

Book Review

The Metaphysics of Truth, by Douglas Edwards. Oxford University Press, 2018, 208pp.

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There's recently been a revival of interest in what truth is. For a long time, deflationism ruled the roost, telling us that there's not much of metaphysical interest in studying truth. Metaphysicians turned their attention to truthmaking and, for the most part, didn't connect their findings to theories of truth. But the pendulum swings back. Enter Douglas Edwards's *The Metaphysics of Truth*, which boldly sets out a theory of truth in the grand old style.

In fact, you get not one but several theories of truth, for Edwards is a *pluralist* about truth. Traditional realist correspondence theories are fine as far as they go; as are (broadly anti-realist) pragmatist theories. Each works well within its own domain, but none covers all the cases. Some truths are true because they correspond to mind-independent states of affairs. Others are true because they possess a warrant which would survive arbitrarily close scrutiny and improvement in information (they are *superassertible*). Nevertheless, *being true* is a unified property, not a 'mere disjunction', as it satisfies the conceptual platitudes governing our concept of truth.

Edwards starts by arguing that *being true* is a genuine property (chapter 1) and, more importantly, that it is a substantial property, with a nature we can investigate metaphysically (chapters 2 and 3). Pluralism about truth emerges in chapters 4 and 5. Edwards then claims that its nature cannot be given purely by any traditional approach to truth. This provides his main argument for pluralism. Just how truth pluralism should be defined is deferred until chapter 7, where Edwards presents his view, *determination pluralism*, and contrasts it with other pluralist approaches from Crispin Wright (1992, 2003), Michael Lynch (2009), and Nikolaj Pedersen and Cory Wright (2013).

One very welcome development at this point is Edwards's focus on social truths (chapter 4 and elsewhere), something that's noticeably lacking in traditional metaphysics. Edwards considers leading social constructivist theories of race and gender, including Haslanger's hugely influential *ameliorative* account. He then asks how a metaphysical theory can account for such truths. His contention is that, although there genuinely are truths about social reality,

they are of a different kind than truths about chemical or biological reality. This, he argues, is a strong motivation for pluralism about truth.

Edwards then links truth pluralism to *ontological pluralism*: the idea that there are multiple ways in which something can have existence or being. This is one of the most interesting developments in the book. For while truth pluralism has been around for a good 25 years, ontological pluralism is much newer. (Or rather, it's an old idea which was seemingly killed off in the analytic literature by Quine, but which has recently begun to reemerge.) The final part of the book (chapters 9 and 10) turns to truthmaking and primitivism about truth, the view that there can be no informative theory of truth. Here, Edwards argues persuasively that 'if you want to endorse a theory of truth-makers, you must admit there is a substantive and articulable nature of truth' (182).

The book is a good read, with clear writing in an easy style. It's also relatively short, at 183 pages of text. For the most part, Edwards cuts to the chase, with minimal tangents, digressions, and diversions. All of this makes the book a great choice for students or for those wanting to quick overview of truth pluralism. (If you didn't get on with *Truth and Objectivity*, this might well be the book for you.)

There were places where I'd liked to have heard more. Some of the argument against deflationism in chapter 3 (which mostly rests on arguments from Frank Ramsey, Michael Lynch, and Crispin Wright) goes past quickly. I'd also have liked to have heard more about Edwards's preferred account of truth pluralism, *determination pluralism*, and how it differs from other pluralist accounts: the discussion in §7.2 is rather brief.

What of the view itself? I'll focus on some features of Edwards's determination pluralism about truth (setting aside ontological pluralism).

Edwards sets up his metaphysical view in terms of the metaphysical distinction between *sparse* and *abundant* properties. The former are often taken to capture genuine and objective similarities between objects and to support inductive generalisations, whereas the latter correspond to the many arbitrary ways in which we may describe things. Edwards doesn't take a stance on the metaphysics of sparse properties: they could be universals, tropes, or natural classes (37).

Next comes the idea of *domains of discourse*: the physical, biological, social, moral, aesthetic, and so on. Each predicate is associated with a domain and this determines which domain a sentence falls into. Each domain is then associated with a truth-like property (such as correspondence or superassertibility), and this determines the way such sentences are true or false. Biological sentences are true when they correspond to biological facts, for example, whereas moral sentences are true iff superassertible.

What determines the appropriate truth-like property for a domain? A key idea is that predicates come in two kinds: those that are *responsive* to objective reality 'out there' and those that *generate* parts of reality. Physical, chemical, and biological predicates fall into the former category; social, moral, and aesthetic

into the latter. Connecting up these ideas, Edwards takes responsive predicates to pick out sparse properties, whereas generative predicates denote abundant properties. So, in general, sentences characterised by responsive predicates are apt for correspondence-truth, whereas sentences characterised by generative predicates are apt for superassertibility-truth.

I'm now going to outline, in no particular order, some thoughts and worries that occurred to me as I read through *The Metaphysics of Truth*.

The view might be thought of as *dualism* about truth. (OK, dualism is a form of pluralism, but no one calls Descartes a mind-body *pluralist*!) Two-category thinking pervades Edwards's analysis. There's two main kinds of predicates (responsive and generative), denoting two determinate truth properties (correspondence and superassertibility). By contrast, the motivations for pluralism are often far less constrained. There are mathematical truths; moral truths; modal truths; aesthetic truths. Are these all alethically on a par? Even if mathematical or moral truths are in some sense 'up to us', are they really up to us in the same way that the truths of *Wuthering Heights* or *Withnail & I* are?

Moreover, lining up predicates and properties in this way gives some strange results. Both 'is a gene' and 'is a penguin' are biological, hence responsive, predicates. So 'is either a gene or a penguin' is a responsive predicate, denoting a sparse biological property. Yet 'is either a gene or a penguin' is a paradigm gerrymander: precisely the kind of case for which philosophers appeal to abundant properties.

A further worry in the area is Edwards's characterisation of abundant properties as those which an object has in virtue of the corresponding sentence being true (84–8). On this view, Cleopatra had the property *being a woman* because 'Cleopatra was a woman' is true. But this seems problematic. For one thing, there were no token utterances (Edwards's truthbearers: 20) of that English sentence in 30 BCE; yet Cleopatra was a woman then. It's not as if she became one when the first such token was uttered. But more importantly, a person is a woman (according to Haslanger and many others) in virtue of the systematic kinds of oppression, based on real or presumed biological features, they face. All of that can obtain without a society having a word or a concept for woman.

A general worry for many pluralist views (not just Edwards's) is the reliance on superassertibility as the truth-property for a range of domains. A feature of superassertibility is that, if *A* is superassertible, then it's knowable that *A* is superassertible. Hence within such domains, all truths must be knowable. But is it plausible that we could know all moral, modal, or mathematical truths? Moreover, superassertibility seems incompatible with vagueness. If there are indeterminate truths (as epistemicists claim) then they are unknowable truths. If not, then I may be warranted by the visual evidence in taking this borderline reddish patch to be red. By hypothesis, nothing can destroy that warrant. So, my belief is superassertible yet (by hypothesis) not true. Given that there is vagueness in the moral and aesthetic domains, superassertibility cannot be the relevant truth-property. Edwards occasionally mentions a *coherence* theory as an

alternative for these domains (83). But coherence seems a worse choice than superassertibility for a domain-specific truth property, given that it does not consistently support the T-scheme. Consider again the borderline red patch. One maximally coherent set of beliefs takes it to be red; another takes it to be non-red. So if we define truth as membership of a set of maximally coherent beliefs, the truths are inconsistent. Adding the T-scheme leads to inconsistency *simpliciter*.

What about Edwards's favoured version of pluralism, *determinism pluralism*, itself? To understand the view, we need to understand the relationship of determination that holds between correspondence (or superassertibility) and *being true*. One model is the familiar determinate/determinable relationship that holds between, e.g., *being red* and *being scarlet*. But that doesn't seem to be the correct reading here. For one thing, a truth may be both a truth-by-correspondence and superassertible (the truth *that I'm alive*, for example), whereas properties like *being scarlet* seem to exclude other determinates of the same determinable. And indeed, this seems not to be the model Edwards has in mind (126). Instead, Edwards describes the relationship on the model of *winning*, for which there are a number of 'winning-determining properties'. You can win by potting the black, by checkmating, and so on (§7.1). I wanted to hear a little more here. For these seem to me to be ways of winning in much the way that *being scarlet* is a way of being red. If we're not to understand them in that way, I'm not sure how we should understand them.

Characteristic of Edwards's view is that the property *being true* is not ontologically derivative upon the specific truth-properties. It is not the disjunction of them, for example. The generic property is more basic than any of its domain-specific determinates (155). But the domain-specific properties all entail truth. So we have necessary connections between wholly distinct entities. What explains this? Edwards gestures towards conceptual norms governing truth (125), but this can't help if we're asking about a metaphysical relationship between (sparse) properties. Note that both these worries would be overcome if truth were a disjunctive (*either corresponding or being superassertible*) or existential (*being such that some domain-specific property applies*) property. For then, the connection would be at bottom a logical one, explicable in virtue of the disjunctive or existential nature of that property.

Here's another worry. Edwards pursues the metaphysics of properties in general in terms of the sparse/abundant distinction. And *being true* is a property. So which kind is it: sparse or abundant? Neither answer is particularly happy. If sparse, then the sparse truth of 'murder is wrong' would seem to require objective, mind-independent reality to be such that murder is wrong, contrary to the pluralist's characterisation of moral truth. And in general, by the same reasoning, it would seem that no truth-by-superassertibility can have a sparse property of truth. If abundant, on the other hand, then the truth of 'evolutionary theory is true' would be a generative, mind-dependent, 'up to us' matter. At times, it sounds as if objective truth is a sparse property whereas mind-dependent

truth is abundant. But that undermines Edwards's contention that there is a single, unified, generic property being true. If there isn't a single, unified, generic truth property, then worries about 'mixed' inferences reappear, for there would then be no property which all valid inferences preserve. (And similarly for the problem of 'mixed' conjunctions.)

Edwards, noting a similar worry (§7.5), says that *being true* is neither a sparse nor an abundant property (140). It's some other kind of entity. What kind? Edwards doesn't say. Many philosophers think properties are either sparse or abundant; many even take 'abundant' to mean something like 'a property that isn't sparse'. This 'other' category of property is left mysterious. I worry that we're forced to posit a new ontological category just to get us out of trouble: never a welcome outcome. (Moreover, it would be one containing a single entity: *being true*.)

One final worry (which reflects my own take on the issue) is that we seem to be able to account for much of what pluralists want to say without pluralism. Here's how. Identify *being true* with the existential property of *having a truthmaker*. If all truths have a truthmaker, then that gets the extension of 'is true' right. It also explains the unity of truth. The pluralist's insights are explained by the range of ontological categories from which truthmakers may be drawn. They may be states of affairs, objects, properties, or events. They may be concrete or abstract, physical or mental, microscopic or macroscopic, objective or mind-dependent. Some truthmakers exist because (in part) we bring them into existence; some don't.

Here's why I think something like this picture *has* to be along the right lines. Some truthmaker theorists say that only the fundamental entities do truthmaking duty; others count metaphysically derivative entities among the truthmakers. Either way, if you have suitable fundamental entities, you'll have truthmakers enough for your truths. So if there aren't objective, worldly truthmakers for social truths (for example), then it must be that the social world isn't ultimately grounded in the non-social. But it is. Our mental lives (or at least, our contentful mental states) are ultimately grounded in physical facts. Our dispositions to believe, trust, assert, and so on, are all ultimately grounded in objective, non-mental reality. We are part of the physical world too. Indeed, Edwards acknowledges the 'global applicability' of the truthmaker principle (170). This alternative view can still accommodate the intuition that some matters are 'up to us': truths are subjective, or intersubjective, when the story of how they're grounded involves (at some level) facts about our mental states. I suggest that this kind of view can accommodate many of Edwards's insights, but without the costs of pluralism.

The Metaphysics of Truth raises all of these interesting issues and more. That makes it a very rewarding, as well as enjoyable, read. It's an excellent choice for students and faculty looking for an introduction to pluralism about truth. Those already invested in the area would perhaps have benefitted from more

detail along the way. Nevertheless, Edwards's own version of pluralism is reasonable and well-motivated, and certainly seems to be an improvement of Crispin Wright's (1992, 2003) 'strong pluralism'. The applications of Edwards's theory to social truth and ontological pluralism adds to its interest. I'm looking forward to hearing more on these topics.

References

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