Strawson’s Truth

Paul Snowdon
TRUTH

F.P. RAMSEY / PETER SULLIVAN
J.L. AUSTIN / CHARLES TRAVIS
P.F. STRAWSOON / PAUL SNOWDON
MICHAEL DUMMETT / IAN RUMFITT
PETER GEEACH / GRAHAM OPPY
JANE HEAL / JULIAN DODD
JENNIFER HORNSBY / GILA SHER

GUEST EDITOR
Guy Longworth, University of Warwick

© 2013 THE ARISTOTElian SOciETY
In celebration of the 125th year of the Proceedings we are proud to announce our first ever Online Conference of the Aristotelian Society: a week-long event featuring a classic paper a day from our back catalogue, each accompanied by a commentary by a contemporary philosopher and an online forum open to all. The commentary will stimulate discussion by highlighting the paper’s major themes and their continuing importance to current debates; signaling challenges to specific claims and arguments; and indicating thematic connections between the various papers.

Continuing in the Society’s long tradition of publishing the proceedings of its live events, both the classic papers and commentaries will be published in our first ever Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, The Virtual Issue, which will be free and available online following the conference.

The first Online Conference and Virtual Issue will focus on the theme of Truth. What is it for the things we say or believe to be true? Does truth depend on a relation between what we say or believe and the world? What are the natures of the things we say or believe, the bearers of truth? To what are the truth-bearers related when they are true: are they related to facts, ordinary objects, or something else? What is the required relation? We’ll want an account of the nature of truth that addresses those questions also to fit with an account of truth’s importance: why should it matter to us that what we say or believe is true rather than false? Our views about truth are liable to impact widely on our views about other things. Are moral claims or views apt to be true or false, or are they to be evaluated along different dimensions? Does truth figure in an account of the nature of belief or the nature of assertion? Is the acquisition of beliefs that are true amongst the fundamental aims of inquiry?

Each of the papers selected for the Online Conference were chosen for the distinctive answers that they advance to these questions. In some cases papers were chosen because they have had a decisive impact on later discussions, in others they were chosen because they present views and arguments that deserve more careful consideration than they have thus far received. In all cases, there is much to be gained from becoming acquainted, or reacquainted, with these important texts.

The Online Conference and Virtual Issue will be moderated and edited by Guy Longworth (Warwick).
Paul Snowdon has held the post of Grote Professor of Mind and Logic at University College London since 2001 where he is also head of department. His research and publications relate to three main areas: the problem of personal identity (on which he is completing a book manuscript), the philosophy of perception, and the mind-body problem.
STRAWSON’S ‘Truth’ is his response to Austin’s paper of the same title, both of which were presented to the Aristotelian Society in the summer of 1950. Because it is primarily a critical response Strawson’s paper is not typical of his style. Usually a paper by Strawson is a continuous and developing argument for a philosophical theory. But in this case he comments on Austin’s approach in a series of remarks, which to some extent are relatively separate. However, Strawson has two other more general goals besides considering or criticising Austin. The first is to criticise a more general theory which Strawson calls the Correspondence Theory of Truth, Austin’s presumably being only one version of it. The second is to articulate to some extent and display the virtues of what is often called the Redundancy Theory of Truth, originally proposed by Ramsey, which fundamentally Strawson was convinced by. Strawson was, though, unhappy about that familiar name.

Now, because Strawson’s paper is, as one might say, basically ‘reactive’, it cannot be properly considered in isolation from Austin’s paper. What then is Austin doing in his paper? I think that we can see it as having three main aims. The first is to identify the things which are true (Austin calls them ‘statements’) and to specify the conditions under which they are true. This amounts to his theory of truth. Austin of course wittily insisted that the focus of analysis should be the adjective ‘true’ rather than the noun ‘truth’, but we are hardly being unfair to him by calling what he offers a theory of truth. Second, towards the end of his paper Austin criticises something like the Ramsey approach, and some additions that Strawson himself had proposed to it in an earlier paper. But, third, as I read it, Austin is trying to convey a message about truth and what we might call the ‘philosophy of truth’. It is not an easy message to summarise but I think that one can say that the message, or part of the message, is, or includes, the proposal that analysing truth is not especially difficult, nor is truth as important or interesting as philosophers suppose. According to Austin the real questions include such things as; how do the ‘symbols’ used in map-making differ from those used in statement-making? He compares focussing on truth to focussing on freedom, which is according to him far too general a notion to analyse profitably. He proposes, too, that truth is not really the basic goal of assertion. Austin in fact was attempting in a way to lead philosophers away from the analysis of truth. In this Austin is engaged in
conveying a negative attitude to standard philosophy, an activity that for him was almost inseparable from doing philosophy at all. Interestingly, I think it is true to say that Strawson does not himself really engage head on with this aspect of Austin’s paper, although he picks up some issues connected to it.

Now, whatever one’s reactions to these central proposals of Austin’s fairly short paper, it is hard to escape the feeling that the paper does not represent Austin at his best. Quite a number of times he makes points that look questionable or arbitrary. For example, in his discussion of whether beliefs are the basic bearers of truth he simply remarks that ‘if, as some also say, a belief is ‘of the nature of a picture’ then it is of the nature of what cannot be true.’ To which one feels like responding; whoever thinks beliefs are pictures? Where does that idea so much as come from? Again, when considering the proposal that propositions are the basic truth bearers Austin remarks that ‘a proposition in law or in geometry is something portentous’ and seems to imply that that is a defining characteristic of a proposition. Surely Austin was familiar with employment of that term outside those contexts, or perhaps with its employment by philosophers. Although I cannot substantiate the claim here I believe that Austin’s paper offers a number of examples of this. This perhaps links with the verdict that the encounter between Strawson and Austin was ‘won’ by Strawson. Such infelicities would not have escaped the assembled philosophers listening to the encounter. Of course, that Austin committed various mistakes should not be taken to mean that his main claims are wrong.

Austin’s theory of truth is as follows; the primary bearers of truth are statement, which are, or seem to be, sentences as used by a certain person on a certain occasion, and a statement is true when the historic state of affairs to which it is correlated by the demonstrative conventions is of a type with which the sentence used in making it is correlated by the descriptive conventions. This whole structure acted on Strawson rather as a red rag on a bull. He objects (in section I) to Austin’s notion of a statement (and its role), and then (in section II) to the other end of the relation, facts or states of affairs, and then (in section III) to Austin’s account of the so called conventions which define the relation and their role in his analysis of ‘true’.

---

1 Austin (1950) p. 86. Page references are to Austin (1961).
2 Austin (1950) p. 86
3 For statements see Austin (1950) pp 87 – 89, for the conventions see p.90.
In his discussion of Austin’s identification of the truth bearers as statements, Strawson suggests, very plausibly it seems to me, that Austin’s understanding of ‘statement’, as, it seems, a token use of some words, while perfectly legitimate as one reading of ‘statement’, does not really pick out what, in many contexts when we are ascribing truth, we can be taken to be talking about. Thus, if I say that his statement is true, what I say could be re-expressed by saying that what he said is true, and what he said is clearly not the words he used in making the statement. In this sense of what he said, it is obvious that what Jo said and what Margaret said can be, as we would say, the same thing, but their statings of it are not the same thing. Conceding the validity of Strawson’s point here leaves at least two interesting questions. The first is about Austin. Can Austin’s analysis be maintained or defended if he were to drop his thesis that the basic bearers of truth are statements in his sense? The problem is that central to Austin’s approach is the reference to two types of conventions which relate to language, or language use, and they need, somewhere in the analysis, a linguistic hook to attach to. But the non-linguistic use of statement does not immediately provide that. The second question relates to Strawson. He says that ‘it is not easy to explain the non-episodic and non-committal sense of statement’, by which he means its use as expressing what various people might have said, and which according to him is what truth ascriptions deal with. The question is whether Strawson can really think there are truth bearers, if ultimately talk of truth is simply a linguistic device for re-assertion. Really, on that conception, since nothing is ascribed, but rather is reaffirmed, there is nothing for anything to bear, hence no need for truth bearers. Strawson seems not to clarify this element in his own thinking.

The points, far too rich to summarise, that Strawson makes in section II, certainly, it seems to me, raise serious questions about Austin’s conception of what we might call the world end of the ‘correspondence’ relation. What exactly are states of affairs, or situations? Strawson proposes something like a redundancy theory of ‘facts’. That is, ‘It is a fact that p’ is simply equivalent to ‘p’. That would imply that facts are not things in the world; talk of facts is simply a way of talking about what is really there. Strawson also argues that talk of states of affairs and situations is equally no more about special things in the world than is talk about facts. I think it can be said that Austin did not provide a properly investigated employment of these expressions. What needs to be

---

asked though about Strawson’s treatment is whether he properly shows his redundancy type theory of facts is correct. An aspect of this is that even if facts are not properly to be thought of as within the spatio-temporal world, there, as it were, to be tripped over, maybe they are entities of another, abstract, sort, and if so, maybe they can also figure somewhere in a theory of truth. The question here is how far Strawson shuts out the Correspondence theory.

Having so far made a very strong case for saying that Austin had selected the wrong interpretation of ‘statement’ and had not properly thought through the significance of his talk of states of affairs, etc, Strawson turns, in section III, to Austin’s conception of the two kinds of conventions that an account of truth needs to attend to. Amazingly, Strawson is quite gentle with Austin’s conception of two types of conventions. I suspect that this reflects Strawson’s acceptance of the deep importance of the contrast between reference and description (or characterisation) in thinking about the understanding of language. He wants to allow something like Austin’s two elements in an account of language. Fifteen years later, in his paper ‘Truth; a reconsideration of Austin’s views’, Strawson brings out that Austin’s talk of two types of conventions is very hard to make sense of. For example, presumably, the sentence ‘That cat is sleeping’ is descriptively correlated with the type of situation of an indicated cat sleeping; but then when I use it in on a particular occasion what other convention is involved? Rather, I simply indicate a particular cat. In ‘Truth’, Strawson chooses not to develop radical criticisms of Austin’s talk of conventions. What he says, though, is that it simply obvious, or patent, that when we ascribe truth to something we are not saying anything about linguistic conventions. As Strawson puts it, it may be that Austin has said something which is close to being correct and perhaps informative about when a remark is true, but that is not what we are asserting in saying that it is true.

I want to make three remarks about this central thought in Strawson’s paper. The first is that Strawson’s style of argument is a style he used on other occasions. Basically, Strawson trusted his sense as an ordinary and reflective speaker as to what he was saying when employing certain constructions, be it using the word ‘true’, or using definite descriptions, as a basis for rejecting a philosophical analysis of that talk that was under consideration. He does not solely look for implications of the theory that might worry one; he held that it is simply obvious to ordinary speakers that the proposal, be it Austin’s or Russell’s, was wrong. The second remark is that there is something surprising in Strawson’s concession that Austin’s proposal may come close to being correct about when a statement is true. It is natural to feel
that Strawson’s rather savage handling of some of the elements in the analysis would have lead him to deny Austin had even got the ‘when’ question right. The third remark amounts to a question; is Strawson really entitled to be sure that in the relevant philosophical sense of what we are saying, that we are not saying what Austin proposes? I am myself not offering an answer to that question, but I want to note two things. First, Strawson himself accepted analyses of ordinary concepts – for example, the concept of perception – of which it cannot be said, I am inclined to say, that the ordinary thinker would feel it represented what he was saying when employing the relevant term. Second, the goal of philosophical analysis is often specified in terms of a priori determinable necessary and sufficient conditions, a conception that the ordinary speaker, even a highly intelligent and subtle one, can hardly be authoritative about.

There is much else in Strawson that deserves attention, but I want to conclude by engaging with one other aspect of Strawson’s paper. Although Strawson does not say this he basically agreed with Ramsey’s so called Redundancy theory. Now, Strawson did not try to remove one problem for that view, which is how the analysis applies to use of ‘true’ where there is no attached claim that is being affirmed, as in ‘What he said to you is true’. But he felt in 1950 that the basic idea could be supplemented by talking of speech acts that we perform when using ‘true’ which we would not perform if we just affirmed the attached claim. Thus, I can count as conceding that p if I say ‘It is true that p’, whereas simply affirming that p is not to concede anything. Strawson’s own major criticism of his paper is that this attempt to add to Ramsey by ‘taking a leaf out of Austin’s own book’ is not helpful. It obscures the central point of Ramsey’s theory and it brings in facts about speech acts that are too unsystematic to clarify the use of ‘true’. With Strawson’s major retrospective criticism we should, surely, agree. Strawson did not ever, I think, abandon his commitment to Ramsey, and it would not be insane to conjecture that his own subsequent criticisms of the Davidsonian programme in part reflected what might be called an implication of Ramsey, which is that if ‘true’ is basically a transparent device for reassertion it cannot really be introducing something substantive enough to be the central notion in the theory of meaning.

Strawson’s thorough, subtle and professional paper surely throws a number of spanners into Austin’s works. It remains unclear though quite what power the spanner that Strawson thought was the biggest has.
REFERENCES


PRESIDENT: Sarah Broadie (St. Andrews)

PRESIDENT-ELECT: E.J. Lowe (Durham)

HONORARY DIRECTOR: Lucy O’Brien (UCL)

EDITOR: Matthew Soteriou (Warwick)

LINES OF THOUGHT SERIES EDITOR: Scott Sturgeon (Oxford)

VIRTUAL ISSUE GUEST EDITOR ON ‘TRUTH’: Guy Longworth (Warwick)

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE: Ben Colburn (Glasgow) / Alison Hills (Oxford) / Rosanna Keefe (Sheffield)
Marie McGinn (UEA) / Samir Okasha (Bristol) / Ian Rumfitt (Birkbeck) / Robert Stern (Sheffield)

EXECUTIVE ADMINISTRATOR: Mark Cortes Favis

ASSISTANT EDITOR: David Harris

EDITORIAL ASSISTANT: Lea Salje

WWW.ARISTOTELIANSOCIETY.ORG.UK