Crispin Wright: Truth and Objectivity (Cambridge Mass: Harvard U P 1992)

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1. Plural truth?

Wright says that any predicate which has certain platitude-sustaining features, F, deserves to count as a truth predicate, and this position 'is thus at least in principle open to the possibility of a pluralist view of truth: there may be a variety of notions … which pass the test' (25). What impact should this view have on Wright's account of the English predicate 'true'? One possibility is that it opens the door to treating it as ambiguous: perhaps someone who, operating within Wright's framework, is an anti-realist for one discourse and a realist for another should believe that the sense of 'true' as it occurs in the one is the least that does justice to F, whereas the sense of 'true' as it occurs in the other is meatier.

I believe that Wright's text sometimes suggests that this is his view.[1] However, I shall show that no damage would be done to his central theses by rejecting this position, that there is no need for him to adopt it, and that he does better not to. This is intended as a minor friendly emendation (or perhaps clarification).

It is one thing for a tree to exist, another for a sensation to exist, and yet another for a number to exist (or so I shall suppose). Would any of these supposedly constitutive differences show that 'exists' is ambiguous, perhaps meaning, respectively, 'has spatial and temporal location', 'has temporal location' and 'has platoplasmic location'? Of course not: we get a better explanation of why different kinds of filling in the schema 'what is it for a … to exist?' deserve different kinds of answer by attending to the differences in the filling. We have no need to appeal to a shift of sense of 'exist'. If we did make the needless appeal, we would still have to invoke the (putative) fundamental differences between trees, sensations and numbers in order to explain how it is that English-speakers cannot hear such assertions as 'A tree exists which weighs more than a ton' as trivially false: they cannot hear the supposed platoplasmic reading of 'exist'. Once these differences have been invoked, the allegedly varying sense of 'exist' is clearly at best an idle wheel.

Likewise, even if it is one thing for 'This tree is an oak' to be true, another thing for 'Burning live cats is cruel' to be true, and yet another for 'Buster Keaton is funnier than Charlie Chaplin' to be true, this should not lead us to suppose that 'true' is ambiguous; for we get a better explanation of the differences by alluding to the differences between trees, cruelty and humour. We could thus be minimalist about what it is for sentences about comedy to be true, some species of realist (e.g. one committed to Cognitive Command) about what it is for sentences about morals to be true, and a stronger species of realist (adding, perhaps, Wide Cosmological Role) about what it is for sentences about familiar material objects to be true, without supposing that there is more

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[1] Though certainly not always: cf. p. 90, n.12, where he explicitly denies commitment 'to the idea that truth divides into more and less substantial kinds'. Remarks which seem to me best interpreted as proposing the ambiguity interpretation are found on pp. 38, 75, 78, 142 and 174.

than one univocal truth predicate.[2] The dispute between anti-realists and realists need not bear essentially on the nature of truth, but instead on the nature of the subject matter introduced by the sentences to which the predicate 'true' is applied.

In the case of 'exists' the obvious move is to take a minimalist line about its content, so that it is topic-neutral, fit to be appended to any kind of designator, and then tackle the questions about what is involved in the existence (thus minimally and uniformly understood) of different kinds of things. Wright's position is surely analogous: he takes a minimalist line about truth, equipping himself with a notion which ought to be usable, in the mouths of philosophers of many persuasions, with respect to a wide variety of sentences. The questions to be tackled are questions about what is involved in the truth (thus minimally and uniformly understood) of sentences of different kinds.

This is as it should be, for the following reasons. (1) Many of the relevant questions about realism and anti-realism can be phrased without using the notion of truth. Thus both Cognitive Command and Wide Cosmological role are stated without use of the word. More generally, much of the debate can be prosecuted in such familiar but truth-free terms as: do values exist independently of our affective responses? Are numbers self-subsistent objects? If the theses need not be stated in terms of truth, a framework for them should not entail the ambiguity of 'true'. (2) The platitude-sustaining features, F, are stated using our ordinary predicate 'true'. If this is really ambiguous, Wright's envisaged starting-point for the enquiry would not be firm. (3) Validity (or truth itself) for 'mixed' arguments (or sentences), ones involving sentences from discourses for which different degrees of realism or anti-realism are deemed appropriate, must be defined either in terms of minimal truth or in terms of the least notion appropriate to the components of the mixture. In either case, the theorist would find himself saying that every sentence would on some occasion be assessable in terms of the most minimal truth predicate (the one whose applicability is entailed by the applicability of any other). But it seems descriptively quite incorrect to suppose that we switch truth-predicates in this way, some sentences being properly evaluated by a stronger one when they occur only with ones from the same discourse, and properly evaluated by a weaker one when they occur in mixed company.

2 Cognitive Command

How can one prevent the condition of Cognitive Command from being trivially satisfied within every truth-apt discourse? Wright envisages the following objection from the 'trivializing theorist': 'it is a priori that any difference of opinion concerning the comic, when not attributable to vagueness and so on, must involve cognitive shortcoming, since, if all else fails, ignorance or error will at least be involved concerning the truth value of the disputed statement.' (p. 149)

If one accepts that sentences of a certain kind are truth-apt, then it is a priori that one must think of someone who disagrees with one about the truth value of one of them as in error, even if one thinks one has no resources so to persuade the other party, or a neutral observer. Thinking this does not require one to think that the truth of the relevant matter goes beyond all possible evidence. On the contrary, one takes it that the evidence

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[2] For Cognitive Command, see pp. 92-3; for Wide Cosmological Role, see p. 197-8 ('truth' in 'truth-apt' (p. 197) does not violate my claim, for it abbreviates the features otherwise described in terms of syntax and discipline).

has settled the matter (though the other party is in some way ignorant of it or blind to it). Nor does thinking this require one to suppose that, if one were to step back from one's own engagement with the issue, and view oneself and the other party from the outside, one would be able impartially to adjudicate in one's own favour. One might on the contrary suppose that if one took this perspective one would see only a difference of culture or response, with no cognitive superiority on either side. But to the extent that one attains this neutral perspective, one no longer takes the judgements to be truth-apt. If one did so take them, then (in a suitable case) one would have to take one or other to be true, in which case one or other party would have the superior view, contrary to the supposition of equality. This is why reflection on irresolvable differences in morals has a tendency to sap confidence in one's own moral views. (The tendency is sometimes a useful curb to excessive zeal, but sometimes it is merely deplorable.)

One source of error relates to sentences which lie outside the relevant area of discourse. But for many discourses it is a priori that there is room for a conception of error which does not have this source: error which, rather, stems from the subject's handling of matters specific to the relevant discourse. Do such errors count as genuine cognitive shortcomings? By one natural standard, they do: since they relate to what is truth-apt, they relate to what may be believed, judged, justified, known and so on. [3] The problem for Wright is to provide us with a more discriminating guide to what to count as a cognitive shortcoming. The guide should allow for the possibility that these errors relating to the truth-apt may fail to count as cognitive.

Wright addresses the problem by claiming that it is up to the trivializing theorists, those who would see all such errors as cognitive, to defend their position, and that such a defence should be constrained by the following principle:

> We ought not to associate a special faculty with a particular region of discourse, a faculty, that is, apt for the production of non-inferentially justified beliefs essentially involving its distinctive vocabulary, unless the best explanation of our practice of the discourse, and especially the phenomenon of non-collusive assent about opinions expressed therein, has to invoke the idea that such a faculty is at work. (p. 153)

The suggestion is that it is in principle possible to have discourse-specific error in the absence of a discourse-specific 'faculty'; hence error without cognitive shortcoming.

By a 'special' faculty Wright means (I think) what he later refers to as a 'sui generis' capacity, This in turn is, I think, intended to be a capacity which, if its output is best characterised as judgements in an area of discourse for which the concept j is distinctive, has inputs best described in terms of the impingement of the property j. At least, this is how I interpret such remarks as:

> Postulating such an epistemology involves crediting the knowing subjects with a certain appropriate cognitive endowment, and crediting the states of affairs known about with certain appropriate characteristics to which that endowment is able to be appropriately non-inferentially responsive. (p. 153)

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[3] I here go along with Wright's view that agreement that the disputed discourse is minimally truth-apt will be common to the disputants. However, it would be hard to find room within this agreement for the arguments which would interest a Humean non-cognitivist concerning the connection between belief, truth and moral realism.

I shall argue that a faculty which delivers intuitional[4] judgements may not be sui generis, in the sense I have understood it, and that this possibility means that the trivializing theorists are still in the field.

The leanest way to think of a faculty is as an inner state which systematically, for some range of impinging inputs, disposes a subject to respond in a certain way. Not all faculties, thus thought of, will have any claim to be cognitive. The natural position, which Wright has to defeat, is that every faculty which delivers intuitional judgements is cognitive. The 'sense of humour' counts as an intuitional judgement-delivering faculty; but if Cognitive Command is to be an additional hurdle, not cleared by a discourse merely in virtue of its truth-aptness, there must at least be a question whether the sense of humour is a cognitive faculty. This, on Wright's suggestion, amounts to whether the best explanation for our practice of making comic judgements, and especially for the wide range of agreement in this practice, must invoke the idea that a sense of humour is at work.

Thus expressed, it may seem obvious that community in sense of humour (to the extent that it obtains) explains community of comic judgement (to the extent that it obtains). There is no need for this sense to be thought of as 'sui generis', if this means built to respond directly to the comic, magically ungrounded in our five senses. Rather, like the ability to detect merely by taste the region in which a wine was made, it will be non-sui generis, based on capacities to detect other features of situations. This is quite consistent with its outputs being intuitional, since the fact that a faculty is grounded in more basic capacities does not mean that the subject can justify its deliverances in terms of judgements that might be elicited from the grounding capacities. Thus chicken-sexers use their senses in determining the sexes of young chicks, but they are unable to say to what basic perceptual features they are responding, and so a fortiori are unable to justify their sex judgements in these terms or any others.

Wright stresses that an explanation in terms of a faculty must, by the envisaged principle, be the best available, and must be detailed. The previous paragraph, by contrast, arguably makes use of 'sense of humour' to denote whatever it is which explains the community of response or judgement, in which case it is explanatorily thin. We confront two questions: Is the envisaged requirement of detailed explanation acceptable? Could it fail to be met by whatever mechanisms underlie the practice of a truth-apt region of discourse?

If the principle requires that we cannot regard a faculty as cognitive unless we can here and now supply a detailed explanation of how the inputs are processed into the judgmental outputs, the principle is too strong. It took some years of research to discover to what perceptible features of chicks the chicken-sexers were immediately responding. Yet ahead of the research it was correct to regard their skill as a cognitive capacity, lacked by an ordinary person, and possessed in various degrees of imperfection by trainees at various stages of training. If the principle requires merely that we have ground for confidence that there is an explanation to be had, it seems unlikely that it could exclude anything. If it was necessary to suppose that the faculty be sui generis, in the sense I envisaged, then in some cases (the comic in my view being one) we could be

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[4] I follow Wright in the use of 'intuitional' (e.g. p. 151, 153): an intuitional belief is one which may on occasion be justified, but whose justification does not involve citing other beliefs.

confident that there would be no explanation which retains that idea; thus the association between being sui generis and having as outputs intuitional judgements perhaps plays a villain's part Wright's argument.

Generalizing, the upshot is this. Suppose we have an area of discourse characterised by use of the concept j, and which, by WrightÕs standard, is truth-apt. Suppose further that at least some of the j-judgements are intuitional. Is it a priori that all disagreements concerning the truth value of these are to be accounted for in terms of cognitive shortcomings? The facts which ensure truth-aptness ensure that there is some sort of mechanism, a 'faculty' in the lean sense, which systematically disposes speakers under appropriate circumstances to make j-judgements. It would be unreasonable to suppose that a detailed account of these mechanisms is available a priori, or even in an obvious if a posteriori way, for we can lack such an account even in cases where the mechanisms are indisputably cognitive (e.g. the chicken-sexers). It is unnecessary to suppose that the mechanism is one best described in terms of j-inputs. A party to a disagreement in a j-judgement, in supposing the other to be in error must, in cases where all non-j-specific sources of error have been eliminated, attribute the error to some difference between his version of the j-mechanism and the other party's, a difference which he can but view, so long as he persists in his j-opinion, as amounting to an inadequacy or malfunction in the other's. In short, the condition of Cognitive Command is trivially satisfied.