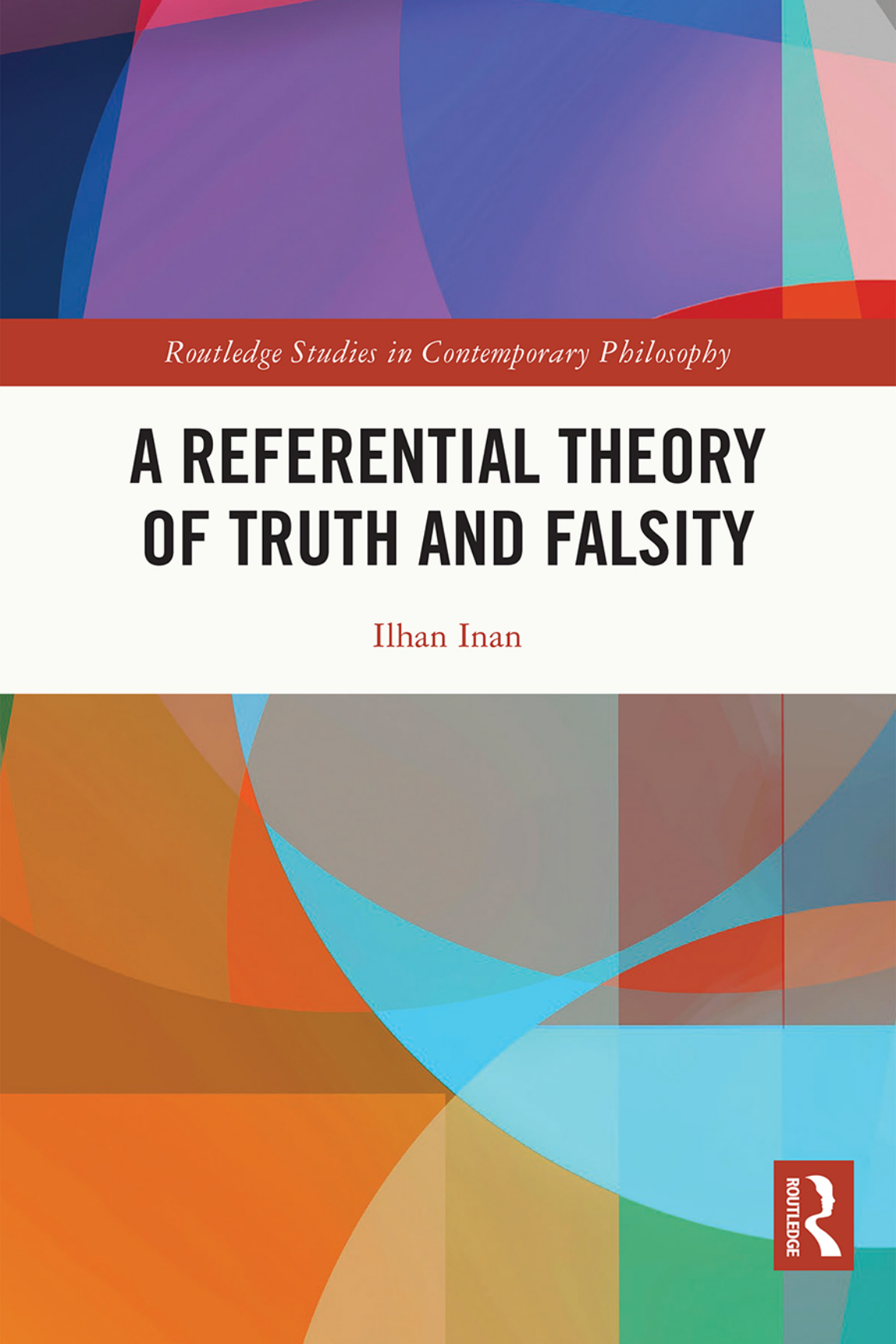

Routledge Studies in Contemporary Philosophy

A REFERENTIAL THEORY OF TRUTH AND FALSITY

Ilhan Inan

ROUTLEDGE

A Referential Theory of Truth and Falsity

This book proposes a novel theory of truth and falsity. It argues that truth is a form of reference and falsity is a form of reference failure.

Most of the philosophical literature on truth concentrates on certain ontological and epistemic problems. This book focuses instead on language. By utilizing the Fregean idea that sentences are singular referring expressions, the author develops novel connections between the philosophical study of truth and falsity and the huge literature in the philosophy of language on the notion of reference. The first part of the book constructs the author's theory and argues for it in length. Part II addresses the ways in which the theory relates to, and is different from, some of the basic theories of truth. Part III takes up how to account for the truth of sentences with logical operators and quantifiers. Finally, Part IV discusses the applications and implications of the theory for longstanding problems in philosophy of language, metaphysics, and epistemology.

A Referential Theory of Truth and Falsity will appeal to researchers and advanced students working in philosophy of language, epistemology, metaphysics, and linguistics.

Ilhan Inan is Full Professor of Philosophy at Koç University, Turkey. He is the author of *The Philosophy of Curiosity* (Routledge, 2012) and co-editor of *The Moral Psychology of Curiosity* (2018).

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A Referential Theory of Truth and Falsity

Ilhan Inan

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Contents

Acknowledgements *vii*

Prologue 1

PART I
The Referential Theory of Truth and Falsity **5**

1 Introducing the Referential Theory 7

2 Frege's Theory of Truth and Falsity 20

3 Whenglish: A Language with No Sentences 40

4 Slingshot Argument 63

PART II
Some Common Theories of Truth in Relation to the Referential Theory **77**

5 Correspondence Theories 79

6 Identity Theory 96

7 Truthmaker Theories 103

8 Deflationism 116

PART III
Sentences with Logical Operators **131**

9 Negation 133

10 Disjunctions and Conditionals 162

11 Existential and General Statements 174

PART IV
Applications and Implications of the Referential Theory 189

12 Liar Paradox 191

13 Sentence Reference and User Reference 206

14 Ostensible versus Inostensible Reference 217

15 Sentences as Rigid and Accidental Designators 228

16 Necessity and Contingency 241

17 Knowledge and Curiosity 250

18 Evolution of Language and Emergence of Truth and Falsity 268

Epilogue *283*
Index *289*

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Prologue

I have very fond memories of those times during my childhood when my parents, my sister, and I would get together to solve mathematical and logical riddles from my father's collection of Martin Gardner books. What fascinated me the most was that each puzzle had a solution, usually a unique one, and after my father asked the question, we would all separately try to discover it. My father would use mathematical formulas to approach the problem, my mother used her strong intuitions, my sister appealed to her vast imagination, and all I had was my reasoning skills. There were different paths to take, but we were all trying to find the very same solution. This was, I think, the first time—at the age of eleven—that it dawned on me that truth was out there, waiting to be discovered. However, with the little knowledge I had of mathematics at the time, I was also of the opinion that numbers were simply invented by humans, and that the whole science of mathematics was merely our own creation. And if this is the case for mathematical truths, I wondered, could it also be the case for all truths? Of course, I believed, as most people do, that there is a physical reality, but perhaps, I thought, it is up to us to choose how we categorize that reality into trees and mountains, and tables and chairs. On the one hand, I thought that truth is out there; on the other, I also thought that it may be our own product. How could that be? In my mature years I went back and forth between these two ideas, and now I stand somewhere in between. All along I had the vague idea that the way in which we use the concepts of truth and falsity has something to do with our ability to refer to reality, even if that reality is partially our own construct. I was especially fascinated by our ability to refer to things unknown to us, which surely was the best indicator that there are truths waiting to be discovered. Years later, this simple idea led me to consider a referential theory of human curiosity. I ran into a substantial problem, however, and as I was trying to tackle it, I came to realize that truth and reference are intimately related to one another, much more than I, or any other philosopher, had previously thought. Independent of where we stand on the huge range of alternatives within the relativist/realist scale, a theory

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of truth should be able to account for the simple fact that we can ask a question out of curiosity being aware of our ignorance concerning its true answer. Among the questions we ask, there is one type that appears to be the simplest of all, admitting of only two answers, "yes", and "no". What do we mean when we answer such a question by uttering one of those simple words? The more I thought about it, the more apparent it became that it is in fact a very challenging one to answer. What initially appeared to be the simplest of all question forms turned out to be the most difficult one. The theory of curiosity I endorse is based on the intuitive idea that when one asks a question out of curiosity, one attempts to refer to something they represent as being unknown to them. If the unknown is a person they ask a who-question; if it is a location they ask a where-question; if it is a cause or a reason they ask a why-question, etc. In all these cases we can identify the object of one's curiosity, the very thing one is curious about. When one asks a propositional question, however, it is a lot more difficult to identify what the object of curiosity is. Whatever it may be, I thought, it must have to do with the referent of a sentence. Initially by appealing to the dominant Fregean view, I thought that the object of curiosity in such cases could be one of the two *truth values* as they are usually called, but then I came to realize that I had no idea what these odd Fregean entities were supposed to be. I contemplated this for some time, and then one night I had a dream. I was in the middle of nowhere, perhaps in space, and there was this gray sphere right before me, about the size of my head, hanging in mid-air. I asked, "Who are you?", and a low confident voice responded, "I am *the True*", with an emphasis on the last word. I said, "I thought you were an abstract entity", to which it said, "I am, but I portray myself as a sphere to communicate with you". I then asked, "Where is the False?", and the sphere responded, "Ha… ha… that is just a myth." It dawned on me then that we call a sentence *false*, not when it refers to some unidentified odd entity, but when it simply fails to refer. This then led me to consider the most intuitive idea that a sentence that expresses a truth refers to a portion of reality. Just as I can use the name "Sue" to refer to Sue, I can use the sentence "Sue is happy" to refer to a certain state that Sue is in, namely her being happy. If I am curious whether Sue is happy, then what I wish to know is whether such a state exists, or whether my sentence refers to that state. I then realized that when our sentences succeed in referring then we call them *true*, and when they fail, we call them *false*. This very simple idea is what led to the referential theory of truth and falsity. Just as with most alternative theories, it is a theory that is quite easy to state, but very difficult to defend.

Not to create any false expectations, let me first say a few words about what I shall not be directly discussing in this book. There are various popular metaphysical, ontological, epistemic, ethical, and political problems regarding our ordinary concept of truth that I shall not directly address. The theory of truth that will be explained and defended here

will not presuppose any definite view on what the world is like, what it consists of, whether we can ever come to know it, whether it is partially our own construct, when we are entitled to assert something as being true, whether something being true is wholly or partially dependent on our culture, what the political and ethical implications of claims to truth are, etc. That is not to say that such important issues will be completely irrelevant; by gaining a better understanding of the deep grammar of truth we will be in a better position to clarify some of the important questions we ask about such issues, and, perhaps more importantly, to raise novel questions about them. In a nutshell I shall try to demonstrate that truth is a subspecies of our more general notion of reference, and then I shall discuss its implications with regard to various philosophical issues to show how fruitful a theory it is. An important moral to be drawn from the discussions to follow is that the concept of truth is not an essential part of language, and for languages such as ours which are built on the concept of truth, reaching truth cannot be the ultimate epistemic goal.

Here is a brief summary of what is to follow: In Part I, after briefly introducing the referential theory, I engage in a critical discussion of Frege's theory of truth and falsity, ending up denying almost everything that Frege says, except his initial claim that sentences are referring expressions. I then construct Whenglish, a hypothetical language, which will help us reveal our semantic intuitions that sentences are in fact referring expressions, and will also support the two fundamental claims of my theory, that truth is a form of successful reference, and falsity is a form of failure of reference. Furthermore, it will demonstrate how there could have been a language with no sentences, no predication, and no notions of truth and falsity. I then attempt to show what goes wrong in the famous Slingshot argument, which is supposed to show that if sentences refer, they refer to their truth values. Part II contains a discussion of the ways in which the referential theory relates to, and differs from, some of the basic theories of truth within the literature, namely, correspondence, identity, truthmaker, and deflationism. Part III is devoted to a discussion of how the referential theory deals with negative sentences, disjunctions, conditionals and quantified sentences, in which I try to show that logical notions act as reference-shifting operators in such sentences which refer to what I call *conceptual states* when they express truths. Part IV concentrates on certain important philosophical applications and implications of the referential theory. Initially, I discuss how the referential theory may shed new light on the Liar paradox. I then take up four separate distinctions between ways of referring and apply them to declarative sentences and their uses and discuss various implications of this in relation the referential theory. First, I take up Kripke's distinction between speaker's reference and semantic reference, as well as Donnellan's distinction between referential and attributive uses of definite descriptions, and explore how these distinctions, with certain modifications, could be generalized in

order to apply them to the use of full sentences in a philosophically interesting way. Then I take up my own distinction between ostensible and inostensible reference, which is roughly the distinction between reference to something known versus something unknown and show how this distinction can be applied to an agent's epistemic connection to the referent of a sentence. This chapter is also aimed at constructing the background for the discussion of two types of propositional knowledge that comes later. In the following chapter I try to show how Kripke's distinction between rigid and non-rigid designation could be applied to sentences and discuss in what ways this is philosophically fruitful. Based on this discussion, I then take up the implications of the referential theory with respect to the distinction between necessary and contingent truths. The next chapter is on certain epistemic implications of the referential theory regarding the notions of knowledge and curiosity, which will allow us to make a novel distinction between two kinds of propositional curiosity and, perhaps more importantly, between two corresponding kinds of propositional knowledge. The final chapter is on the implications of the referential theory with regard to the evolution of language and the emergence of our concepts of truth and falsity.

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