

TRUTH AND MEANING

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C.E.M. Joad's catchphrase—'It [sc., the true answer to a question] all depends what you mean by...'¹—suggests that truth is to be explicated in terms of meaning, not *vice versa*. The paper develops this idea.

More particularly, it develops the version of this idea propounded by Ramsey in his unfinished book *On Truth*:

A belief [sc., a particular mental state] is true if it is a belief that p , and p . In Mr Russell's symbolism

B is true $:= (\exists p). B$ is a belief that $p \ \& \ p$. Df

Similarly, updating the symbolism,

B is false if and only if $\exists P(B$ is a belief that $P \wedge \neg P)$.

How are we to understand the quantifier ' $\exists P$ '? Not substitutionally, on pain of circularity. Rather, in terms suggested by A.N. Prior: ' $\exists P$ ' is to be read 'There is a way things might be said or thought to be' and the attendant variables as 'things are that way' or 'things are thus'. Similarly, ' $\forall P$ ' is to be read 'However things may be said or thought to be'. The 'ways' in question are open-ended, and are not tied to any one language or any particular group of thinkers.

On this reading, Ramsey's definition of truth for beliefs is a semi-formal version of a thesis that Strawson propounded as 'something uncontroversial and fairly general about truth'. A belief, Strawson said, 'is true if and only if things are as one who holds that belief thereby believes them to be'. *Pari passu*, 'one who makes a statement or assertion makes a true statement if and only if things are as, in making that statement, he states them to be'. Notice the adverbial phrases in these formulations.

In defining truth as it applies to beliefs, Ramsey takes as understood the notion of a belief's being a belief that P . Similarly, in explicating truth as it applies to statements, Strawson takes as understood the notion of a statement's saying that things are thus-and-so. That is, both take the *content* of a belief or statement to be prior to its truth in the order of philosophical explanation.

The large problem that faces any theory of this kind is to say what it is for a belief (or statement) to have the content that it has. As Dummett pointed out in 'Truth', a truth-conditional account of this is precluded. One cannot simultaneously say: (1) what it is for a belief to be true is for things to be as one who holds that belief thereby believes them to be; and (2) what it is for a belief to be a belief that things are thus-and-so is for the belief to be true if and only if things really are thus-and-so. The circle of explication is too tight to be illuminating. Following Ramsey, I propose to replace (2) with a pragmatist account of the determinants of content: to a first approximation, what it is for a belief to be a belief that P is for it to be a disposition to act as if P , in a circumstance where it matters whether P .

In the present paper, I am not directly concerned with this large matter, but with some logical problems (or apparent problems) that confront the meaning-first approach.

First problem (Geach): There is bound to be a shift in meaning between a free-standing sentence and its occurrence following ‘*B* is a belief that’, and this shift renders illegitimate the quantified form ‘ $\exists P(B \text{ is a belief that } P \wedge P)$ ’.

Reply: Even on a Fregean view of attitude reports, there need be no shift in meaning.

Second problem (Davidson): Intensional notions such as ‘believes that’, ‘says that’ or ‘means that’ are ‘obscure’, so we should theorize about meaning in an ‘extensional first-order language’; constructing a truth theory to ‘serve’ as a theory of meaning enables us to do this.

Reply: (1) Truth theories do not adequately serve as theories of meaning (cfr. Foster). (2) *Pace* Davidson (and Quine), ‘believes that’ and ‘says that’ etc. are clear enough to be acceptable primitives in theories that account for our knowledge of language. What such theories have to account for is our knowledge of what statements say—for example, my knowledge that the German statement ‘Entweder er regnet, oder es schneit’ says that it is either raining or snowing. One thing I know is this: however things may be said or thought to be, if one German statement, *A*, says that things are one way, and another, *B*, says that things are another way, then their disjunction ‘Entweder *A* oder *B*’ says that things are either one way or the other. In Prioré, I know

(*E*) $\forall P \forall Q$ (if the German statement *A* says that *P* and the German statement *B* says that *Q*, then the German disjunction ‘Entweder *A* oder *B*’ says that either *P* or *Q*).

Since I also know that ‘es regnet’ says that it is raining, and that ‘es schneit’ says that it is snowing, my knowledge of (*E*) helps to account (compositionally) for my knowledge that ‘Entweder es regnet, oder es schneit’ says that it is either raining or snowing.

Third problem: Ramsey proposes a definition of truth, but Tarski gave a proof that truth is indefinable.

Reply: Tarski’s proof assumes that an adequate account of truth will conform to his ‘Convention *T*’. This presupposes that every well-formed sentence in the relevant language has truth-conditions. On Ramsey’s view, this presupposition holds only if every such sentence says something. Without this assumption, Tarski’s proof breaks down. However, the assumption is dubious for the very sentence used in Tarski’s proof. That is a *Liar sentence*:

(*L*) *L* does not express a truth

Given Ramsey’s definition of truth (extended to apply to sentences, relative to contexts), we can prove that *L* does not say anything at all.

The real problem: the apparatus of quantification into sentence position plus intensional notions which Ramsey's definition invokes appears to generate paradoxes. In particular, we seem to be able to prove that certain utterances or inscriptions say nothing, and then prove what they say.

Let us suppose that Epimenides utters 'Epimenides utters no sentence or closed formula which, when standardly construed, expresses something that is the case'. More exactly, let us suppose that he utters the formula $\neg\exists P(\delta P \wedge P)$, which I shall label ' λ ', in an interpreted formal language in which ' $\exists P$ ' is Prior's existential sentential quantifier and ' δP ' means 'Epimenides utters a sentence or formula which, when standardly construed, expresses the thought that P '. Let us also suppose that λ is the only sentence or formula that Epimenides utters in the relevant period. We cannot assume that Epimenides's words succeed in expressing a thought, but we can be sure that any thought his words express will, when standardly construed, be equivalent to $\neg\exists P(\delta P \wedge P)$. In other words, we have the following:

$$\forall Q(\delta Q \rightarrow (Q \leftrightarrow \neg\exists P(\delta P \wedge P))).$$

We can now set out an argument for the conclusion that Epimenides utters no sentence or closed formula which, when standardly construed, expresses anything. That conclusion may be formalized as $\neg\exists R\delta R$, and we deduce it by deriving a contradiction from the contrary hypothesis $\exists R\delta R$:

1.	$\forall Q(\delta Q \rightarrow (Q \leftrightarrow \neg\exists P(\delta P \wedge P)))$	Premiss (see above)
2.	$\exists R\delta R$	Assumption, for <i>reduction</i>
3.	δR	2, existential instantiation
4.	$\delta R \rightarrow (R \leftrightarrow \neg\exists P(\delta P \wedge P))$	1, universal instantiation
5.	$R \leftrightarrow \neg\exists P(\delta P \wedge P)$	3, 4 modus ponens
6.	R	Assumption
7.	$\neg\exists P(\delta P \wedge P)$	5, 6 \wedge -elimination and modus ponens
8.	$\delta R \wedge R$	3, 6 \wedge -introduction
9.	$\exists P(\delta P \wedge P)$	8 existential generalization
10.	$\neg R$	7, 9 <i>reductio</i> , discharging assumption 6
11.	$\neg\neg\exists P(\delta P \wedge P)$	5, 10 \wedge -elimination and modus tollens
12.	$\exists P(\delta P \wedge P)$	Assumption
13.	$\delta S \wedge S$	12, existential instantiation
14.	δS	13, \wedge -elimination
15.	$\delta S \rightarrow (S \leftrightarrow \neg\exists P(\delta P \wedge P))$	1, universal instantiation
16.	$S \leftrightarrow \neg\exists P(\delta P \wedge P)$	14, 15 modus ponens
17.	S	13, \wedge -elimination
18.	$\neg\exists P(\delta P \wedge P)$	16, 17, \wedge -elimination and modus ponens
19.	$\neg\exists P(\delta P \wedge P)$	12, 18 <i>reductio</i> , discharging 12
20.	$\neg\exists R\delta R$	11, 19 <i>reductio</i> , discharging 2

So far, our derivation vindicates the claim that, in the unfavourable circumstances described, Epimenides's words (as standardly construed) express no thought.

The problem, though, is that the logical rules used in reaching this conclusion may be further applied to show that things are as Epimenides's words (as standardly

construed) say them to be, thereby ensnaring us in a revenge paradox. For, as it seems, our derivation may be validly extended as follows:

21.	$\exists P(\delta P \wedge P)$	Assumption
22.	$\delta P \wedge P$	21, existential instantiation
23.	δP	22, \wedge -elimination
24.	$\exists R\delta R$	23, existential generalization
25.	$\neg\exists P(\delta P \wedge P)$	20, 24, <i>reductio</i> , discharging 21

Line 25 is just the formula λ . So, it seems, the argument that shows that Epimenides's words say nothing may be extended to establish the truth of what they say.

Two initial observations about this derivation:

(1) The rules employed in it are all acceptable to an intuitionist. Dummett suggested that intuitionistic logic is the one to use when reasoning about 'indefinitely extensible' totalities, and the totality of ways things might be said or thought to be is a paradigm of what he had in mind. But restricting ourselves to intuitionistic logic does not help with the present paradox.

(2) Tweaking Ramsey's definitions of truth and falsehood will not help either, for neither definition is used in the derivation. This brings out a point which is clear in the best mediaeval discussions but of which many moderns lost sight: the Liar is as much a paradox about what we can say as it is about truth.

Ways out:

Appeal to the change in context between (20) and (25). Context is crucial to many versions of the Liar, but it does not get to the heart of this one. For suppose ' δP ' means 'Epimenides utters a sentence or formula which Rumfitt will interpret (at 9.30 a.m. on 12 July 2014) as expressing the thought that P '. As before, the derivation yields $\neg\exists R\delta R$, so $\neg\exists P(\delta P \wedge P)$, as I interpret it, says nothing. At line 25 of the derivation, though, I affirm the very same formula, $\neg\exists P(\delta P \wedge P)$. That is, I am led in the course of the derivation to affirm a formula that, as I now interpret it, says nothing.

Instead, I recommend revising the logical rules to take account of the possibility that well-formed formulae may (in some contexts of utterance) fail to say anything. In particular, we should work in a system of *signed formulae*, where $+A$ signifies that A is accepted as true, while $-A$ signifies that A is rejected as untrue. In such a system, the rule of *Reductio* becomes:

(*Red*) From $X, +A \vdash +B$ and $X, +A \vdash -B$, infer $X \vdash -A$.

On this view, we reach $-\exists R\delta R$ at line 20, but are able to reach only $-\exists P(\delta P \wedge P)$, not $+\neg\exists P(\delta P \wedge P)$, at line 25. The conclusion we can reach is entirely consistent with the thesis that Epimenides's utterance of $\neg\exists P(\delta P \wedge P)$ fails to express a thought (as standardly construed). *Pace* Gary Kemp, to reject λ as untrue is not say that it is untrue.