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The Functions Truth Serves

From time to time, protests were voiced that the concept of truth is ‘richer’ than what minimalist and redundancy theories could deliver. These dissenters insisted that truth is a substantial concept; those theories fail to do it justice. As we have seen, there are grounds for complaint. Nevertheless, the protests were largely ineffectual. The reason they did not prevail, I suggest, was because the dissenters were not radical enough; they too were operating within the confines of the linguistic conception, which does not have enough resources to supply a truly substantial theory of truth. So, if a substantial conception of truth is to be worked out, it will have to break out of that restriction.

To help clarify what we might be looking for, it is useful to consider what functions a philosophical explication of the concept of the truth of statements (sentence, proposition, judgement, belief, etc.) might reasonably be expected to serve. Doing so will give us some criteria against which to evaluate competing conceptions.

3.1 Desiderata for truth-theories

Which questions should a theory which addresses the truth of statements be expected to answer, and which intellectual worries is it intended to assuage? Eight desiderata can be found easily enough in the relevant, rather specialized literature. Depending upon their predilections, philosophers have standardly recommended their favoured theory as satisfying some or all of these.

In detailing these eight here, I am not assuming that all of them should necessarily feature in an analysis of the concept of truth, nor that to be adequate a truth-theory should explicitly address them all. But each has in fact been invoked at some stage by some protagonist in the recent debates. Once we have identified them, we can consider whether they should be accepted as constraints upon any adequate explication of the concept of truth.
1. *Primarily*, of course, any theory of truth can be expected to capture and express in a systematic way the basic sense manifest in standard use of the word with regard to statements. An undisputed intuition is that there is a fundamental linkage between truth and reality. Indeed, from the early Greeks right down to the colloquial speech of today, there is a broad consensus that to speak the truth is to ‘tell it like it is’. Since truth-theories purport to explain what it is for a statement to be true, they were trying to illuminate this ancient and enduring signification. In all the debates swirling about these various theories of truth, a central concern has been somehow to explicate or comment upon this linkage of what is *asserted* to be so to what *is* so.

2. Secondly, truth is the goal of inquiry. We investigate matters in order to *discover* the truth. That implies that the activity of inquiry has truth as its objective, or goal: its *telos*. Our inquiries are successful if, and only if, they enable us knowingly to tell the truth about the matters inquired into.

   Once this objective is recognized, we notice that this feature of inquiry has much broader relevance. Indeed, it applies to the activity of statement-making in general. Of course, that there are familiar contexts where the sense in which truth is the *telos* of the activity of statement-making is deliberately circumscribed, or cancelled – as in pretending, in joking, in theatrical performances, in playful banter, and in a different way in deliberate acts of lying. But even in such cases, where the context indicates special conditions, or limitations, on how the declarative sentences uttered are to be taken, the very possibility of understanding what is said as a *statement* takes into account this feature of the practice of assertion. In general, leaving aside those special contexts, in making statements we *aim* to make statements which are true, because truth is the *telos* of the activity of statement-making.

   This might not seem very significant, but in fact it has far-reaching consequences, as we shall see. For this feature of statement-making invests truth with *normative* force – that is, being true is an essential standard which statements have to satisfy in order to be made well. Recent truth-theories rarely acknowledge this. It follows that false statements are deficient; they are *errors*. Accordingly, it is reasonable to expect an account of truth to supply some explication of how it comes to be intrinsic to the practice of assertion. The question is: how does truth acquire this normative character?

3. Truth carries normative force in other ways as well. Once the question of what constitutes truth had been transposed into one about the uses of “true”, the way was open for alternative proposals going beyond the truisms of the minimalists and deflationists. One such proposal was that the point of calling some statement ‘true’ was to *commend* it in some way. It was said that a ‘true’ statement is simply one which is good to believe. Or, it is one which a speaker would be warranted in asserting. Or, it is one which will survive further scientific research. Or, it is one which would command