Adam C. Podlaskowski
Drew Johnson *Editors*

Truth 20/20: How a Global Pandemic Shaped Truth Research

Springer

Synthese Library

Studies in Epistemology, Logic, Methodology,
and Philosophy of Science

Volume 489

The aim of *Synthese Library* is to provide a forum for the best current work in the methodology and philosophy of science and in epistemology, all broadly understood. A wide variety of different approaches have traditionally been represented in the Library, and every effort is made to maintain this variety, not for its own sake, but because we believe that there are many fruitful and illuminating approaches to the philosophy of science and related disciplines.

Special attention is paid to methodological studies which illustrate the interplay of empirical and philosophical viewpoints and to contributions to the formal (logical, set-theoretical, mathematical, information-theoretical, decision-theoretical, etc.) methodology of empirical sciences. Likewise, the applications of logical methods to epistemology as well as philosophically and methodologically relevant studies in logic are strongly encouraged. The emphasis on logic will be tempered by interest in the psychological, historical, and sociological aspects of science. In addition to monographs *Synthese Library* publishes thematically unified anthologies and edited volumes with a well-defined topical focus inside the aim and scope of the book series. The contributions in the volumes are expected to be focused and structurally organized in accordance with the central theme(s), and should be tied together by an extensive editorial introduction or set of introductions if the volume is divided into parts. An extensive bibliography and index are mandatory.

Adam C. Podlaskowski • Drew Johnson

Editors

Truth 20/20: How a Global Pandemic Shaped Truth Research

Springer

Editors
Adam C. Podlaskowski
Department of Social Sciences,
College of Liberal Arts
Fairmont State University
Fairmont, WV, USA

Drew Johnson
Department of Philosophy, Classics,
History of Art and Ideas
University of Oslo
Oslo, Norway

Acknowledgments

Editing a volume is necessarily a collaborative affair, requiring the coordination, good will, ingenuity, and patience of its contributors and publishers. This volume is a collaborative endeavor in multiple respects; in addition to the work of the contributors, the volume finds its origin in the collective efforts of the steering committee and presenters of the Virtual International Consortium of Truth Research. Moreover, several of the contributions are edited transcripts of panel discussions held at the Truth 20|20 Conference held in August and July of 2020; here we see another level of collaborative engagement in philosophical issues to do with truth in the conversations between panelists, which has continued as these panelists worked to prepare the transcripts for publication. Accordingly, we must acknowledge the work of many people (some multiple times over) in bringing this volume to fruition.

should be clear from our concluding remarks, Michael's work—in both his work on alethic pluralism and recent discussions of truth in politics—have been a source of inspiration for us.

We would like to acknowledge the efforts of our publishing team at Springer; thanks to Chris Wilby, Palani Murugesan, Svetlana Kleiner, Carmen Spelbos, and Otavio Bueno. The team helped us navigate a somewhat unusual copyright issue regarding the inclusion of the conversation between Evans and Strawson, and were remarkably patient throughout the process of the compilation of the volume. Thanks are owed again to Otavio for suggesting the idea of the volume, and again to VICTR's steering committee for supporting the idea.

Finally, thanks are owed to Danyele Podlaskowski for her patience and support throughout this process. We would also like to thank Iris Podlaskowski for her enthusiastic input (characteristic of any toddler) during many of our Zoom meetings.

Introduction

Adam C. Podlaskowski and Drew Johnson

Truth in a "Post-truth" Era?

If recent years have taught us anything, it is that truth matters. We faced enormous challenges—from a global pandemic, the effects of climate change, to reckoning with racial injustice—each of which required decisive action based on the best available information. At the same time, we have witnessed a crisis of misinformation, which has made it more difficult to distinguish truth from fiction and to reach a common ground, even concerning basic facts such as the existence and seriousness of the COVID-19 virus. And while the misinformation crisis threatens to undermine even good faith attempts to get at the truth, in the public sphere we have also seen a troubling disregard for truth as a value in public discourse. It is not surprising, then, to find the term "post-truth" enter public consciousness.[1] While debates over the nature, value, and concept of truth may once have seemed timeless and abstract (some might say arcane) philosophical issues with limited import for public life, we now see these philosophical problems being worked out as topics of public discourse

---

[1] The "post-truth" phenomenon, it might be thought, ultimately reflects a concern with *epistemic* issues, rather than purely alethic ones. However, we think the reference to truth in this phrase is not simply accidental; in addition to providing an apt phrase for discussing the apparent decreasing emphasis on truth as such as a value in politics, the phenomenon seems to rest at the intersection of epistemology and philosophy of truth, dealing with notions like *trust*. (See also Chaps. 10 and 11, on polarization and political bald-faced lies, respectively).

A. C. Podlaskowski
Department of Social Sciences, College of Liberal Arts, Fairmont State University, Fairmont, WV, USA
e-mail: apodlaskowski@fairmontstate.edu

D. Johnson
Department of Philosophy, Classics, History of Art and Ideas, University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway
e-mail: drewjohnson3190@gmail.com

in *real-time*. Given the current heightened significance of truth in public life, it is important now more than ever to consider truth—its nature, value, and role in public discourse—from a philosophical perspective.

While safety measures in response to the global pandemic imposed the necessity of physical distancing, in something of a silver lining, those same restrictions inspired new ways to connect with one another. Taking advantage of the ubiquity of video-chat platforms such as Zoom, a group of philosophers interested in truth (Joseph Ulatowski, Robert Barnard, Chase Wrenn, Marcus Rossberg, and Adam Podlaskowski) organized the entirely online *Truth 20|20* conference in August 2020, featuring leading philosophers from around the world. This conference led to the formation of the Virtual International Consortium for Truth Research (VICTR), with the goal of bringing together researchers interested in all areas of the philosophy of truth, regardless of geographical location and institutional affiliation. VICTR has since hosted a regular speaker series (and two additional online conferences), featuring both established and early career researchers from across the globe. This volume is the first to feature some of the exciting research presented at VICTR events, including both edited transcripts of panel discussions and new submissions from researchers who presented at VICTR-hosted events during the year 2020. Given the year of the conference, and the need to reflect and take a *clear look* at truth, the choice of title for the volume was inevitable.[2]

In the next section, we provide an overview of the contributions to the volume. We take a televised conversation held between Gareth Evans and P.F. Strawson—the transcript of which is also included as part of the first chapter—as a framing device for the volume as a whole by identifying points of connection between their discussion and the themes taken up by the individual contributors. We hope that this further contributes to VICTR's ambitions of putting researchers on truth from around the world in conversation with each other, even if only vicariously through our editorial voice.

Chapter Overviews and Themes that Develop

In 1973, the Open University hosted a televised conversation between P.F. Strawson and Gareth Evans on the topic of truth and factuality. This discussion between two stellar philosophers served as the centerpiece of a panel more recently led by Huw Price, joined by Douglas Edwards, Cheryl Misak, and Amie Thomasson during the Truth 20|20 conference. Transcripts of both the panel discussion and the original televised conversation between Strawson and Evans appear here, for the

---

[2] We do not apologize for the pun, which is fully intended. As philosophers, of course, we feel compelled to draw attention to the pun built into the title—and we then have to explain it and then we have to make the present qualification. This illustrates why philosophers are rarely funny. (In any case, the name of this volume was inspired by the name of the *Truth 20|20* online conference that gave birth to VICTR. The name of that conference was originally devised by Joe Ulatowski.)

first time in an edited collection.[3] In what follows, we briefly trace some of the conversation between Strawson and Evans (and between Price, Misak, Edwards, and Thomasson), elaborating on points where the conversation connects with other contributions to this volume.

The conversation between Strawson and Evans opens with an introduction by Susan Wilson, who sets two constraints on an adequate theory of truth: first, a theory of truth "must show what all true statements have in common," and second, any such theory must also "show how different kinds of true statement are related to each other." These constraints, it turns out, are not easy to jointly satisfy. Following the constraints, we should expect an adequate theory of truth to explain, for instance, what the statements "Water is H_20," "2+2=4," "Slavery is wrong," and "The Earth is not flat" all have in common—that in virtue of which they are all true—while also accounting for differences in *how* they are each true. (And as Thomasson observes, the first constraint—identifying what all truths have in common—presupposes that truth is a substantial property in the first place, that is, something with a *nature* amenable to philosophical investigation—a presupposition challenged by influential deflationary approaches to truth.)

That Wilson articulates constraints in this way illustrates how prescient the conversation is: Strawson and Evans are led to wrestle with many of the core points characterizing contemporary debates over the nature of truth. As Strawson grapples with the problem of accommodating both constraints, he goes on to suggest that empirical truths have some sort of primary status, with mathematical, logical, and moral truths possessing a secondary or derived status. This accommodates Wilson's first constraint by explaining how the primary truth generates or supports secondary/derived truth, while acknowledging variability in terms of the primary/secondary truth distinction. The difficulty for this approach resides in showing in a satisfactory way *how* primary truth supports secondary/derivative truth, which in one guise amounts to explaining how truths of some purportedly less fundamental kind can be reduced to truths of a more fundamental kind.

This problem (now usually called the "scope problem") has since motivated a move to distinctively pluralist theories of truth. It has been observed that monist theories (including correspondence, coherence, and pragmatist theories)—those taking all truths to possess a common nature—are especially hard pressed to meet both constraints. Pluralist alternatives to Strawson's position propose that truth possesses multiple natures, whether because truths come in different varieties, or because truth is implemented, realized, or manifested in various ways.

The topic of truth pluralism comes up in a separate entry in this volume, courtesy of Douglas Edwards. Edwards' book *The Metaphysics of Truth* (Oxford University Press 2018) is featured in its own panel where Edwards (as author) responds to various criticisms of his book (raised by Nathan Kellen, Michael Lynch, and David Taylor). In this panel, we find a range of fresh reactions to his work. To consider one:

---

[3] A transcript of the 1973 Strawson/Evans discussion has been made available earlier (online) by Huw Price.

pluralists about the property of truth—Edwards included—contend that the relevant truth property varies across statements of different kinds, e.g., scientific statements versus moral statements. A tempting pluralist strategy (one that Edwards takes) for individuating statement kinds is in terms of their respective domains of inquiry (e.g., scientific vs. moral subject matters and practices) with affiliated distinctive core concepts and vocabulary (e.g., predicates such as "mass," "is wrong"). A difficulty for this approach, Michael Lynch points out, is that for some areas of thought and discourse, such as politics, it is not clear that there is a set of core predicates or concepts; after all, the political realm for instance is a "hodgepodge" of different kinds of claims, leading to a difficult question for this sort of pluralist: "What truth property is possessed by true political claims?"

Though pluralism is a popular approach to meeting both of Wilson's constraints, it continues to be met with resistance from deflationary views, as is anticipated in Evans' response to Strawson. Deflationists (including minimalists, redundancy theorists, disquotationalists, and prosententialists) contend that truth performs an altogether humbler function in our cognitive lives. For example, the truth predicate allows us to assent to what others say (e.g., "What she just said is true") and to express various generalizations (e.g., "Everything Socrates said is true" rather than having to assent to the conjunction of every claim he ever made). (But see Marcus Rossberg's contribution for an argument that strictly speaking, truth-predicates are not even needed for these expressive functions). Ultimately, these and related logico-expressive functions meet Wilson's constraints in a different fashion: all truths are instances of these functions without the need for their sharing some common property. If, as the deflationist contends, our use of the truth predicate is exhausted by these and related expressive functions, then more substantive theories of truth end up lacking adequate motivation.

We certainly see a similar dispute develop between Strawson and Evans. Strawson can be regarded as advancing a substantive theory of truth (of which metaphysical truth pluralism is one variety), insofar as he views truth as having a metaphysically robust nature amenable to philosophical investigation. Moreover, Strawson's stance can be regarded as a "realist" one, insofar as the substantive truth-property he countenances relates true statements to worldly states of affairs, rather than to mental or mind-dependent entities (as proposed by anti-realist conceptions of truth). Evans, by contrast, takes a more deflationary approach which he takes to complicate matters for such realist approaches. This complication arises from reflection on Frank Ramsey's point that a statement is true when things are as it states them to be, which has a realist-sounding ring to it (at least on a naïve interpretation). However, by emphasizing what Evans calls a "thin" or "undifferentiated" notion of truth—one that acknowledges Ramsey's point without requiring a metaphysically loaded interpretation—we avoid altogether the risk of generating scope problems. Indeed, perhaps the most famous deflationary position is courtesy of Ramsey himself: the Redundancy Theory, according to which "P is true" is *redundant* in that the sentence has no more significance than simply the sentence "P." Beyond its immediate interest, this discussion also exemplifies the broader point that embracing some forms of deflationism can raise doubts about

which matters have genuine metaphysical significance in the first place, leading to a fruitful discussion by Price, Misak, Edwards, and Thomasson as they move past their initial commentary.

While Ramsey's influence is felt throughout Evans and Strawson's conversation, there is plenty of historical context missing relevant to understanding his considered view—itself no easy task. Cheryl Misak provides that missing context in a panel discussion (also included in this volume) on her recent book, *Frank Ramsey: A Sheer Excess of Powers*. Misak details Ramsey's intellectual progression and intellectual exchanges with peers, arguing that Ramsey's project comprises a kind of *pragmatist* approach to truth, though his view is popularly associated with the redundancy theory. (As Misak explains, Ramsey thinks of beliefs, in pragmatist fashion, as "habits with which we meet the world," where true beliefs better equip us for this task than false ones). Simon Blackburn and Jennifer Hornsby provide commentary on Misak's book, including on this very question of what sort of theory of truth Ramsey was developing leading up to his death. In addition to providing new insights into one of the twentieth century's great minds, this panel also serves as a natural transition to other entries in this volume concerned with deflationism.

Two entries in this volume provide novel Ramseyian approaches to truth. In "Let's Tell the Truth: Expressive Meaning and Propositional Quantification," María José Frápolli makes a new case for how the truth predicate "vanishes" into the logical form of sentences. She adapts Bertrand Russell's theory of descriptions—in which "denoting phrases never have any meaning in themselves, but . . . every proposition in whose verbal expression they occur has a meaning"—to truth ascriptions such as "What she said is true." Doing so yields the position that the truth predicate has an expressive meaning that is distributed across the logical form of truth ascriptions. The expressive role of truth identified by Frápolli does not commit us to regarding sentences in which "true" and its variants are used as implicating a distinct property of truth as a constituent of the propositions expressed, and hence something possessing a substantive nature. While this Ramseyian proposal has several attractions, it is commonly thought to suffer from the (purported) major defect of requiring propositional quantification. Frápolli responds to this famous worry head-on, arguing that influential criticisms of propositional quantification fail because they rest on a logical confusion.

The other Ramseyian proposal in this volume, Marcus Rossberg's "Truth May Be Redundant," draws a rather different conclusion on the role of truth. While we earlier characterized Ramsey-style redundancy theories as exemplifying a variety of deflationism, Rossberg's entry calls this classification into doubt. Deflationary theories of truth generally deny that truth has any metaphysically substantive nature, with the idea that instead, truth merely plays a logico-expressive function. Frapolli's Ramseyian proposal about truth certainly qualifies as deflationist in this regard, as it argues that the truth-predicate has an important (distributed) expressive meaning. We have characterized deflationism as holding that truth plays only a very humble role in our cognitive lives, namely, that of providing certain necessary expressive resources for endorsement of propositional content. Rossberg argues, however, that truth predicates are, strictly speaking, *not even* needed for this purpose: all of

the expressive powers deflationists associate with truth predicates can, in fact, be included in a language completely lacking a truth-predicate. Rossberg accomplishes this by showing (quite generally) how to explicitly define a truth predicate by means of purely logical resources, including higher-order quantifiers. As such, he demonstrates truth to be in-principle eliminable. Whereas opponents of deflationism typically complain that deflationists assign truth too small a role, Rossberg contends that deflationists give truth too *large* a role in thinking it is strictly necessary for the expressive power it adds to a language.

In "Validity as Truth-Conduciveness," Arvid Båve raises a different sort of challenge to the presumed relationship between truth and logic: that is, he places in doubt the standard view that deductive validity is a matter of truth-preservation. This conception of validity, Båve notes, is relatively "clean," in that it primarily employs logico-mathematical concepts and avoids taking a stance on normative questions about belief and inference. But as Båve argues, epistemic notions are central to logic such that we require a "messier" account of validity that bears directly on these notions. In particular, he makes a case for validity as best understood in terms of truth-*conduciveness*. This leads Båve to the surprising conclusion that deductive inferences are actually *defeasible*, with the idea that a truth-conducive argument will preserve truth *almost* always, or in a high frequency of instances, but not without exception (as exemplified by the Liar paradox).

Whereas Rossberg and Båve focus on different respects in which the operations of logical inferences relate to truth (or don't), Junyeol Kim attends to some important ways in which truth is regarded as the aim of the sciences. In "Frege on Logic: The Truth-Value True and Logic Qua the Science of Truth," Kim offers a new interpretation of Frege's puzzling claim that, while all sciences aim at truth, logic (in particular) is the science of truth. Put briefly, he makes the case that, whereas the sciences share a concern with the True, in that they aim to expand our knowledge of the True by identifying those propositions about the world which partly comprise the object "the True," logic has a different role. Logic shows how far we can extend knowledge of the True when that object is the only thing given to us, i.e., independently of identifying any particular empirical claims with the True.

Even among those who disagree over some of these key issues relating truth and logic, it seems clear that logic—and good reasoning, more generally—are very valuable. But why is logic valuable? The natural answer seems to be that we value both acquiring true beliefs and avoiding false ones, and logic is one important way to achieve these dual aims. This answer certainly accords with the distinct conclusions drawn by Båve and Kim. But it runs up against the views of deflationists who deny truth is a substantive property and hence not the sort of thing that can be valuable. This would seem problematic for deflationists. For while deflationists (such as Frápolli) provide reasons for concluding that truth performs only some logico-expressive functions for us, it nevertheless seems clear that the value of logic itself does not consist simply in arranging and rearranging formal symbols. So, it rests on the deflationist to indicate why logic is valuable in a way that does not *ultimately* rely on the value of truth. Of course, there are strategies deflationists can take here to account for the apparent value of truth. For instance, deflationists can

make the qualification that truth is valued in some cases only insofar as and because having true beliefs, or uttering true claims, and drawing truth-preserving inferences (or possibly just truth-*conducive* ones, if Båve is correct) from them is important to achieving what is of more fundamental value in the relevant cases. As such, truth's "value," when it is valuable, is highly derivative; and so, the value of logic would ultimately depend on what is fundamentally valuable in various areas of discourse. Whether this is the best solution to this challenge will not be settled here, in any case.

Because truth appears to be valuable, not just as a basic goal of logic and good reasoning, but as an end of communication more generally, we can see a similar challenge arising elsewhere. Indeed, there is a rich tradition, which includes the early Ludwig Wittgenstein, going so far as to claim that we cannot effectively communicate in the first place unless our linguistic practices are aimed at the truth. While this would seem to introduce even more difficulties for deflationists, as Kensuke Ito argues in "Myth of The Conceptual Necessity of Truth-Directed Communication," initial impressions here are misleading. He offers a case where, contra Wittgenstein, we are able to "make ourselves understood with false propositions just as we have done up until now with true ones." The case features a language game of Ito's invention: the Falsity Game, wherein speakers follow Grice's conversational maxims except that instead of conforming to the maxim of quality that one's contributions to a conversation are to be *true*, speakers conform to a variant maxim according to which their contributions are to be *false*. Ultimately, Ito distinguishes between *formal* and *material* theories of truth, where the former focus on truth insofar as it relates to determining what is said, and the latter focus on truth as it figures in our communicative practices. According to Ito, the Falsity game is not possible when considering formal theories of truth, but is possible when considering material theories. This brings us back to the now familiar clash between substantivist and deflationist positions, where the debate over truth is shown to *dissolve*: deflationism is appropriate to formal theories of truth, which apply equally to the Truth Game (following Grice's normal maxims) and the Falsity Game, but not to material theories, which only concern *our actual* practices and hence only the Truth Game.

While the Falsity Game appears to be playable, it does not seem that any actual linguistic communities play it, as a matter of brute fact. Still, one might be concerned that conversational norms in certain areas can be subject to shifts and distortions that jeopardize a shared commitment to playing the Truth Game. Most notably, the influences of social and affective forces on political belief, when taken to an extreme, might come to threaten the integrity of norms for truth, belief, and warrant in political discourse. That is, there may be a danger of political discourse drifting away from the Truth Game, as we discuss in our concluding remarks at the end of the volume.

These and related issues are the topic of the panel discussion entitled "Truth and Polarization." We began this introduction by highlighting the information crisis that has made clear, among other things, why truth continues to matter. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2020 US Presidential election, we face the very

real danger of different perceived "realities" emerging, where there is little common ground. The polarization that threatens to emerge endangers democratic institutions, not to mention the lives of innocent people. The members of this panel—Michael Lynch, Maria Baghramian, Cailin O'Connor, Robert Barnard, Chase Wrenn, and Joe Ulatowski—discuss the sources of political polarization and how it has blocked our ability to agree on a common set of truths.

In this panel, Lynch puts on the table the interesting suggestion that, in light of increasing polarization, the strong influence of affective and social factors on political judgments, and the connection between one's political ideology and social identity, political claims may not primarily be in the business of stating facts but rather expressing a commitment to an identity-reflecting value. This brings to the forefront *expressivist* analyses that deny, for a given area of discourse (with a primary focus on moral and other normative discourse), that our claims purport to represent objective features of the world but instead express certain conative or affective mental states.

Once again, we find that this possibility is alluded to in the debate between Strawson and Evans, where Strawson notes that the very fact that moral claims (and we might add political claims here) seem to have a function other than stating facts about the world has moved some philosophers precisely to resist characterizing such claims as apt for truth and falsity in the first place. Evans is quick to note that this seems to have the "unacceptable consequence" that moral claims are not truth-apt statements at all. We should certainly be uneasy with the pure expressivist move at least for political discourse, insofar as that move requires giving up on political truth altogether. Whether some version of "tempered" or hybrid expressivism about political discourse can successfully acknowledge the role that truth plays in politics from within an overall expressivist framework remains to be seen (though we offer some suggestions in the concluding remarks).

The final contribution to this volume also occupies the intersection of truth and politics. In "Political Bald-Faced Lies are Performative Utterances," Susanna Melkonian-Altshuler examines one rather overt way in which norms for truth in political discourse are flouted: cases of bald-faced lies, such as when Donald Trump (as a presidential candidate) insisted that he did not say that, when you are famous, you can "grab women by the pussy," despite there being readily available and incontrovertible audio evidence that he did say this. Melkonian-Altshuler rejects the major explanations of political bald-faced lies on offer (including some discussed during the panel on "Truth and Polarization") and makes the case that a bald-faced lie is a performative utterance intended to motivate a target audience to make the lie *pass for truth* by affirming it, acting as though it were true. This promises to shed light on one of the more vexing features of political activity, especially for anyone who values truth.

At the end of the volume, we offer some concluding remarks, where we continue the discussion of truth as a value in political discourse. Drawing from the insights offered in the contributions to this volume, we argue for what might be regarded as a pluralist approach to the function of political discourse. Rather than construing all political claims as uniformly aspiring to truth (or not) to an equal degree, we argue

that political claims sometimes play a more descriptive role, sometimes a more action-guiding role, and frequently both at once. In brief, the idea is that democratic discourse functions well only when political claims are (at least some of the time) (i) responsive to a shared objective reality, and (ii) represent and help to implement the will of the people. This view acknowledges the important role of emotion and identity in shaping political viewpoints, while also regarding objective truth as a goal in politics.

Guide to the Volume

Though we have organized this collection with certain thematic progressions in mind, each contribution can be appreciated on its own. As you make your way through this volume, we hope you'll appreciate the depth of thought that continues to be put into the study of truth. If the recent years have taught us anything, it is that truth still matters to us a great deal; and if the entries in this volume show anything, it is that inquiring into the nature and value of truth continues to be a difficult, though ultimately rewarding, endeavor. This is a place where philosophers of truth, far from being sequestered in an esoteric academic corner, have much to contribute to public life.

Contents

Contributors

Maria Baghramian University College London, London, UK

Robert Barnard University of Mississippi, University, MS, USA

Arvid Båve Stockholm University, Stockholm, Sweden

Simon Blackburn University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK
University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC, USA

Douglas Edwards Utica College, Utica, NY, USA

María José Frápolli University of Granada, Granada, Spain

Jennifer Hornsby University of London, Birkbeck, UK

Kensuke Ito Tokyo Metropolitan University, Hachioji, Japan

Drew Johnson University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway

Nathan Kellen Owensboro Technical and Community College, Owensboro, KY, USA

Junyeol Kim Chungbuk National University, Cheongju, South Korea

Michael Lynch University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT, USA

Susanna Melkonian-Altshuler Jesus College, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK

Cheryl Misak University of Toronto, Toronto, ON, Canada

Cailin O'Connor University of California Irvine, Irvine, CA, USA

Adam Podlaskowski Fairmont State University, Fairmont, WV, USA

Huw Price University of Bonn, Bonn, Germany
Trinity College Cambridge, Cambridge, UK

Marcus Rossberg University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT, USA

David Taylor University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN, USA

Amie Thomasson Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH, USA

Joe Ulatowski University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand

Chase Wrenn University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, AL, USA

Chapter 1
Smoke and Flickering Shadows: Strawson and Evans on Truth and Factuality

Huw Price, Cheryl Misak, Douglas Edwards, and Amie Thomasson

Abstract This chapter is an edited transcript of a panel discussion at the Truth 20|20 Conference. The discussion centers around a discussion between P.F. Strawson and Gareth Evans recorded for the Open University in 1973. In the ensuing discussion, Strawson's and Evans' comments on truth are compared both to Ramsey's work on truth just before his death, and also to contemporary pluralist accounts. One of the major themes of the discussion is the distinction, suggested by Strawson and Evans, between a 'thin' notion of truth suitable for application across a variety of domains, and a more substantive notion appropriate for certain domains but not others. The panelists consider whether these two notions could be made to fit into a coherent overarching account, and whether the theory of truth is the right place to locate this 'thin'/'substantive' distinction.

H. Price (✉)
Center for Science and Thought, University of Bonn, Bonn, Germany
e-mail: hp331@cam.ac.uk

C. Misak
Department of Philosophy, University of Toronto, Toronto, CA, USA
e-mail: cheryl.misak@utoronto.ca

D. Edwards
Philosophy Department, Utica University, Utica, NY, USA
e-mail: doedward@utica.edu

A. Thomasson
Department of Philosophy, Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH, USA

Joe Ulatowski Let's get our session four of *Truth 20/20* underway. I will be the moderator. I'm Joe Ulatowski. I've co-organized this conference with colleagues Robert Barnard, Adam Podlaskowski, Marcus Rossberg, and Chase Wrenn. Tonight's session is entitled "Smoke and Flickering Shadows: Strawson and Evans on Truth and Factuality". It will be a panel discussion with Huw Price, Cheryl Misak, Douglas Edwards, and Amie Thomasson.

Huw Price Thank you, Joe, to you and the other organizers for inviting me, and for putting together such a wonderful meeting. Today, first of all, we're going to watch a video from 1973, a discussion between P.F. Strawson and Gareth Evans about truth. And then with the other panelists, Cheryl, Doug, and Amie, I'm going to have a discussion about the video, and then open up for Q + A at the end.

The story of how I first came to encounter the video is in the material that Joe has distributed in announcing this session. It is also at a website that I've been running with Richard Marshall on his 3:16 site (https://www.3-16am.co.uk/articles/without-mirrors), which has a series of commentaries about the discussion from other scholars. More about that later, but now I'm going to hand you over to Strawson, Evans, and Susan Wilson:

***

TRUTH – A Conversation between P.F. Strawson and Gareth Evans (1973)[1]

Introduced by Susan Wilson, Lecturer in Philosophy, The Open University

Susan Wilson: When a philosopher asks the question, 'What is truth?', we need to know what would count as a satisfactory answer. The two philosophers you are now going to hear are looking for an answer which will do at least two things. First, it must show what all true statements have in common. The reason why we want to know this is because we want to explain why it is that we apply the same word, 'true', to many different kinds of statements. We want to show how all true statements resemble each other. But if we want to give a complete account of this, we also need to show how different kinds of true statement are related to each other. And this is the second thing that we demand of a satisfactory account of truth. We want to show both how true statements resemble each other, and how they differ. Here now to discuss such an account of truth are P F Strawson of Magdalen College, Oxford, and Gareth Evans of University College, Oxford.

P.F. Strawson: Well, some 50 years ago, as you know, of course, Frank Ramsey said that there was no serious problem about the general nature of truth; though, of course, there were problems about the nature of statement, or assertion, and the nature of belief. Now I think that in spite of all that's happened in the intervening time, I think Ramsey was right. The question what it is for a statement to be true, or a belief to be true, really admits of a simple answer, and the answer is this, that a statement is true if and only if things are as one who makes that statement thereby states them to be; and a belief is true if and only if things are as one who holds that belief thereby believes them to be.

Now, this rather trivial sounding formula has two great merits. For one thing, it admits of as many specific applications as you please. And again, on the other hand, it makes the point which Austin, I think, expressed by saying, 'It takes two to make a truth'. For

---

[1] We are grateful to Ann and Galen Strawson and The Open University for permission to reproduce this text in this form.

example, suppose someone says, or believes, that Caesar was bald, then what he says, or what he believes, is true if and only if Caesar was indeed bald. And here we have this twofold reference, reference, on the one hand, to a believing or a saying, and, on the other hand, to that in the world which the statement is about or the belief is about. This is twofold reference to the thought, on the one hand, and the world, on the other, and any adequate account of truth must allow for that.

But as I said at the beginning, Ramsey did acknowledge that there were plenty of problems in the vicinity which weren't so simply dealt with, and one of these was the problem of the nature of assertion. And I suppose one might regard current investigations into systematic semantics as an attack on this problem. That's to say, this is an investigation into the nature of those linguistic conventions in virtue of mastery of which we're able to say and to understand the true or false things that we do say or understand. Now, what I regard as misleading is to call the outcome of these investigations a definition of truth, as is fashionably done. For example, if somebody comes up with a systematic semantics for English, which nobody, of course, has in fact yet done, then it will be in this fashion to say that he's defined truth for English, or defined 'true in English'. But of course, there isn't one concept of truth for English, another for French, and another for Swahili, and so on, there's just truth. If the semantic theorist is to be said to have defined anything, then I could be ready to say that he's defined English, rather than he's defined truth.

Gareth Evans: Well, I think on their behalf, I would concede that. It seems to me that the concept of truth has an application across languages, it has a wider range of extension than any of the terms they define. I wonder, perhaps slightly parenthetically, I wonder whether one can't, however, get some illumination from their ideas, from a Tarskian-style treatment, by trying to identify grammatical categories which are common to many languages, such as name and predicate, conjunction, negation, and so on, and trying to define truth recursively, something along the following lines. One might say you take the basic set of sentences which will be, let us say, names coupled with predicates, and we say that such a sentence of this kind is true if the item named by the name satisfies the predicate, or the predicate applies to it.

And then, for more complicated sentences, say, a negation, a sentence which consists of another sentence with a negation sign is true just in case that other sentence is not true; and so on with conjunction, and the other devices of sentential composition. It must be said that such a general application of this idea relies upon a primitive notion of naming, as I used it, and of satisfaction of predicates, but don't you think it gives us some illumination?

P.F. Strawson: Well, I think it's an improvement on the language-relative notion of truth, but I still think that the concept of truth has a generality, which transcends, which goes beyond this typology of statement forms, just as much as it transcends differences of language. However, I think, in my turn I might make a concessive move here, and say that that title 'theory of truth' might well be allowed to include under it this sort of investigation of general statement forms common to all languages, and their relations. Now, I think this for two reasons, first of all, it seems clear that if it were not for language and the variety of statement forms that make up all languages, if it were not for language, truth really wouldn't amount to very much; and indeed, nor would thought amount to very much. The other reason – that follows on, perhaps – is that after all we have this grand title, 'theory of truth', and it seems rather a pity to confine it to the rather insubstantial Ramseyan formula.

Gareth Evans: Well, very well, let's look at the possibility. We both agree we want a general account of truth and let's look if this Ramsey formula, that's to say the formula, 'He said something true just in case things are as he stated them to be', does in fact capture this. Now, it seems to me there is a thin interpretation of this formula, which does. We understand this idea of things being in the world as someone states them to be as a general statement which we understand from many particular instances of the following form. 'He said that snow is white and snow is white', 'He said that grass is green and grass is green', i.e., we understand that so long as there is a filling that we can put 'He said that P and P' in that schema to yield a truth, things are as he stated them to be.

That seems to me what I should call a 'thin interpretation', and it does seem to me that's utterly general. But there is a more substantial interpretation, which I can call 'the realist interpretation', which puts more weight upon the idea of things in the world being in thus and such a condition. It seems that if we do put a weight on that it might not have the generality, the formula might not have the generality that it ought to have.

P.F. Strawson: Could you say a bit more what you have in mind?

Gareth Evans: Well, of course, this idea of things in the world being in such and such a condition is not the most perspicuous of notions. I mean, is it, one might ask, perhaps the distribution of elementary particles, and their organization and location, and so on. But, insofar as one has a grip upon the idea, it seems difficult to find things in the world which would make, say, mathematical statements true, or maybe some logical truths true. It seems that these – moral statements, too – the mathematical statements are difficult because it doesn't seem that there are things whose relations and dispositions make two and two plus four true. I mean, 'two plus two equals four' true. In the case of say a moral statement, 'John ought to look after his mother,' it isn't that there's any lack of things. John and his mother are certainly there, but it's difficult to see in virtue of what relationship, if one takes a realistic idea of this, in virtue of what relation they must stand for the statement to be true.

P.F. Strawson: Well, two things here. First, you raise the question about the condition of things in the world, or facts about the world, just how extensive is this, and you mentioned the relation of elementary particles. Well, I think we can construe it a little, indeed a great deal, more broadly than that. I think it might be allowed to cover facts about the disposition and relation of gross bodies, of ordinary physical bodies, facts about their sensible qualities. We have facts about people's states of mind. We have facts about social institutions and the rules that are accepted in them, or that constitute them, and the degree to which people's behavior represents compliance with these rules and failure to comply with them.

We really have an enormous range of types of fact, which fairly clearly fall under the rubric of facts about the world, or statements, or descriptions of how things are in the world, this crucial phrase. However, I must concede that though we can make this a very extensive range of facts, it's not so easy to include in it mathematical facts, as we are prone to call them, or the 'facts', if that's the right word, expressed by moral judgments.

But isn't it worth remarking that philosophers, precisely sensitive to the importance in this connection of the notion of condition of things in the world, or facts about the world, have been prone to reclassify mathematical formulae and moral judgments to refrain from calling them statements in the strict sense, true or false in the strict sense; have been inclined to reclassify them, to come to, say, moral judgments to assimilate them to imperatives, as Professor Hare notably does, and to treat mathematical formulae, logical truths, perhaps, with rules, to assimilate those to rules.

Gareth Evans: Yes, but their propensity to do this illustrates, it seems to me, the power of this connection, between truth and things in the world having to be in such-and-such a condition. But this does seem to me an unacceptable consequence that we deprive these of appropriate bearers of truth and falsity; they're not statements. And I do put it as a virtue of this very thin interpretation, the Ramsey formula, that each of these fit. I mean, he said that two plus two equals four, and two plus two does indeed equal four.

P.F. Strawson: Well, now, how about this? Couldn't one say that truth in the primary sense is as conceived in the realist interpretation, the one which puts the weight it does put on facts about the world, the way things are in the world. This is truth in the primary sense. One who says something true in this sense, says how things are in the world, and what he says is true because things are in the world as he says they are. But, what we do, and intelligibly do, is to extend the word 'true', the notion of truth, and apply it to other utterances, which play a different role in our lives from that of stating or purporting to state how things are in the world. And we do this because the acceptability of those utterances depends on the truth of other things which are true in the primary sense. There's a kind of dependence of things which we call true in this extended sense on truth in the primary sense.

Gareth Evans: Well, I see the programme. I see the idea of this extension. But you'll have to refine it, won't you, because there are a large range of things which we judge to be acceptable on the basis of truths in the primary sense, which I don't think even you would want to call true, such things as giving advice and commands. I mean, these we do evaluate in the way you suggest.

P.F. Strawson: That's quite right, of course. And so I put it wrongly, or insufficiently clearly, let me try again. Let's take a mathematical formula, a simple one like 'seven plus five equals twelve'. Now, it's quite clear that this doesn't state how things are in the world. More specifically, it doesn't state what the results are of certain sorts of counting operations. For example, you might count one group of sheep and another group of sheep separately, and then count all of the sheep together. And if you do so, you would characteristically come up with a certain result. Now, it's certainly true that 'seven plus five equals twelve' doesn't state what this result is.

But the fact is that counting operations of this sort, not just on sheep but on millions of types of things, do regularly and characteristically have a certain outcome. This is a fact about the world, and because of this fact about the world, mathematical formulae and formulae of that sort have a certain utility for us, which they wouldn't have if these facts didn't hold. They enable us perhaps to *calculate* how many sheep there are in a certain field. They enable us to get from one set of truths about the world to another set of truths about the world. And in this way, they enter into, are entwined with other elements in our total belief system. Simple arithmetic cannot by itself tell me how much money I have in my bank account, but it can certainly help to work out how much money I've got in my bank account.

Gareth Evans: Simple arithmetic maybe. I can see that this account might work for it, but mathematics can get quite refined. We have propositions about the irrational numbers, about non-denumerable infinities, and say in pure logic, we have propositions such as Gödel's incompleteness theorem. It's very difficult to see how quite these can be regarded as intertwined in that way.

P.F. Strawson: Okay, so one has to admit that mathematics develops a sort of autonomy, that it develops its own criteria of acceptability, its own procedures of proof, and so forth. But this doesn't show that the links that I want to emphasize are severed. The links are still there, they're just less direct in cases like this, because there's no very straightforward application of highly sophisticated mathematics to the way things are in the world in the way I illustrated in the case of a simpler arithmetical formula, but though the links are less direct, the links are still there.

Gareth Evans: Well, I agree again that there are these differences. I can see the difference between demarcations to be made between fact-stating discourse in some primitive and prior sense and the mathematical discoveries. And not only do I see that these would be distinguished, I can see an order of development. I can see the order indeed you see. But it doesn't seem to me that the account of truth, the theory of truth, is the place to reflect these differences. It seems to me that we want an undifferentiated concept really. You remember you wanted – and you charged Tarski and others are systematic semanticists – you wanted an undifferentiated concept of truth, which applied, on the one hand, across languages and within a language across different statement *forms*. Well, I want an undifferentiated notion of truth which applies across different statement *contents*.

P.F. Strawson: I see, but notice what happens, or what can happen, when somebody is devoted to your undifferentiated concept of truth. For example, instead of being prepared to accept my primary truth and secondary extensions, for example, in mathematics, what typically happens for somebody wedded to the notion of undifferentiated truth is that he, as it were, extends his notion of the world to keep pace with the undifferentiated notion of truth. Thus, he tends to invent or imagine a realm of timeless, perfect, immutable mathematical objects, the relations between which are reflected or mirrored in the truths of mathematics. What you get is in fact a Platonism in mathematics, an extension of the world to run along

with mathematical truth. And indeed, you'll get the same sort of thing, though we haven't talked about this, in morality.

Gareth Evans: You mean the sort of non-natural qualities that Moore talks about.

P.F. Strawson: Non-natural qualities, exactly.

Gareth Evans: But, of course, the undifferentiated notion of truth leads to these excesses – and I agree with you that they are excesses – only if it's a realist one. It seems to me that's one of the great merits of the thin interpretation that I have given of the Ramsey formula, that we can have an undifferentiated notion of truth, which doesn't have this consequence. We don't need objects whose states and relations our truths are true in virtue of.

P.F. Strawson: I see, you wish to cling to the undifferentiated version of truth but reject any extensions of the realist picture [Evans interjects: 'of the world'] that goes along with it?

Gareth Evans: Exactly, yes.

P.F. Strawson: Yes, well, now, let's see. There are two things it seems to me that we can agree about. First of all, we can agree about the coverage of the expression 'true' and of the notion of truth. That's to say, we can agree a word is used and correctly used not only of the honest to goodness empirical truths which reflect the way things are in the world, but it also has this further extension to cover mathematics, moral judgments, logic, and so forth. That we can agree on. And it seems to me there's something else that we ought, at any rate, to agree on, namely, that this extensive coverage of the notion of truth is something that calls for explanation.

Now, it seems to me that the notion I've sketched at least provides the pattern of an explanation. That's to say the notion of primary truth, which is a matter of reflecting the way things are in the world, and then an explanation on the basis of this, of how we come to extend the notion into these other fields. Here is, not a full explanation, but at least the pattern, the project of an explanation; but it doesn't seem to me that you have offered one.

Gareth Evans: No, no, I haven't, and I'm not in a position to do so. That's to say the demarcation of the class of truth-bearing utterances, or truth- or falsity-bearing utterances. I offer this just tentatively, I mean, the formula itself, 'He said that P and P', does impose a certain grammatical restriction, doesn't it? I mean, we can't get, 'He said that close the door and close the door'. I mean, that's going to do some of the work for us.

P.F. Strawson: Yes, but the work which this grammatical test does is a work of *demarcation* and not a work of *explanation*. Incidentally, it doesn't even do the demarcation quite right, because there are typically constructions like the future indicative in English, for example, which would pass your grammatical test in that sentences in this tense and mood fit in, but sentences in this tense and mood are often used for giving orders, for example.

Gareth Evans: What, what?

P.F. Strawson: Well, you'll find this in army orders, company orders: 'A Company will parade at 10:30 tomorrow morning'. This isn't something up for assessment as true or false.

Gareth Evans: It's not true if they do[n't].

P.F. Strawson: Well, as on the board there, it's an order, not a prediction. So the grammatical test, for one thing, doesn't demarcate quite right. That seems to be trivial. More important is the point that at best you get a *demarcation* of the class of things that are true or false, and not an *explanation* of the extension of the coverage, the range of that class.

Gareth Evans: Well, the only deeper suggestion I can make, and I concede that – I mean, in a way one could put the point also by saying how difficult it would be to identify the appropriate grammatical forms in a totally alien language, for example, one would have to look at it. No, the only suggestion I can make is and it's a gesture in the direction of belief, the idea, that's to say, that anything appropriately regarded as true or false is a proper object of belief. And indeed this might be used to distinguish assertions in a complicated way from commands.

P.F. Strawson: Right. Well, I think that's better, in that it's not something purely formal, purely grammatical. The idea is that things which are true or false are proper objects of