MINIMALISM, THE GENERALIZATION PROBLEM AND THE LIAR

ABSTRACT. In defense of the minimalist conception of truth, Paul Horwich (2001) has recently argued that our acceptance of the instances of the schema, ‘the proposition that \( p \) is true if and only if \( p' \), suffices to explain our acceptance of truth generalizations, that is, of general claims formulated using the truth predicate. In this paper, I consider the strategy Horwich develops for explaining our acceptance of truth generalizations. As I show, while perhaps workable on its own, the strategy is in conflict with his response to the liar paradox. Something must give. I consider and reject various alternatives and emendations to the strategy. In order to resolve the conflict, I propose an alternative approach to the liar, one that supports Horwich’s strategy while leaving minimalism maximally uncompromised.

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the last twenty years, Paul Horwich has developed, defended and refined what he calls the minimalist conception of truth. The minimalist conception of truth (herein, minimalism) comprises a theory of truth, the minimal theory of truth (herein, MT), whose axioms are (certain of) the instances of the equivalence schema,

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\langle p \rangle \text{ is true if and only if } p,^2
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as well as a theory about the relevant axioms – the instances of (ES) – to the effect that they are both epistemologically and explanatorily fundamental. According to Horwich, the instances of (ES) are epistemologically fundamental in that we do not arrive at them or seek to justify them on the basis of anything more obvious or more immediately known. Rather, it is claimed that we have an underived inclination to accept any instance of the schema.3

The instances of (ES) are taken to be explanatorily fundamental in two senses. First, it is claimed that our (underived) acceptance of them is the source of everything else we do with the truth predicate. Thus, the minimalist is committed to explaining our acceptance of sentences containing ‘true’ by reference to our (underived) inclination to accept the instances of (ES), together, perhaps, with our acceptance of propositions not involving the concept of truth. Second, it is claimed that MT suffices to explain all
of the facts about truth. Thus, the minimalist is committed to establishing certain propositions involving the concept of truth in terms of the instances of (ES) and other factors not involving that notion.

The claim of explanatory fundamentality (first sense), when combined with a particular view of meaning – to the effect that “the property of a word that constitutes its having the particular meaning that it has should be identified with the property that explains ... the various characteristic ways in which it is used” (Horwich 2001, 150) – yields the minimalist thesis about truth, i.e., the thesis that the meaning of ‘true’ is fixed by our underived inclination to accept the instances of (ES).

Anil Gupta (1993a,b) and Scott Soames (1997) have challenged the minimalist thesis. Their arguments appear to show that, contrary to what Horwich claims, our (underived) inclination to accept the instances of (ES) is insufficient to account for our acceptance – or, more generally, our use – of generalizations formulated using the truth predicate. They point out that, although the advocate of minimalism may be able to explain our acceptance of each instance of truth generalizations such as

(1) Everything Tarski says is true

and

(2) Every proposition or its negation is true,

he cannot explain our acceptance of the generalizations themselves. This problem has come to be known as the generalization problem (herein, GP).

In a recent paper (2001), Horwich attempts to resolve the GP – to show that, in fact, the minimalist has available the resources to explain our acceptance of truth generalizations like (1) and (2) – and, thus, to save the minimalist thesis. In this paper, I consider Horwich’s strategy. As I show (Section 3.3), while perhaps workable on its own, the strategy is in tension with Horwich’s response to the liar paradox. Moreover, I argue that the most likely alternatives and emendations to Horwich’s strategy are unavailable (Section 4). In order to resolve the tension – and, with it, the GP – I propose an alternative approach to the liar (Section 5) – one that supports Horwich’s strategy for resolving the GP while leaving minimalism maximally uncompromised.

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 discusses the GP; Section 3 covers the liar paradox and identifies a dilemma for the minimalist that arises when the GP is considered in light of Horwich’s response to that paradox; Section 4 considers and rejects certain strategies for responding to this dilemma; Section 5 proposes an alternative response to the liar and,