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Realism, Pure and Simple? A Reply to Timothy Williamson

Timothy Williamson's interesting and searching critical study¹ calls into question a number of concepts and claims which are important to the structure of *Truth and Objectivity*. Among his contentions are

- that assertoric content is not so cheap a commodity as is there suggested;
- that superassertibility cannot serve as a truth predicate for any but the most limited discourses;
- that the Cognitive Command constraint is open to trivialization, being satisfied by any minimally truth-apt discourse;
- that the notion of a 'discourse' is anyway ill defined for the purposes of the pluralism about truth bruited in *Truth and Objectivity*;
- that a realist should not unprotestingly accept the idea of minimalism as the default option with respect to a given region of discourse;
- and, in general, that the issues about realism are better kept simple – that we do not stand to gain by trying to work within the sort of pluralistic framework which *Truth and Objectivity* recommends.

I shall here take the opportunity briefly to explain why, on these various matters, I continue to prefer my thoughts to Williamson's.

I. Assertoric Content

According to minimalism, to ascribe truth is not to ascribe a property of intrinsic metaphysical *gravitas*. Any sentence is a candidate for truth which is possessed of assertoric content; and possession of assertoric content is essentially a matter of meeting certain syntactic and disciplinary constraints – essentially, a sentence has to be capable of significant embedding within constructions such as negation, the conditional, and contexts of propositional attitude, and its use must be subject to acknowledged standards of warrant. When such standards are satisfied, that will then suffice, *ceteris paribus*, to justify the claim of truth.²

Williamson suggests that to look at matters in this way is to risk missing a distinction – namely, that between sentences which *aspire* to assertoric content, as he puts it, and those which really achieve it. What satisfaction of the syntactic and disciplinary constraints ensures, in Williamson's view, is merely the *aspiration* to assertoric content, which aspiration may be unfulfilled nevertheless.

What necessitates such a distinction? On Williamson's view it is required to handle a sentence like 'Eldorado is crowded' – a sentence which, 'on one respectable view', is unavailable for the making of any genuine statement since 'Eldorado' fails to refer. The example is cannily chosen, since it might be used either to highlight a difficulty posed for minimalism by recognizedly mythical and fictional discourses, or by the possibility of unwitting reference

failure by practitioners of a discourse who mistakenly believe in the existence of certain objects or properties.³ I shall say a little about both.

Discourse both within and about a fiction characteristically makes liberal use of the indicative mood, with all the syntactic variety which that subserves, and is subject to a high degree of internal discipline: there are many claims about Hamlet which are determinately correct, and many which are determinately incorrect. Ought not such statements to count, therefore, as minimally truth-apt? And is there not as much reason to regard any of them as true, therefore, as there is reason to regard it as acceptable by the standards of the fiction which it concerns?

Now certainly a minimalist might answer 'yes' to both those questions. The result would be to enjoin an ontology of fictional characters, rather cheaply as one might think.⁴ Suitable sentences featuring 'Eldorado' which are in accordance with the legend would likewise foist a reference upon that name – to a real mythical city, as it were. But I doubt if minimalism should take this line; certainly, it is not forced to. One alternative – in effect, one of the options offered to error-theory in *Truth and Objectivity*⁵ – would be to maintain that the truth predicate relevant to fictional discourse generally, and to Spanish legend in particular, is not the notion of superassertibility arrived at by generalization over the standards of acceptability internal to such discourses – essentially a matter of conformity with the fiction, or legend – but involves compliance with some externally given standard; for instance, in the case in point, that it has to do with representation of the characteristics of a real city somewhere. The challenge posed by minimalism to the error-theorist about a given region of discourse is to make out either that accepted opinion within that region hardly ever actually conforms to the standards of warrant which actually govern it, or that the notion of truth which actually informs the discourse is not superassertibility in the light of those standards. I would propose that we should take an error-theoretic view, in the latter sense, about fiction. George Eliot's fiction is of real people inhabiting a town called Middlemarch. The statements of the fiction are true or false according to whether there really is or is not such a town inhabited by people who are named and described as by the authoress. Warrant for such a statement, by contrast, understood in such a way as to allow George Eliot's own statements and those within the bounds of responsible interpretation of her fiction to be warranted, is a matter, broadly, of conformity with that fiction. And – what is distinctive of fiction – to have warrant, in that sense, is to have no reason whatever to regard such a statement as true. On such an account, there will be no pressure upon the minimalist either to countenance an 'unbearably light' ontology or to accept that, fictional discourse's satisfaction of the emphasized constraints of syntax and discipline notwithstanding, no genuinely truth-evaluable contents are dealt with therein.⁶

Alternatively, we may take Williamson's example as motivating an objection based on any view which, like that of Gareth Evans,⁷ holds that

failure of reference is, in the right kind of context, sufficient to divest a sentence of truth-evaluable content. On such a view, we, who mistakenly believe in the golden city of legend, may use sentences like 'Eldorado is crowded' in such a way as to respect the constraints of syntax and discipline emphasized by the minimalist, under the illusion that we are dealing in real contents, although no genuinely assertoric content is possessed by any such sentence. And now: if an illusion of singular reference can create an illusion of assertoric content, why cannot an illusion of *predicate reference* do likewise? Cannot the case of the moral error-theorist, for instance, be precisely that moral predicates, as standardly used, fail to refer to – to express – any genuine properties, and hence that moral discourse is not so much as minimally truth-apt?

This kind of view of the import of reference failure is, of course, controversial. But it would be better for the minimalist not to hold out a hostage to the outcome of that controversy. Rather, it seems to me that no damage is done to the dialectic of *Truth and Objectivity* if, at least pending resolution of such issues about reference, Williamson is granted a reference-failure-dependent distinction between genuine assertoric content and the mere aspiration to it, and it is allowed that, in cases where reference failure is an open possibility, all that is ensured by satisfaction of the constraints of syntax and discipline is possession of a kind of content indistinguishable from Williamson's mere aspiration. That there is nevertheless content of a sort in the relevant kind of case is indisputable. Even if 'Eldorado is crowded' actually expresses no singular thought, the sentence unquestionably has enough meaning to identify the kind of thought it aspires to express: it contains what is purportedly a singular term standing for an item of a familiar kind, understood to have certain well-understood distinguishing characteristics, and it purports to ascribe a well-understood property to that item. That is enough to ensure that tokenings of the sentence may intelligibly, if mistakenly, be believed to be true, and assessed accordingly. It is also enough to ensure that reason to suppose such a sentence true has to embrace reason to suppose that 'Eldorado' refers; and hence that the mere conformity of a particular such sentence with the legend – in circumstances where the legend is generally believed – is not sufficient to constitute a genuine warrant for the claim that the sentence is true.

This concession substantially affects the *Truth and Objectivity* treatment neither of expressivism nor of error-theory. If only reference failure stands between the aspiration to assertoric content and the real thing, then the aspiration already precludes expressivist construal, which is therefore pre-empted, as before, by satisfaction of the syntactical and disciplinary constraints. Nor, contrary to what Williamson implies, is life any easier for the moral error-theorist. It was recognized in *Truth and Objectivity* that an error-theorist might make a case precisely by arguing that little if anything of what passes as acceptable within a given discourse is, in the light of standards

appropriate to it, genuinely so. The disclosure of reference failure in a discourse which repeatedly and essentially purports reference to a particular type of object or property is, of course, one way of doing that. So there is no cause for *methodological* reproach of a moral error-theorist who takes just the tack that Williamson adverts to, attempting to argue that moral predicates lack reference. But it remains that in order successfully to prosecute that tack, he will have first to articulate a conception of moral properties no less clearly implicit in moral discourse than the above conception of the intended referent of 'Eldorado' is implicit in the discourse of those who believe in the legend; and then proceed to show, or anyway make it plausible, that nothing answers to that conception. And there's the rub. There is no doubt about the ontological commitments of one who subscribes to the Eldorado legend. But it is quite another thing to disclose a commitment, in ordinary moral thought and argument, to properties sufficiently metaphysically outlandish to facilitate the second part of the error-theorist's task. In any case, it will be made neither easier nor harder to do so if one corollary of success will be that moral discourse presents only an illusion of genuinely assertoric content.

II. Truth and Superassertibility

Can superassertibility – the property of being warranted by some state of information and then remaining warranted no matter how that state of information is enlarged upon or improved – function as a truth predicate? Williamson is sceptical. For suppose, for *reductio*, that truth and superassertibility coincide within a discourse D, and let *q* be a statement of that discourse, and (*) the statement:

q and no one ever has warrant for *q*.

By the hypothesized coincidence, and the Disquotational Scheme, we have that

(*) is superassertible if and only if *q* and no one ever has warrant for *q*.

It follows that if (*) is not superassertible, then

Not (*q* and no one ever has warrant for *q*).

Since (*) cannot be superassertible, the latter may be detached, whence, by classical logic

If *q*, then someone sometime has a warrant for *q*.

But this result is surely unacceptable: *q* may be any statement of D and there can be no a priori guarantee that all the truths of D will sometime be warranted.

This reasoning, as Williamson notes, has affinities with Fitch's so-called paradox⁸ and might be challenged in some of the ways familiar from the discussion of that paradox. For instance, the broad strategy of Dorothy Edgington's discussion of Fitch⁹ might be adapted to challenge Williamson's claim that (*) is not superassertible. Williamson reasons that (*) can be superassertible

... only if some state of information provides a warrant to assert that: *q* and no one ever has a warrant to assert that *q*. But a warrant to assert that conjunction is impossible, for it would involve a warrant to assert the first conjunct, that *Q*, and the existence of such a warrant is contradicted by the second conjunct, that no-one ever has a warrant to assert that *Q*. (p. 138)

Now strictly, this reasoning is good only if the existence of a warrant is the same thing as somebody sometime having that warrant. If the existence of a warrant is held to consist, rather, in its *availability* to one who prosecutes an appropriate channel of investigation, then a warrant can exist which no-one will ever actually have. It would be fair to reply that that distinction cannot help so long as it is accepted that no-one can simultaneously be warranted in believing both *q* and that no-one will ever have a warrant for *q*.¹⁰ For in that case no such warrant could be reckoned to be so much as available. But – the Edgington-type point – we have to ask after the range of the quantifier, ‘no-one’ in (*)’s second conjunct. Whatever it is, it is consistent with each of the subjects who fall within it always lacking warrant for *q* that there should be *another* subject who has warrant both for *q* and for the perennial ignorance on the matter of each of the subjects in the former range. Of course, such a subject will not be able to *express* that for which he or she has warrant by a tokening of the sentence ‘*q* and no-one ever has warrant for *q*’. But that is owing to the, in effect, indexicality of the quantifier. It is familiar that justification for a tokening of an indexical sentence may be possible only for someone in whose mouth the claim thereby made needs to be re-expressed. (Consider a tokening of ‘I am the leftmost’, uttered by the leftmost child in a row of immobilized, blindfolded children.) Where indexical sentences are concerned, superassertibility, like truth, has to be construed as a property of specific tokenings; and it is a property which belongs to a tokening in virtue of the claim made thereby.¹¹

A distinct reservation about Williamson’s argument would concern its reliance on classical logic at the final stage. Williamson explicitly signals this reliance, but observes in a footnote¹² that I myself have been critical of attempts to resolve Fitch’s paradox by recourse to intuitionistic logic. He means his readers to conclude, presumably, that I could have no consistent quarrel with the use of classical logic in the present context. In fact, however, *Truth and Objectivity* explicitly argues¹³ that classical logic must be a casualty in any region of discourse where truth is held to be epistemically constrained but it is acknowledged that not all issues are guaranteed to be (weakly) decidable.¹⁴ This was, moreover, explicitly signalled as a change of heart. Since superassertibility is evidentially constrained, any discourse for which truth is held to be constituted by superassertibility, and which is rich enough to express the premises for Williamson’s argument must – if sentences like (*) are not effectively (weakly) decidable – be one for which

classical logic has been rejected. In that case, even prescindng from the previous concern, the final step in the argument would be undermined.

The most basic concern, however, about Williamson's adaptation of Fitch is that it merely ignores provisos which are explicit in *Truth and Objectivity*. It is explicitly acknowledged that superassertibility cannot do duty as a truth predicate for any discourse in which truth can convincingly be argued to be epistemically unconstrained. If Williamson is right that there can be no such thing as a warrant for any sentence of the type of (*), then the truth of any such sentence transcends all possible evidence, and cannot accordingly be modelled by superassertibility. What was claimed is that superassertibility will serve as a model for the truth predicate – that is, an extensionally adequate construal of it – for any discourse all of whose truths are knowable. If (*) is a sentence which cannot be warranted, then no such discourse will contain a sentence of that ilk. There is therefore no thesis in *Truth and Objectivity* with which Williamson's argument, even if sound, engages. Williamson will be likely to reply that any worthwhile discourse will surely embrace the means for discussion of which of its sentences are, have been, or will be warranted; and that the concession that no discourse containing the resources for the construction of a sentence like (*) can allow construal of its truth predicate as superassertibility is therefore tantamount to the concession that superassertibility can do justice to truth only in highly artificial, restricted circumstances. But that is wrong. When we envisage the possibility of different outcomes to the realist/anti-realist debates about, for instance, morals, mathematics and comedy, we are concerned with the status of commitments distinctive of those areas of discourse in a sense in which – for moral, mathematical and comic 'P' respectively – someone who asserts 'No-one will ever have a warrant for 'P' need *not* have undertaken a moral, mathematical or comic commitment.

III An Attempt to Trivialize Cognitive Command

A discourse exerts Cognitive Command just in case it is a priori that disagreements formulated within it, were not attributable to vagueness, of any of a variety of kinds,¹⁶ will involve some form of cognitive shortcoming. I argued that a discourse's meeting this condition is necessary if we are to think of it as apt to *represent* in a more than minimal sense, and that minimally truth-apt discourses can fail to meet the condition. The latter claim has proved to provoke suspicion.¹⁶ Williamson argues, in effect, that it can be sustained only by making out a more refined sense of 'cognitive shortcoming' than anything explained in *Truth and Objectivity*, and that it is unclear along what lines such an explanation might run.

My strategy to ward off trivialization was to try to show how the ascription of Cognitive Command to a discourse is something that cannot be undertaken lightly, but, even after the minimal truth aptitude of a discourse is agreed,

demands serious philosophical work: either a case must be made for semantic (Dummettian) realism for the discourse in question, or some form of intuitionist epistemology must be postulated for statements of the discourse, or for others which must come into dispute if a disagreement within the discourse is to be rationally sustained. In Williamson's view, this attempt fails. It fails because a very simple line of thought directly delivers the conclusion, that cognitive shortcoming must be involved in any dispute within a minimally truth-apt discourse, without further philosophical obligation. As Williamson expresses the matter,

Suppose that my opinion 'Rhubarb is disgusting' and your opinion 'Rhubarb is delicious' are both true. Then, by the disquotational property of minimal truth, rhubarb is disgusting and rhubarb is delicious. That, however, is impossible; It follows that our opinions are not both true. Thus it seems to be a priori that our difference of opinion does involve something which may properly be regarded as a cognitive shortcoming. (p. 140)

Are matters so simple? How exactly does the assurance emerge that one of the protagonists in the rhubarb dispute is coming cognitively short? Certainly, not both opinions can be true. But it would seem necessary, if cognitive shortcoming is to be implicated in the dispute, that one protagonist in particular (or of course both) be guilty of it. Williamson therefore needs to be able to conclude that either one, or the other, of the opinions involved must be determinately untrue. And it is a *classical* step to that from the lemma that not both are true.¹⁷ Bivalence – or at least determinacy as between truth and untruth – is needed to justify such a step. Such principles may be viewed as question-begging in a context in which, could we but get a decent grip on the notion, it may be right to think in terms of the possibility of there being 'no fact of the matter'.

Let us try, on Williamson's behalf, a variant, equally simple line of argument. Put up, for *reductio*, the hypothesis that the dispute about rhubarb involves no cognitive shortcoming; and suppose that my opinion is merely that rhubarb is not disgusting. And now suppose

1 Rhubarb is disgusting;

Then

2 I am guilty of cognitive shortcoming (since I hold that it isn't).

Therefore

3 It is not the case that rhubarb is disgusting (from [1] and the hypothesis).

Hence

4 Williamson is guilty of cognitive shortcoming (since he holds that rhubarb is disgusting).

But that again contradicts the original hypothesis, that no-one is guilty of cognitive shortcoming, which is therefore false.

Anyone inclined to draw the conclusion that Williamson is right, and that cognitive shortcoming must indeed be involved in any dispute within a minimally truth-apt region of thought, ought to reflect that a perfectly parallel argument could be run concerning a conflict of opinion about a borderline case of some *vague* concept, say a shade of colour on the borderline between red and purple. Part of what is meant by the idea that the borderline between red and purple is vague is precisely that there are shades of colour in that region about which neither verdict, 'red' nor 'purple', is *mandated*, though either is *permissible*. It follows that about such a shade you and I may permissibly disagree about the merit of the verdict, 'purple'. The conclusion is utterly unwanted that one of us has to be in error. But the line of argument just illustrated looks to railroad that conclusion through.

What is going wrong?¹⁸ Even in a case where no particular verdict is mandated, to the extent that a verdict, say 'purple', is permissible, to that extent the *consequences* of that verdict have to be reckoned permissible too. But if the shade is purple, then someone who thinks otherwise is guilty of cognitive shortcoming. So if it is permissible to regard the shade as purple, it must also be permissible to think that cognitive shortcoming is involved in the dispute. That is perfectly in accord with the immediate conclusion of the *reductio*, whose effect is to enforce denial of the hypothesis that no cognitive shortcoming is involved. But Cognitive Command, remember, requires *more* than permissibility for the claim that cognitive shortcoming is involved: it requires an *a priori mandate* for that claim. And that has not been made out. Or rather: such a mandate is forthcoming only if we grant a double negation elimination step on the immediate conclusion of the *reductio*, and so rely on classical logic once again. There's nothing wrong with the argument about the rhubarb dispute – as far as it goes. The point is rather that the conclusion falls short of what is necessary to justify Williamson's suspicion.

Concerning a dispute about a borderline case nothing is more natural than to affirm that nobody need be wrong. But we must *not* affirm that. For if nobody is wrong, then since it follows from A's opinion, that *P*, that B's opinion, that not-*P*, is wrong, A has to be wrong – contrary to hypothesis. To take indeterminacy seriously is to recognize that for a shade to lie on the borderline between red and purple is for it to enjoy a status consistent *both* with its being red *and* with its being purple – not a third kind of status, inconsistent with both. To take it that it may be determinately the case – hence *mandated* – that no cognitive shortcoming is involved in a conflict of opinion about such a case is implicitly inconsistent with the recognition that this is the nature of indeterminacy.

That, at any rate, is the view which I would favour of the borderline cases spawned by semantic vagueness. And what I am suggesting is that discourses in which Cognitive Command fails involve indeterminacy of a structurally similar sort – only not generated, of course, by semantic vagueness. Each protagonist in the dispute about rhubarb is committed to regarding the other

as guilty of cognitive shortcoming; and the view of each protagonist is permissible. But to take it that the determinately correct view is that no shortcoming is involved in that dispute, is to take it that those views are *not* permissible. So that hypothesis is indeed at fault, and has to be rejected. The point, however, is that to reject the hypothesis is not to saddle the aesthetics of food with Cognitive Command. It has not been shown to be a priori that cognitive shortcoming has to be involved in such a dispute; what has been shown is only that there can be no mandate for the claim that *no* shortcoming is involved. That is exactly as it should be if conflicting opinions are permissible.

What Williamson's simple train of thought, reworked in this way, brings out is that care is necessary in the description of what is involved in a discourse's failure of Cognitive Command – more care, no doubt, than I consistently exercised in *Truth and Objectivity*. What remains (plausibly) true is that it is not a priori that a dispute about whether or not rhubarb is disgusting has to involve cognitive shortcoming. But that's not to say that it may be right to suppose that no shortcoming is involved. For if it were right, then neither protagonist – each of whom is committed to shortcoming on the part of the other – can be right, so each is guilty of cognitive shortcoming after all. The contrast between discourses which exert Cognitive Command and the merely minimally truth-apt is a contrast between those wherein disagreements must, subject to the other conditions, be ascribed to cognitive shortcoming and those which make possible disagreements for which such an ascription is not mandated.

The foregoing outlines moves available to a defender of distance between minimal truth aptitude and Cognitive Command who continues to work with the thin notion whereby the holding of an untrue opinion is sufficient for cognitive shortcoming. Williamson, as noted, believes that a satisfactory response to his objection will have to work with a more substantial notion, and is sceptical whether anything suitable is available. It is therefore important to note that in the right circumstances the thin notion becomes itself rather more substantial than he seems to recognize. What occasions the thin notion is the desire that Cognitive Command should catch discourses for which we think of truth as evidentially unconstrained. The motivating kind of case is illustrated by the dispute, outlined in the latter half of Chapter 4 of *Truth and Objectivity*, in which two scientific theorists arrive at conflicting theoretical opinions via the internally blameless prosecution of good scientific method. If we think ourselves entitled to the view that there must be facts of the matter which one, or both, are misrepresenting, then the capacity of the Cognitive Command constraint to put controls on the notion of 'representation', understood in a fashion congenial to the realist, demands that cognitive shortcoming be involved in such a dispute; so there is no option but to say that the mere holding of an untrue opinion suffices, in such a case, for cognitive shortcoming. Obviously matters change, however, if we are

concerned with statements whose truth or untruth cannot, we conceive, lie beyond detection. In such cases the holding of an untrue opinion ensures something more, namely, either that optimal means for determination of the truth status of the statement in question have not been implemented, or that they have been mis-implemented. And in such a case there will therefore be some fact about the way a subject has arrived at an errant view such that one who happened to know of that fact would have grounds for reservation about the errant view *independently* of any self-standing opinion on the matter concerned.¹⁹ Such a notion is actually pointed to in a number of passages in *Truth and Objectivity*,²⁰ though Williamson does not discuss them.

In any area of discourse, therefore – like, plausibly, the aesthetics of rhubarb – where we pretend to no conception of how truth and untruth might altogether lie beyond our recognition, the claim that someone is holding an untrue opinion, and is thereby guilty of cognitive shortcoming, must be held to imply some in principle *independently appreciable* shortcoming in the grounding of that opinion. That is the claim that it takes ‘substantial philosophy’, of the kind mapped out on one main branch of the tree of alternatives explored in *Truth and Objectivity*, to make good. And it is something which a minimalist about the comic, or the aesthetics of rhubarb, will believe it is impossible to make good.

IV. Discourses, Default Views and Keeping Life Simple

Anyone who regards the debate between realist and anti-realist not as a single overarching metaphysical struggle but as the union of various local debates, so that the realist might conceivably win in the mathematical case, for instance, but lose in the moral, will want to go along with the idea of a plurality of discourses with respect to which local realist and anti-realist views can be brought into opposition. Williamson does not challenge that exactly. But he is resistant to the idea that such debates need not exhibit a common structure, whereby the realist about a given discourse is always represented as making essentially the same kind of claim; and more resistant still to the suggestion that anti-realism – minimalism – might be the default view. And above all, he is totally out of sympathy with the idea that a variety of truth predicates may be characteristic of different discourses. I shall finish by briefly responding to these ideas in reverse order.

I believe Williamson misunderstands the pluralism about truth canvassed in *Truth and Objectivity*. Here is a passage typical of the sort of reservation he has:

Suppose that the discourses D1 and D2 are both conducted in English ... let ‘A1’ and ‘A2’ be declarative sentences in D1 and D2 respectively. Thus ‘either A1 or A2’ is also a declarative sentence of English. Some notion of truth is applicable to both the disjunction and

its disjuncts, for otherwise the platitude that 'either A1 or A2' is true if and only if either 'A1' is true or 'A2' is true, would be vitiated by equivocation. Thus at least one notion of truth is applicable to both 'A1' and 'A2', and to longer sentences in which they are embedded. (p. 141)

This is an illustration of the more general point that

A natural language is strongly unified in syntax and semantics. Any finite set of its words can be combined together within the unity of a sentence. The notion of truth must respect and reflect this integrity. Truths are many; truth is one. (p.141)

The pluralism suggested in *Truth and Objectivity* is not in tension with this. And I ought not to have written, if indeed I anywhere do, in a way which suggested the postulation of *ambiguity* in the word 'true'. An ambiguous term typically needs two or more explanations, each determining a different extension for it. For the minimalist, however, a truth predicate is any that satisfies the minimal set of platitudes: those platitudes enshrine all that can be said by way of explanation of the meaning of the word, which is therefore *uniform*. Since, moreover – as Williamson himself emphasizes²¹ – a truth predicate for a given discourse will satisfy the Disquotational Scheme, there is no question of a pair of predicates each qualifying as a truth predicate for a given discourse yet differing in extension. 'True' is not ambiguous as are 'stage', 'tear' and 'still'.

The variety which truth predicates in different discourses may nevertheless exhibit may be illustrated by a parallel with identity. In one sense the concept of identity does not vary as we consider different ranges of individuals, but is sustained by uniform inferential links, grounded in the twin platitudes that everything is self-identical, and that identicals share all their properties. Nevertheless what *constitutes* identity is subject to considerable variation as we vary the kinds of objects with which we are concerned. The identity of material objects is arguably constituted by spatio-temporal continuity; identity and distinctness among numbers, on Frege's famous account, is dictated by relations of one-one correspondence among associated concepts; the directions of lines are identified and distinguished by relations of parallelism between lines; and it is, notoriously, very difficult to say what constitutes identity for persons, though considerations of bodily and psychological continuity call the shots.

The notion of 'constitution' applied here could no doubt be usefully clarified, but I see no reason to question the authenticity of the general idea that the instantiation of a certain concept may be constituted in different ways, depending upon the kind of instantiators concerned. That at any rate is the contention of pluralism about truth. There is no single discourse-invariant thing in which truth consists. Depending upon the region of discourse with

which we are concerned, it may consist in superassertibility, or not; in representation of explanatorily active states of affairs, or not; in a fact about the direction of ideal opinion, or not; and so on. That is to ascribe a species of diversity to the concept; but it is not of a kind to generate the sort of problem about the interpretation of the truth predicate when discourses mingle which Williamson alleges.

Of course, it would be consistent to accept that truth has a variable constitution, sometimes amounting to something congenial to the realist, sometimes not, without according default priority to anti-realism. Williamson begs leave to doubt that there is any good reason for such a view of the priorities, complaining that

Unfortunately, Wright doesn't make it clear why it is more 'unassuming' to assume that the truth predicate has no intuitively realist extra features than to assume that it has no intuitively anti-realist features (nor why we may need to make either assumption prior to investigation) (p. 136)²²

This remark would be fitting, it seems to me, if a merely minimally truth-apt discourse represented a *neutral zone*, about which neither a realist nor an anti-realist view would be appropriate; and if both realist and anti-realist had to substantiate their views by pointing to *additional* features which discourses might possess. But with one exception, that is not the way of it. The exception – the case where an intuitive anti-realism might feed upon the demonstration of a positive feature – is that of Euthryphronic discourses, wherein the extension of the truth predicate is (partially) best opinion determined. But in each of the other cases I distinguished – Evidence-transcendence, Cognitive Command, and Wide Cosmological Role – the anti-realist contention is of a property *missing*, and is carried in train by the contention that the discourse in question is *merely* minimally truth-apt. That has the following effect. If we are agreed that a certain discourse is minimally truth-apt, and have so far carried no investigation as to how it fares in the light of the various cruces, then we ought not so far, in our thought about truth and objectivity for the discourse in question, fall into any assumption inconsistent with the eventuality that it prove *merely* minimally truth-apt. If the justifiability of an anti-realist view depended upon the discourse's possession of *further* 'anti-realism relevant' features, then a kind of neutralism would be the default stance. But because that is not so, the distinction between neutralism and anti-realism effectively collapses.

That is not to say that the default assumption should be that subsequent investigation will turn out negatively, from a realist point of view. Williamson would be right to complain about that. The point is merely the obvious one that, given only the datum of minimal truth aptitude, the conservative strategy will be to make no assumption about the kind of content possessed by the

discourse, and the constitution of truth within it, which is not justified by that datum. So we will avoid thinking about such things in any of the ways evoked by standard realist imagery. We will thereby be default anti-realists – not in the sense that we assume that subsequent investigation will go the anti-realist's way, but in the sense that nothing in our practice of the discourse, nor in the conceptions of truth and objectivity for it which we can so far justifiably profess, will change if that proves to be so.

Williamson concludes his study on a note of scepticism about whether what he views as 'the proliferation of complexity' effected by *Truth and Objectivity* best serves the consideration of this set of issues. In so far as this doubt is generated by his convictions that truth has to be construed as uniform, and that key distinctions such as that between minimal truth aptitude and Cognitive Command have not been made out, then it is addressed by the preceding remarks, assuming that they are sound. But it seems to me that even one utterly sceptical about the specific proposals of *Truth and Objectivity* should mistrust the direction of Williamson's remarks here. The classical forms for opposition between realist and anti-realist – in particular, the expressivist, error-theoretic and Dummettian paradigms – demonstrably fail us when we use any one of them to attempt to construct a satisfying *ubersicht* of realist and anti-realist disputes in all the areas in which they arise. Whether or not *Truth and Objectivity* takes useful initial steps, nothing seems to be more certain in this area than that these debates exhibit an intrinsic variety and that we can only make their clarification and conduct unnecessarily difficult by assuming otherwise.

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Notes

I am indebted to Bob Hale, Stewart Shapiro and Timothy Williamson for correspondence and discussion.

- 1 *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 2 (1) (1994), pp. 130–44. All references by page numbers are to Williamson's essay unless otherwise stated. The essay discussed my *Truth and Objectivity* (Harvard University Press, 1992).
- 2 The proviso is wanted because the best construal of the notion of truth governing a particular discourse may represent it as disconnected from the standards of warrant on which practitioners rely. Such a separation is one way of making space for error-theories such as those of Mackie about ethics and Field about pure mathematics. See the remarks about fiction below.
- 3 Williamson's comparison with error-theoretic views of ethics suggests that he has the second sort of difficulty in mind.
- 4 This theme is pursued in John Divers and Alex Miller, 'Minimalism and the Unbearable Lightness of Being', forthcoming.

- 5 See Chapter 3, Section V.
- 6 Similar advantages might be carried by the quite different type of proposal that fictional statement be construed as true but *elliptical*, suppressing dominant occurrences of an operator like, 'According to George Eliot's fiction, . . .' whose effect would be to create referentially opaque contexts.
- 7 See his *The Varieties of Reference* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1982).
- 8 F. B. Fitch, 'A Logical Analysis of Some Value Concepts', *Journal of Symbolic Logic*, 28 (1963), pp. 135–42.
- 9 Dorothy Edgington, 'The Paradox of Knowability', *Mind*, 94 (1985), pp. 557–68.
- 10 The contrary supposition, that someone could be in position justifiably to accept a claim of the form, 'P and no-one will ever have a warrant for P' has points of affinity with Moore's Paradox 'P and I do not believe that P', though the latter, as usually presented, concerns assertion rather than belief, and makes no explicit play with warrant.
- 11 Williamson has objected to me in correspondence that to read quantifiers indexically in this way, and thereby to associate them rigidly with a particular domain, is to abrogate the means for any but a contradictory reading of a sentence like 'There is no-one who could have been born in the Cretaceous Age, but someone might have been.' I agree that there should be a way of hearing such a sentence which calls for non-rigid construal of its second quantifier. But it seems doubtful that such a construal is ever needed except within the scope of a modal operator; and in particular it is unclear what it would come to in the case of a quantifier with dominant scope, like the 'no-one' in the example we are concerned with.
- 12 Note 11, p. 144.
- 13 See Chapter 2, Section III.
- 14 A proposition is weakly decidable just in case at least *defeasible* evidence is available to decide between it and its negation.
- 15 For details, see *Truth and Objectivity*, pp. 143 ff.
- 16 In addition to Williamson, Mark Sainsbury has expressed doubts: see his contribution to the forthcoming Book Symposium on *Truth and Objectivity* in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*. The remarks that follow bear on a doubt generated in discussion of the book by philosophers at Ohio State and communicated to me by Stewart Shapiro.
- 17 The step, precisely, from 'not (A & B)' to 'not A V not B'.
- 18 Williamson, who favours the 'epistemic' view of vagueness (see his contribution to the symposium 'Vagueness and Ignorance' in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, supp. vol. LXVI [1992], pp. 145–62), will not feel obliged to think that anything is wrong. But the charge that Cognitive Command is open to trivialization is not, presumably, intended to depend upon that view. In correspondence, Williamson has argued that the 'utterly unwanted' conclusion about disputes over borderline cases ought actually to be accepted – at least if it is a cognitive shortcoming to believe what one does not know. For since one can presumably know only what is definitely the case, and since neither disputed opinion will be definitely true of a borderline case, neither opinion can constitute knowledge.

This is not the place to attempt a detailed treatment of the issues raised by this line of thought. I will merely say:

- that there seems to me to be little to recommend the principle that only known opinion avoids cognitive shortcoming;

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- that there is *something* to recommend the idea that, when a particular view of a borderline case is permissible, so is the claim of that view to amount to knowledge;
 - that the same thought speaks at least for the *permissibility* of the characterization, 'Definitely F' of borderline cases of F (and hence speaks against the idea that it is mandatory to characterize such cases as 'not definitely F and not definitely not F');
 - finally, that the intuition that borderline cases may permissibly be viewed in conflicting ways seems to me, by comparison with views on these other matters, relatively robust.
- 19 Note that this is not to say that there has always to be an effective way of finding such a fact in any case where one exists.
- 20 See for instance *Truth and Objectivity*, p. 103.
- 21 On p. 135. Cf. *Truth and Objectivity*, p. 52.
- 22 See *Truth and Objectivity*, p. 174, for one statement of the idea that Williamson is reacting against.