share opinions amongst themselves without ever finding it at all problematic when the opinions they express about the same subject matter differ. By noting the shortcomings of this community, we are to observe “what truth adds”. 124

According to Price, it is perfectly possible that in this imagined community speakers who are utterly untroubled by and uninterested in divergences in opinion nevertheless rigorously evaluate one another’s utterances in terms of sincerity and warrant. A speaker in such a community may be criticised for not expressing their genuine opinion (for not being sincere), or for expressing an opinion which they obviously have no grounds for holding (for not being accurate, justified or warranted in what they say). 125 However, so long as speakers are sincere, have presumably been acceptably prudent in gathering evidence, and express opinions which are logically consistent with one another, then in this community there are no further grounds for criticism or rebuttal. A difference in opinion does not give pause for thought for any of the speakers concerned, and they never try to reconcile or account for their differences in opinion. Speakers have no qualms with the

content of one another’s assertions so long as these assertions fulfil the two antecedent norms of sincerity and accuracy.

What separates such an imagined community from the disagreement-riddled community in which we actually find ourselves is, on Price’s account, that our own community has come to possess an additional, third norm which guides our assertoric discourse. Our sense that an opinion must fundamentally be either right or wrong about the world is thus not a primitive feature of the very practice of meaningfully sharing opinions with one another through language. Rather, this sense of objective truth and falsehood is the product of an additional normative relation between speakers, on top of evaluations of sincerity and justification. This new normative relation amounts to nothing more than speakers disapproving of those who express opinions which differ from their own.

Price’s account of the concept of truth is therefore rooted in the notion of disapproval and approval. If the members of a given community come to disapprove of those who express opinions which differ from their own, what were previously mere differences suddenly turn into differences that matter to all of the parties involved. When opinions differ, speakers are immediately aware that they have fallen in the esteem of one another, and so naturally wish to rectify this situation. Members of such a linguistic community are thereby drawn to find and diagnose the source of their differences through argument. Differences come to be seen as disagreements that must be overcome in order for speakers to secure the esteem of those around them. It is in this way that Price envisions the norm of truth radically changing the face of assertoric interactions.

Price argues that a community in which this normative relation between peers obtains thereby derives considerable survival advantages over a linguistic community which is guided only by the two antecedent norms of sincerity and accuracy. The former community will be far more successful in the long run than the latter, for in the process of diagnosing and reconciling their differences speakers within such a community will effectively end up pooling information and cognitive resources. Hence Price’s account purports not only to show what the function of the norm of truth is, but also to explain why in actual fact it has won out and come to inform our interactions with one another. Our linguistic interactions have come to be informed by the norm of truth because of the competitive advantage that this brings.

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126 See Price’s claim that in this “conventional system of punishment and reward”, calling other speakers’ assertions “true” or “false” is to dole out “verbal carrots and sticks” in (1988). Facts and the Function of Truth, Basil Blackwell. (p 131)
Obviously, Price’s account of truth clashes fairly violently with the account of truth that has been provided in this thesis. Finding another speaker’s beliefs, expressed through her assertions, to be either right or wrong about the world is not, Price suggests, a primitive feature of finding her assertions to be meaningful; it is this suggestion that runs directly contrary to the account which we have been providing. In examining what is required in order to interpret an utterly foreign speaker, we argued quite to the contrary that the concept of truth simply comes with the very practice of meaningfully exchanging opinions, for in order to see what another speaker means by her assertions we need to be able to see how they systematically express beliefs which are for the most part true of the world.

In order to evaluate the account of assertion and truth that Price presents in contrast to our own, then, our discussion will begin by considering the arguments he presents in Facts and the Function of Truth, for it is here that his account is most clearly and methodically developed. We will then move on to consider some of the later qualifications and concessions which Price came to make to this account.

**Utterances and Behavioural Dispositions**

In its earliest formulations, Price’s argument as to the role of truth in assertoric discourse is presented predominantly in a quasi-biological vocabulary, which is perhaps unsurprising given the emphasis on evolutionary advantage in Price’s account. This choice of vocabulary has additional importance for Price, however, in that he hopes that it will allow him to explain the significance of the norm of truth without needing to delve too deeply into a story of how speakers interpret the meaning of one another’s assertions, i.e. how they relate the assertions that their interlocutors make to particular beliefs that their interlocutors hold.

Price recognises that when attempting to describe the shortcomings of a linguistic community in which opinions are shared but the norm of truth is absent, drawing on the orthodox notion of belief could well be problematic. By describing such speakers as expressing their own beliefs and as recognising the beliefs of others, we would appear to have helped ourselves to the notion of a truth-
evaluable mental state. Since Price’s entire account, however, rests on such speakers entirely lacking the concept of truth, this would seem to presuppose precisely that which Price is holding back from introducing and explaining until a later stage. Consequently, he suggests that when seeking to explain the shortcomings of a community in which no fault is ever found when opinions differ, talk of belief “is dispensable, in principle, in favour of talk of behavioural dispositions”. ¹²⁷

The impression given by Price’s discussion is thus that communication in a linguistic community not yet influenced by the norm of truth can be perfectly well understood in terms of associations between phonetic strings and certain forms of behaviour. In order to explain how speakers who lack the norm of truth understand one another, he suggests:

“What matters is a certain correlation between utterance and action in general: roughly, that within a speech community utterances of a given sentence tend to be correlated to mental states with similar causal or function roles in the determination of behaviour.”¹²⁸

The picture of communication out of which Price’s account of truth is built therefore proceeds in terms of perceived correlations between utterances and actions. The communicative intention of speakers in making an utterance takes a back seat in such an account, as does the interpretive stance of an interlocutor who, recognising such an intention, seeks to extract specific content from the utterance. In its place, we have what appears to be a far more primitive picture of audible responses to environmental conditions. These audible responses hang in a certain relation to behavioural dispositions, and it is this correlation which other members of the community may then observe. For instance, Price notes that:

“Certain sounds might be uttered in response to significant features of their environment – food, dangers of various kinds, and so on; others, perhaps, in advance of significant kinds of behaviour”¹²⁹

What we are concerned with, then, seems to be little more than an audible set of noises with behavioural correlates that happen to be noted by others. Of course, these noises could easily come to influence the actions of those in the vicinity in some way. Members of a certain community could come to generally follow in the direction of noises that are correlated with the presence of food or

¹²⁷ Price, Facts and the Function of Truth, (p 150)
¹²⁸ Price, Facts and the Function of Truth, (p 152)
¹²⁹ Ibid. (p 154)
the impending activity of feeding, while fleeing upon hearing noises with behavioural correlations to panic and distress.

However, what is conspicuously absent from this sketch of language without the norm of truth is any intention on the part of the utterer to communicate anything by making noises at all, or any interpretive recognition of such an intention on the part of an interlocutor. The relationship between utterance and uptake is incidental to the issuance of the particular noises in question. Instead of involving the expression of one’s opinions to others, the alleged form of language with which we are concerned therefore seems to be nothing more than audible behavioural accompaniments to an organism’s interactions with its environment, the observation of which may in turn influence the behaviour of those nearby. In other words, it doesn’t seem to be anything recognisably like a language in which claims are made to others, and opinions are shared. This causes some difficulty for Price’s subsequent claims about the function of the norm of truth, for the effectiveness of his argument relies on there being a community of speakers which lacks the norm of truth but nevertheless communicates through language in a way which closely resembles our own.

Debate and Argumentation

“The guiding principle” behind Price’s account of truth, he claims, is that “it is better to be criticized for claiming that tigers are harmless than to discover one’s mistake in the flesh.”\textsuperscript{130} Here, we have already assumed that claims can be made and recognised in the community in question. When the norm of truth is absent, the suggestion is that as long as speakers are sincere in making this claim about tigers and have some reason for doing so (perhaps they have only encountered a tiger on a single occasion, when it happened to be already engorged and posed no threat), it would be senseless to criticise them. With the norm of truth in place, however, Price presumably envisions that the members of this community who know of the threat that tigers pose will take exception to this claim and a debate will ensue in which this error is corrected.

Although Price begins by describing a community in which correlations are perceived between audible responses and behaviour dispositions, it therefore quickly becomes clear that when he

\textsuperscript{130} Price, Facts and the Function of Truth, (p 145)
wishes to highlight the significance of the norm of truth he is in fact envisioning speakers who express and respond to one another’s opinions in a far more sophisticated way. Price thus seems to vacillate between his initial description of a community in which correlations are detected between audible and behavioural dispositions and a description of a community of speakers who make and respond to concrete claims.

If we then return to the original story of correlations between utterances and behaviour dispositions, it would seem that we are to imagine a particular member of the community who, whilst in the vicinity of tigers, makes utterances which correlate with nonchalant indifference, and whose mistake is ironed out once the norm of truth is introduced. It is utterly unclear, however, how anything genuinely resembling disagreement or debate could iron out such a mistake, given the limited communicative capacities of those involved.

Certainly, observing others being torn limb from limb may cause a change in such a naïve tiger enthusiast’s behavioural dispositions and corresponding audible responses to their environment. But in such an instance, the speaker has not been swayed by argumentation and debate at all. And so long as the supposed “assertions” of speakers within this community are nothing more than the audible noises that accompany behavioural concomitants it does not seem that he or she is ever going to be relieved of her ignorance through debate. Within the community that Price initially describes, the linguistic tools simply do not seem to be in place for a debate to occur in which a better informed speaker conveys through argumentation that tigers are not adorable fluff balls but potentially deadly predators. The tools are not in place for the norm of truth that Price purports to have identified to conceivably take effect.

Suppose, however, that we are to take Price’s community of speakers to be making claims from the very outset with the kind of communicative intent and interpretive uptake that would then allow for debate to occur once the “norm of truth” is introduced. In this case, interpreting assertions by relating them to specific claims about the world would occur prior to such a norm being in place. However, as has been argued in Chapter Two, the very process of interpreting another speaker’s assertions inevitably involves, on occasion, attributing mistaken beliefs either to the other speaker or to oneself, for this is the only way that speakers who make differing judgments can continue to find one another’s claims meaningful. It seems therefore that something like the primitive notions of truth and falsehood are implicated in the very process of interpreting assertions, even before any debate or argumentation takes place. Belief, opinion, meaning, and truth thus seem to be
interdependent concepts, and truth accordingly cannot be removed from a description of opinion-sharing language, and then re-inserted later to account for debate and argumentation.
Opinions and Preferences

In seeking to separate truth from the larger functioning of assertoric communication, Price therefore appears to be attempting the equivalent of extracting a cog from a complex machine, and then explaining its practical significance while avoiding any reference to the functioning of the machine in general. In contrast to this approach, the suggestion that has been made in this thesis is that an explanatory account of truth and falsehood necessarily involves the larger story of how assertions are expressed and interpreted. To find the practical significance of the cog is to understand how it is related to the other components of the machine, to understand how they all fit together.

Price himself later came to acknowledge that his invitation to imagine a community which shares opinionated assertions but lacks the concept of truth may well be an invitation to conceive of the inconceivable. In Truth as Convenient Friction he concedes that he is “open-minded on the question as to whether such a practice is really possible”. Indeed, he then goes one step further when observing that:

“...it is not clear that [this imaginative project] is entirely coherent. If there is a third norm of the kind in question, is not it likely to be constitutive of the very notions of assertion and belief? If so, what sense is there in trying to imagine an assertoric practice which lacked this norm?”

The question of what exactly can be gleaned from Price’s curious invitation to imagine a community in which speakers go about expressing their opinions but otherwise engage no further with one another is a good one. There is, it seems, something to be gained by considering this matter a little longer, even if we acknowledge that the thought experiment as it is in fact presented in Price’s work may well be formally incoherent. After acknowledging the possible incoherence of the example he has devised to illustrate his point, Price goes on to clarify that all he is trying to get at is “…the idea of a community who take an assertion to be merely an expression of the speaker’s opinion.”

131 This is not the only occasion upon which Price acknowledges such a doubt in this article. He also notes that “perhaps a truth-like norm is essential to any practice which deserves to be called linguistic.” (p 172) and that it is “It is doubtful whether notions such as belief, assertion, and opinion are really load bearing, in the imagined context.” (footnote p 178)

132 Ibid. (pp. 176-7)

133 Ibid. (p 177) original emphasis. Also see “Three Norms of Assertibility” (p 247)
of community he is wishing to describe is one in which “differences of opinion would seem as inconsequential as differences of preferences”.

This analogy between expressions of personal opinion and expressions of personal preference seems instructive. When the stakes are low, we are often able to acknowledge another speaker’s preferences without having them affect our own in the slightest. We can happily go on finding coriander delicious even if many of those around us detest its taste. It is this sense in which we are often unmoved in our own views upon learning of the preferences of others that we will need to keep in mind when seeking to extract the major insight that is to be found in Price’s discussions of assertion.

“My own opinion is that...”

Unfortunately, Price himself latches onto the idea of opinions being shared in the same way that we sometimes share preferences so that he can make one last attempt to argue that a community which exchanges assertions but utterly lacks the concept of truth is indeed conceivable. Price suggests that all we need do in order to see what such a community would be like is imagine a community just like our own but in which “whenever we would ordinarily assert ‘p’, we express ourselves instead by saying ‘My own opinion is that p’.” This way of spelling out what it would be for a community to exchange expressions of mere opinion while completely lacking the concept of truth seems fairly problematic.

In our own assertoric practices, appending “My own opinion is that” to an assertion makes a difference to the force with which that assertion is expressed precisely because, and only because, it does not accompany every assertion we make, but instead is used occasionally and selectively. If we were to introduce every assertion we ever made with “My own opinion is that...”, then it would no longer have the same effect. Imagining a variation of our own linguistic community in which every assertion was prefaced with “My own opinion is that...” therefore does not seem to be to imagine a

134 Ibid. (p 181). See also “Three Norms of Assertibility” (p 248) where Price draws a comparison between assertions being exchanged in this way and orders being made at a restaurant.
135 Price “Truth as Convenient Friction.” (p 177)
linguistic practice in which assertions are merely expressions of opinion and the concept of truth is utterly absent, but instead to imagine a ritualistic superfluity accompanying our assertions, which otherwise carry the same force as they did before. As well as, perhaps, being uttered with a generally falling intonation, it would just so happen that our assertions in this slightly tweaked alternative universe were also preceded by the phonetic string /mʌɪ aˈpinjan ɪz ðət/.

What Price seems to want us to imagine, however, is not simply that members of a community that is otherwise just like ours routinely say “My own opinion is that...”, but that as interlocutors the members of this community routinely take the assertions made by the speakers who address them to carry only the limited force and authority that we typically assign to them on those special occasions in which a speaker has provided us with an invitation to afford their suggestion less credence or possibly even disregard it by introducing it as a mere personal opinion. Ordinarily, when a speaker meekly introduces an assertion as their own personal opinion, this is often an explicit acknowledgement that the judgment they are expressing may be mistaken, and thus those who are addressed by such a speaker often stand more ready to dismiss or discredit what is being said if it falls foul of some of the beliefs that they themselves hold.

What Price seems to be better understood to be imagining, then, when he invites us to think of a community of speakers who treat one another’s assertions as mere opinions, is not a community which lacks the concept of truth, but a community in which interlocutors, whenever confronted by a speaker who presents a viewpoint different from their own, immediately concludes that the other speaker has made an error. In such a community, interlocutors would always dismiss the significance of another speaker’s suggestion insofar as it conflicted with their own, and always assume that their own take on the world was correct. This is one way of concretely spelling out what it would be to routinely take other speakers’ assertions to be expressions of “mere opinion”.

Price’s account, despite our objections to the way in which it claims to isolate truth and separate it from the possibility of assertoric discourse, does in this way appear to latch on to a deep concern about the seriousness with which we treat the assertions of those around us. Even if we reject the major contention of his account, and insist instead on the significance of the interpretive relation between truth, meaning, belief, opinion, and assertion, there remains room for a further discussion of how sincerely we engage with opposing points of view as they arise in our communicative

136 This would still seem to leave open the possibility of receiving new information through the testimony of other speakers, so long as it fits in smoothly with one’s world view
interactions. To what extent, for instance, do our encounters with those who hold beliefs different from our own genuinely lead us to reconsider our own picture of the world? In many instances it seems that these conflicting points of view are hastily dismissed without adequate consideration and attention. It is this concern which Price seems to have caught sight of in his account, even if it was not presented in precisely this way.

Price’s work therefore gestures towards the significant difference that exists between narrowly comprehending another speaker but immediately dismissing what they are saying if it conflicts with one’s own previously formed views, and genuinely listening to what another speaker is saying and allowing it to prompt a reconsideration of one’s views. It seems that the problem in the dystopian community he imagines is better understood not so much in terms of the members of this community being blind to or unaware of the fact that when two competing sets of beliefs on the same subject conflict, at least one of these must be mistaken. Rather, it is that whenever they encounter beliefs that conflict with their own they immediately attribute the mistake to the speaker who is addressing them, and hence do not allow for the possibility of the speaker’s assertion modifying their own way of thinking. Treating another’s assertions as mere opinions in this way amounts to always presuming oneself to be in a position of lofty epistemological superiority. Rather than completely failing to see that our differing opinions could bear upon one another, we are here in the territory of belittling our interlocutor rather than engaging with her.

Conclusion

That we should end by focusing on the significance of being prepared to revise our own beliefs on the basis of encounters with others seems fitting, for it is a matter that has otherwise received remarkably little attention. From Quine’s discussions of translating the native locution “gavagai”, to Davidson’s discussion of radical interpretation, to Williams’s discussion of assertion in the State of Nature, it has often felt that we are being invited to adopt the position of an interpreter who is in a position of apparent epistemic privilege, attempting to string together a warts and all theory of what those around us believe. Insofar as we discover that the speakers we are attempting to interpret appear to hold opinions that differ from our own, the emphasis is far more heavily on attributing
explicable error to these speakers, and less attention is afforded to how this encounter may prompt us to re-evaluate our own opinion.137

Insufficient attention therefore appears to have been given to the way in which the interpretive task of understanding another speaker inevitably affords us a unique opportunity to re-evaluate, alter, and reflect on our own point of view. This is not even necessarily at the forefront of Price’s mind when he is explaining the difference that the “norm of truth” makes in the community he is imagining. Instead, Price envisions that “what matters is that disagreement itself be treated as grounds for disapproval, as grounds for thinking that one’s interlocutor has fallen short of some normative standard”.138

Again, here, the emphasis is on each speaker in the community immediately placing the blame on their interlocutor falling short when there is a divergence in opinion. However, it is only once interlocutors no longer disapprove of what one another says merely because it runs contrary to their inherited sensibilities, and instead open themselves up to the possibility of finding their interlocutor’s vantage point superior to their own, that they can be brought through assertoric discourse, debate, and argumentation to see more of the world, and to see it in a more revealing light.

137 Of course that is not to say that the possibility is not recognised that mistakes could be made by either party, it is just that the emphasis is rarely on the way in which exposure to others may lead us to reconsider our own views. Davidson does, though, acknowledge that “[n]o simple theory can put speaker and interpreter in perfect agreement, and so a workable theory must from time to time assume error on the part of one or the other[…] the speaker may be wrong; and so may the interpreter” Davidson, D. (2001). Thought and Talk. Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation: Philosophical Essays, Oxford University Press. (p 169)

138 Price "Truth as Convenient Friction." (p 179). A similar characterisation of the norm of truth is provided earlier when he equates it with being “prepared to make the judgment that a speaker is incorrect, or mistaken […] simply on the basis that we are prepared to make a contrary assertion” (p 176)
Bibliography


