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Review of Chase Wrenn's Truth

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Truth

Chase Wrenn

Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2015; pbk, 211 pp., $22.95, 9780745663241

Chase Wrenn's *Truth* is an entry in Polity Press's Key Concepts in Philosophy series. Polity's

website for the series promises "concise and accessible books that introduce students to some of

the core concepts in philosophy. Each author will get to the heart of the debate about these

concepts — to chart their evolution, the battles over meaning and usage, and to discuss any

current controversies." Wrenn admirably fulfills this promise, providing a clear, concise, and

vivid introduction to both historical and current philosophical literature on the concept of truth,

presupposing "only as much background knowledge of logic and philosophy as a third- or

fourth-year undergraduate would have" (p. x). But don't expect unbiased reporting. As noted

in a back-cover blurb, *Truth* is an "opinionated introduction." For that, however, Wrenn should

not be faulted. I have yet to see a non-opinionated introduction to the philosophy of truth.

Wrenn's first three chapters introduce the central issues with respect to understanding

theories of truth, establishing in each chapter a desideratum of an adequate theory of truth. The

next four chapters survey the theoretical landscape. The final chapter draws together the

scattered opinions provided in the previous seven to defend a deflationary theory of truth.

Discussion throughout focuses more on issues than on a blow-by-blow of who said what.

Given this approach, chapters are not heavy with citations. Instead, each chapter is followed by

a helpful one- or two-page narrative of "further reading" for the interested student. Overall, the

execution is reminiscent of Stephen Read's superb *Thinking About Logic: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Logic* (Oxford, UK: Oxford UP, 1995).

Chapter one introduces the central problem of providing an account of the nature of the truth property and argues that a successful theory of that property must satisfy Tarski's material adequacy condition (must, that is, entail all instances of the schema "'s' is true if and only if s," where 's' is replaced by a declarative sentence). Chapter two provides a very nice discussion of how theories of truth engage the realism/anti-realism debate and defends "a mild form of realism," according to which there are some propositions that are objectively, yet unknowably, true. Chapter three discusses the problem of the value of truth, which has been central to debates regarding truth for the past couple of decades. Here Wrenn does an excellent job of laying out the issues and discussing the many different kinds of value relevant to the question of the value of truth. Wrenn defends the view that truth has *telic value*, that a concern for truth involves possessing many dispositions conducive to leading a good life. The upshot of these first three chapters is the following set of desiderata of an adequate theory of truth: (1) it must satisfy Tarski's material adequacy condition, (2) it must be compatible with the existence of unknowable truths, and (3) it must account for the telic value of truth.

In chapter four, Wrenn reviews the main epistemic theories of truth (coherence theories and pragmatist theories), then argues that all such theories fail to satisfy desiderata (1) and (2). Chapter five surveys the varieties of correspondence theory: the classical correspondence theories of early Russell and Wittgenstein, Hartry Field's causal correspondence theory, and truthmaker theories. Wrenn argues that correspondence theories fare poorly with desideratum (3), failing to provide any principled account of the value of truth. But the main problem faced

by correspondence theories, Wrenn argues, is "the scope problem." While correspondence theories provide plausible accounts of truths about cats on mats, they don't plausibly account for negative, mathematical, ethical, and counterfactual truths. Chapter six then turns to deflationary theories of truth. Here Wrenn discusses Ramsey's redundancy theory, Quine's disquotationalism, and Paul Horwich's minimalism. While the best of these (Horwich's minimalism) solves the scope problem and satisfies desiderata (1) and (2), Wrenn details the ways in which deflationism has had difficulty accounting for the value of truth.

The scope problem for correspondence theories and the value problem for deflationary theories focus the discussion of pluralist theories of truth in chapter seven (Crispin Wright's pluralism and Michael Lynch's functionalism). According to pluralist theories, our concept of truth is a unitary normative concept that picks out different truth properties in different discourses (picking out correspondence in scientific discourse, for example, but warranted assertibility in ethical discourse). Pluralist theories are designed specifically to solve the scope problem and to account for the value of truth, in that they take truth to be a normative property in all discourses. But, Wrenn argues, pluralist theories face the rather serious and unique problem of individuating discourses. Do discussions of the Institutional Review Board, for example, belong to scientific or ethical discourse? Where is the line between scientific and ethical discourses? Wrenn concludes, in chapter eight, by defending deflationism against the critiques of pluralists and arguing that deflationism can account for the telic value of truth.

As should be apparent from even this brief sketch, Wrenn covers a lot of ground, and he covers it lucidly, providing the best introductory undergraduate text on the philosophy of truth currently available. Richard Kirkham's *Theories of Truth: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge,

MA: MIT Press, 1992) has, since its publication, been the standard introduction to the philosophy of truth. But Kirkham's book is better suited to beginning graduate students than undergraduates, and it is now somewhat dated. Kirkham concludes with a brief discussion of Horwich's minimalism (as Horwich's *Truth* had, at the time, only recently been published), but Horwich's work stimulated a great deal of literature on truth, all of which post-dated Kirkham's book. Pascal Engel describes his *Truth* (Chesham: Acumen, 2002) as an "opinionated introduction," but its primary aim is to articulate and defend a theory of truth, and its (first three) "introductory" chapters are really written for professional philosophers, not initiates. If you know the literature, Engel's brief synopses and swift argumentative moves make sense, but if you don't know it you won't gain much understanding of it from his quick tour. Finally, Wolfgang Künne's excellent *Conceptions of Truth* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 2003) provides very detailed, and very Germanic, scholarship on the whole history of the literature on truth. But it, too, is better suited for graduate students and professionals than undergraduates, and it is roughly three times as long as Wrenn's concise volume. Wrenn's *Truth* is more accessible than any of these for an undergraduate audience, and it is more current than any of these, providing excellent coverage of the work of the past couple of decades.

But Wrenn achieves concision at the cost of omitting discussion of some theories that I think are interesting and important (and that are covered by Kirkham and Künne). You won't find any discussion of Davidson's primitivism, of prosentencialism (as developed primarily by Dorothy Grover), or of what are broadly "expressivist" theories (from Strawson's "performative theory" to Robert Brandom's "expressive deflationism"). Also, discussion of Dummett is confined to a couple of pages in the chapter on the value of truth, mentioning only his

comparison of assertion with chess, which set up an analogy between winning as the aim of chess and truth as the "aim" of assertion.

Dummett's most important contribution, however, is his development of anti-realism. As Dummett argued strenuously, semantics comes before metaphysics, and Dummett's anti-realist metaphysics was based on a semantics derived from consideration of intuitionist logic. Wrenn states up front that he is not going to deal with "the formal details of alternatives to classical logic" (p. x), which precludes any careful examination of Dummett's anti-realism. On the one hand, it's hard to fault Wrenn for deciding against getting into such details in an introductory text for upper-division undergraduates; that is a reasonable choice given the aims of the book and of the series in which it appears. On the other hand, chapter two does contain a discussion of Dummett-styled anti-realist metaphysics, which Wrenn criticizes on the grounds that it "comes at the price of classical logic" (p. 33). But, as all the logicians who have worked on developing alternative logics have pointed out over many years, there are a couple weird prices to pay for *accepting* classical logic. To give Dummettian anti-realism a fair hearing, it's necessary to go into some of the reasons why intuitionists reject classical logic, since those reasons constitute the basis of Dummett's arguments for anti-realism. As it is, Wrenn critiques the metaphysics without examining Dummett's strongest arguments for it. I think that Wrenn could have pulled off a nice discussion of the intuitionist basis of Dummett's anti-realism. For chapter two also contains one the most accessible discussions of Fitch's paradox of knowability I have seen. Anyone who can pull that off can explain intuitionist logic to advanced undergraduates. Not only would this provide a deeper understanding of anti-realism, but it would help students better understand what's at stake in Wrenn's own appeal to classical logic.

Despite these omissions, Wrenn's *Truth* truly is a beautiful little book, which is far and away the best introductory text to the philosophy of truth. Anyone looking for such an introductory text for an upper-division undergraduate course will serve their students well by assigning Wrenn. Although there are some important ideas in the literature on truth that students will not encounter in Wrenn's book, after working their way through it they will be well positioned to tackle those ideas, and others, in the primary literature.

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