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# *Truth and the Nature of Assertion*

HUW PRICE

1. David Wiggins's contribution to the Strawson Festschrift is a paper entitled 'What would be a substantial theory of truth?'.<sup>1</sup> Wiggins begins, appropriately, with some remarks about Strawson's views on truth. In particular, he claims to find in Strawson's 1950 article on truth the view that a proper concern of the theory of truth is the task of elucidating the nature of fact-stating, empirically informative, or *assertoric*, uses of language; and hence of distinguishing these from uses of other sorts (distinguishing assertions from commands, for example). Wiggins's paper is an attempt to provide a theory of truth that will enable it to serve this role.

Wiggins locates himself in a tradition that he takes to include not only Strawson but also Dummett and Bernard Williams. About Strawson, at any rate, I think he is mistaken. Strawson does indeed refer to the task just mentioned. But when he asks 'why should the problem of Truth . . . be seen as this problem of elucidating the fact-stating type of discourse?' his 'answer is that it shouldn't be . . . The problem about the use of "true" is to see how this word fits into [the fact-stating] frame of discourse. The surest route to the wrong answer is to confuse this problem with the question: What type of discourse is this?'<sup>2</sup> Strawson's view thus seems to have been that the problem of truth arises only *within* the fact-stating form of discourse, and hence depends on, or assumes, an understanding of that form of discourse.

Wiggins seems to be on firmer ground in discerning the concern he attributes to Strawson—a concern to base an account of the nature of assertion on a theory of truth—in Dummett's 1958 paper on truth;<sup>3</sup> and again, a few years later, in Bernard Williams's 'Consistency and realism'.<sup>4</sup> Williams argues that if assertions are to be distinguished from imperatives it will have to be in virtue of the fact that 'the basic aim of assertions is to be true', this fact being interpreted in terms of 'a substantial notion of truth'<sup>5</sup> (hence Wiggins's title). And Dummett often speaks of assertions as being 'understood as governed by the convention that the speaker is aiming at

<sup>1</sup> D. Wiggins, 'What would be a substantial theory of truth?', Z. van Straaten, ed., *Philosophical Subjects: Essays Presented to P. F. Strawson*, Oxford University Press, 1980, pp. 189–221.

<sup>2</sup> P. F. Strawson, 'Truth', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volume*, 1950, pp. 129–56; at pp. 142–3.

<sup>3</sup> M. Dummett, 'Truth', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 1958–9, pp. 141–62.

<sup>4</sup> B. Williams, 'Consistency and realism', reprinted in his *Problems of the Self*, Cambridge University Press, 1973, pp. 187–206.

<sup>5</sup> 'Consistency and realism', p. 202.

uttering only those the condition for whose truth is fulfilled'. This seems to him 'to belong to the essence of language'.<sup>6</sup>

The essential ingredients of this view seem to be firstly, the idea that truth values attach to unasserted sentences (sentences considered as devoid of assertoric force) and secondly, the claim that to make an assertion is to utter such a sentence, while making it clear that in doing so you are aiming at uttering a true one. (In contrast, giving a command, for example, would be a matter of uttering an unasserted sentence, while making it clear that you want your listener to *make* that sentence true.) Notice that the view requires an account of truth that does not itself depend on the notion of assertion. In particular, it cannot rely on the otherwise appealing intuition that a sentence is true just in case it would be correct to assert it. For that would reduce the supposedly distinctive claim that assertions are governed by the convention that speakers aim to speak the truth, to the truism that assertions are governed by the convention that speakers aim to make them correctly. (*Any* convention-governed activity is governed by that convention.)

The problem is familiar. We have two notions (here, assertion and truth), either of which seems explicable in terms of the other. If we are to escape the circle, one of these notions needs to be anchored to something else. Wiggins's paper is an attempt (the most explicit and sustained attempt in the literature, I think) to anchor truth independently of assertion. In this paper I shall try to show that Wiggins's attempt is unsuccessful, but that the fault lies not so much with the particular attempt, as with this general view of the relation between truth and assertion.

The paper goes like this: in the next section, by way of clarifying the task at issue, I identify two facets of the problem of the nature of assertion, and hence two constraints on a substantial theory of truth. After pointing out why traditional accounts of truth won't do the trick, I turn to Wiggins's alternative, which invokes Davidson's truth-theoretic approach to radical interpretation. I argue that this approach cannot supply what Wiggins claims to get from it; and that the basic fault lies with the very attempt to characterize assertion in terms of truth. I suggest that Wiggins in fact relies on foundations that better support a thoroughly *insubstantial* theory of truth—a theory, in effect, which acknowledges and exploits its dependence on a prior understanding of the nature of assertion—and finish with some comments about the form of such a theory.

<sup>6</sup> M. Dummett, *Frege: Philosophy of Language*, London, Duckworth, 1973, p. 3. In places, however, Dummett seems reluctant to put much weight on the claim that assertions are governed by such a convention. Thus: 'We considered utterances in general, regarded as endowed with a sense but not with a demarcation into types of utterance (assertion, command, etc.), and tried to specify which of them constituted assertions by reference to the intention of the speaker. Rather, the correct approach is to consider utterances as conventionally demarcated into types, by means of the forms of linguistic expressions employed, and then to enquire into the conventions governing the use of various types of utterance' (*Frege*, p. 302).

2. Firstly, then, the problem of the nature of assertion. Why is there a problem, and what is it?

For one thing, we need to recognize that we are dealing not with a single distinction, but with a family of distinctions, whose exact relationships are far from clear. We have already encountered three potential ways of characterizing the class of linguistic expressions whose nature we wish to elucidate: as *fact-stating*, *empirically informative*, and *assertoric*. Many other descriptions seem to point in roughly the same direction: indicative, descriptive, declarative, constative, truth-valuable (or ‘aiming at truth’), and belief-expressing. (I suspect I have missed some.) All of these notions seem to have *some* connection with the task that Strawson refers to. The difficult thing is to say which, if any, is fundamental, and how the others relate to it. A substantial theory of truth would enable the notion of being aimed at truth to play this fundamental role.

But why treat *any* of these distinctions as of much significance? Why try to partition language in this way? Two answers seem important. The first appeals to the grammatical distinction. We don’t have a choice about this. The indicative mood has not been imposed on language by philosophers. It is a striking feature of *natural* language, which a philosophical account of language ought to be able to explain. An illuminating way to express the problem is to ask: Why can’t we dispense with the non-indicative moods, expressing everything we want to express in indicative form? An adequate answer would presumably come in two parts. The first would identify some property characteristic of just those speech acts for which we do employ the indicative mood, while the second would consist in the claim that, by convention, the indicative mood is used to indicate the performance of a linguistic act with this particular property. (The appeal to convention is essential, of course. There is nothing to prevent a group of speakers from choosing to use what in English would be indicative sentences to ask questions, give commands, and so on—but they wouldn’t be speaking English.) The difficult part is to decide what the associated property is. The above list includes some of the more plausible candidates. For example, it might be said that the indicative mood is the conventional indication of assertoric force. In other words, it indicates that a sentence would normally comprise an assertion, if uttered independently.<sup>7</sup>

However, this familiar suggestion illustrates the tenacity of the problem it

<sup>7</sup> Here, as elsewhere in the paper, I assume a simple correlation between indicatives and assertions. In spoken English, of course, commands and questions can, in fact, be phrased in indicative form, with the aid of stress and inflexion. Moreover, as Michael Pendlebury argues (‘Against the power of force: Reflections on the meaning of mood’, *Mind*, 1986, pp. 361–72), non-indicative moods in subsentential clauses may contribute to the meaning of indicative sentences. These points show that the grammatical distinction is less straightforward than tends to be assumed. But as long as there is *some* grammatical distinction here (corresponding to the distinction between assertions and non-assertions) an account of assertion is obliged to explain it. That said, we may as well pretend that the grammar is simpler than, in fact, it is.

is intended to solve. For the original question ('Why can't everything be said in indicative form?') is liable to re-emerge, as difficult as ever, in the question: Why can't everything be said with assertoric force? Why, for example, can't we treat the imperative mood as a content-modifier, so that to give a command is to make an assertion (albeit an assertion with a specialized sentential content, or sense)? The point is that if we want to appeal to a property to explain the significance of the indicative mood, we need to be sure that we can tell whether an utterance has that property, without appealing to its grammatical mood.

The second reason for being interested in Strawson's problem—'this problem of elucidating the fact-stating type of discourse'—is that there are many philosophical theories that rest on the claim that despite appearances, certain types of discourse are not fact-stating. These *non-factualist* theories are best known in ethics and aesthetics, but at times have been offered in solution to a very wide range of philosophical problems. Non-factualism was particularly popular in post-war Britain. Old favourites had a new run, and the techniques were applied to a wider and wider range of traditional problems (including that of truth itself: there is a performative theory of truth, due to Strawson himself; an emotive theory, due to B. Savery; and an evaluative theory, due to A. R. White).<sup>8</sup>

We might have expected that the popularity of non-factualism in these years would have fostered interest in the general distinction on which all such theories rely. In the enthusiasm, however, Strawson's cautious remarks about the need for a general distinction seem to have been largely unheeded. And the opportunity was lost, for in the sixties non-factualism fell into disrepute. Several factors seem to have been important: Geach's development (for just this purpose) of the so-called 'Frege point';<sup>9</sup> the decline of a certain style of linguistic philosophy; and the growing popularity of systematic approaches to general semantics (which, as we'll see, have tended to devote their attention to the fact-stating part of language). The movement is far from dead, however. It remains popular, in particular, in ethics and aesthetics.<sup>10</sup> And elsewhere, a recent and well-publicized example is to be found in Kripke's interpretation of Wittgenstein on the notion of following a rule.<sup>11</sup>

Non-factualism clearly depends on the claim that there is a distinction *within* the class of indicative sentences, between those sentences that are

<sup>8</sup> P. F. Strawson, 'Truth', *Analysis*, 1949; B. Savery, 'The emotive theory of truth', *Mind*, 1955, pp. 513–21; A. White, 'Truth as appraisal', *Mind*, 1957, 318–30.

<sup>9</sup> P. Geach, 'Ascriptivism', *Philosophical Review*, 1960, pp. 221–5; 'Assertion', *Philosophical Review*, 1965, pp. 449–65.

<sup>10</sup> And not only, as Wiggins suggests, among philosophers 'who [have] occupied a non-communicating compartment' ('What would be a substantial theory of truth?', p. 191). A notable exception is Simon Blackburn, whose enthusiasm for the non-factualist approach has long been marked by an appreciation, not only of the range of its potential application, but also of its connections with general issues about language, mind, and the world. See *Spreading the Word*, Oxford University Press, 1984, chs. 5 and 6, and earlier works there referred to.

<sup>11</sup> S. Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1982.

genuinely fact-stating and those that are not. (Hardly anybody disputes a non-factualist treatment of non-indicative sentences.)<sup>12</sup> If a substantial theory of truth is to underpin the distinction we gesture towards in talking of fact-stating and non-fact-stating discourse, it should help us to assess such a claim.

It is worth noting that these two aspects of the problem of the nature of assertion tend to pull in opposite directions. The first encourages us to locate the important distinction at the limits of the indicative mood; whereas the second calls for a narrower distinction, within the indicative mood. The tension depends, of course, on the appeal of non-factualism itself. It would be resolved by a decisive refutation of the various arguments that have seemed to recommend such accounts. Less drastically, however, it might also be resolved by an account which made sense of the idea that some utterances that are not strictly assertoric are, nevertheless, sufficiently similar to genuine assertions to explain their use of the indicative mood. Non-factualists will want to aim for an account of this kind.

There are thus two main constraints on a substantial theory of truth: it should help us to explain the significance of grammatical mood, and it should tell us whether there is any basis for a distinction *within* the class of indicative utterances between those which are *really* fact-stating (or truth-bearing, or assertoric, or belief-expressing, or whatever), and those which are not. Of course, the theory has to meet these constraints from its own resources. It can't rely on such notions as *assertion*, *belief*, and *fact* itself, for an independent understanding of any of these would give us what a substantial theory of truth is supposed to provide.

3. This last requirement is the downfall of traditional accounts of truth (from the present point of view). Thus it is no help here to explain truth as 'correspondence to the facts'. That takes for granted the very notion we are attempting to understand. For example, it makes the issue as to whether there are genuine moral truths—whether moral claims can properly be said to be true or false—depend on that of whether there are moral facts. Similarly, it is unlikely to be useful to try to explain truth in terms of coherence with a system of beliefs. In the moral case, that simply leads us back to the question whether moral attitudes are genuine beliefs.

Strawson's own early account of truth illustrates another way in which a theory of truth can fail to be substantial. (From Strawson's point of view, this may not be an objection: as we saw, Strawson appears at that time to have rejected the view that assertion should be explained in terms of truth.) Strawson's account stems from the observation that by saying 'That's true' (or 'That's a fact'), we can *endorse* an utterance made by another speaker.

<sup>12</sup> David Lewis is one of the exceptions. In 'General semantics', D. Davidson and G. Harman, eds., *Semantics of Natural Language*, Dordrecht, Reidel, 1972, pp. 169–218, he recommends that non-indicatives be treated as disguised declaratives.

The novelty of the approach lies in taking this to be the central feature of truth (or, as this view would think more accurate, of the use of the term ‘true’). This has been called the *reassertion* account of truth: to apply the description ‘true’ to an utterance is not to make some new assertion, but in effect to repeat the previous one. It is a convenient conversational device for achieving that effect. It makes ‘That’s true’ and ‘That’s false’ somewhat analogous to the responses ‘So do I’ and ‘I don’t’ to performative utterances. If someone says ‘I promise to try harder’ we can use one of these responses to make that promise ourselves or to decline to make it. (This view is also known, rather aptly, as the *amen* theory of truth.)

As Williams notes, this account of truth cannot explain why the descriptions ‘true’ and ‘false’ are applied to some sorts of utterances but not to others. Williams says that he does not see ‘how on such a theory it could be more than an accident of language that “is true” signified agreement with *assertions* rather than agreement with anything else’.<sup>13</sup> The response ‘That’s true’ does not merely *re-utter*, it *reasserts*. One cannot endorse an apt question or an appropriate command by calling it true. Of course, we can do it in less direct ways, but so could we in all the cases in which we can just say ‘That’s true’. This account is insensitive to grammatical mood, and hence cannot explain why we should be allowed the conversational convenience in some cases but not in others. Not surprisingly, it is also insensitive to distinctions *within* the indicative mood, and hence cannot help us settle non-factualist claims.

Thus there are at least two ways in which an account of truth can fail to be substantial. It can be so weak as to fail to distinguish the indicatives, in which case it will be unable to explain the significance of grammatical mood. Or, by depending on some such notion as fact or belief, it can fail to provide the required *foundation* for the fact-stating/non-fact-stating distinction. We shall see that the first disability is endemic to the proposal to explain assertion in terms of truth; though as Wiggins’s theory will illustrate, it is liable to be disguised by the second.

4. Wiggins’s approach, in essence, is to consider what must be true of *truth* if the predicate ‘is true’ is to figure in a truth theory adequate for radical interpretation. More precisely, the idea is to look at theories in the style of a Tarski truth theory for a language L, yielding equivalences of the form

$$(1) s \text{ is } \phi \text{ iff } p.$$

Such a theory is to be regarded as specifying the meaning of the L-sentence *s*. There are many such theories, but some of them make better sense than others of the speakers of L. The constraints on  $\phi$  imposed by the anthropological constraint of ‘making sense’ are the marks of the notion of truth.

<sup>13</sup> ‘Consistency and realism’, p. 203.

I am going to argue that this attractive idea is radically mistaken. The distinction that a substantial theory of truth is supposed to help us with—between assertoric, or fact-stating uses of language, and all the rest—is already built into the truth-theoretic approach to meaning, as Wiggins employs it. Wiggins gets out only what Davidson and others have already built in. The project of radical interpretation, even when constrained by the structural insights we have from Tarski, does not in itself yield either the Fregen distinction between sense and force, or (what would come to the same thing) a substantial theory of truth. These have to come from somewhere else.

Wiggins's strategy does not of course consist simply in a Tarskian *definition* of truth. Tarski's approach takes for granted the notion of *translation*. His 'condition of adequacy' is that a truth theory should yield sentences of the form

(2)  $s$  is true iff  $p$

where  $p$  is a translation in the metalanguage of the object language sentence to which the description  $s$  refers, whereas for Davidson and the truth theorists who follow him, the priorities are in a sense reversed. The T-sentences are now expected to yield *interpretations* of the sentences of the object language, and the theory is constrained, roughly speaking, by the requirement that it make good anthropological sense of the speakers of the object language. Moreover, it is not crucial to this programme (as of course it was to Tarski) that the predicate the theory invokes be the predicate 'is true'. John McDowell has repeatedly emphasized this point. McDowell describes what he calls 'the best version of the truth-conditional proposal . . . along these lines':

We may reasonably set ourselves the ideal of constructing, as a component of a complete theory of meaning for a language, a sub-theory which is to serve to specify the contents of (for instance, and surely centrally) assertions which could be made by uttering the language's indicative sentences. . . . [A] direct assault on that task would be to look for a sub-theory which generates, on the basis of structure in the object-language sentences, a theorem, for every appropriate sentence, of this form: ' $s$  can be used to assert that  $p$ '. Now there is a truistic connection between the content of an assertion and a familiar notion of truth . . . ; the connection guarantees, as the merest platitude, that a correct specification of what can be asserted, by the assertoric utterance of a sentence, cannot but be a specification of a condition under which the sentence is true. A radical proposal at this point would be as follows: as long as the ends of the theorems (think of them as having the form ' $s . . . p$ ') are so related that, whatever the theorems actually say, we can use them as if they said something of the form ' $s$  can be used to assert that  $p$ ', it does not actually matter if we write, between those ends, something else which yields a truth in the same circumstances; our platitude guarantees that 'is true if and



only if' fills that bill, and this gives a more tractable target than that of the direct assault.<sup>14</sup>

McDowell is here taking for granted the association between assertoric force and the indicative mood. In speaking of the indicative sentences of an arbitrary language, he clearly has in mind the assertoric sentences (i.e., the sentences whose utterance standardly amounts to an assertion). The idea is thus that the truth theory (or rather, what McDowell says may as well be regarded as a truth theory) yields an account of the content, or sense, of the assertoric sentences of the language in question. For a complete theory of meaning, we need to add to this content-specifying sub-theory a theory of force—an account of the various different sorts of things that speakers of the language do with sentence-contents (including, of course, asserting them).

The extent of this additional theory of force obviously depends on how many varieties of force there are reckoned to be in the object language in question. This gives rise to the thought that, other things being equal, it would be better to treat differences of meaning as differences of sense than as differences of force; for this way they are incorporated into the theory of sense, and do not have to be dealt with later. Or rather, it suggests that every effort should be made to handle a difference of meaning *within* the sort of sub-theory that McDowell describes, before consigning it to the assortment of semantic left-overs which will have to be dealt with when that sub-theory is complete. Of course, if we had some criterion for whether a difference of meaning was a matter of sense or a matter of force, there would be no question of *trying* to accommodate it in the sub-theory; it would be in or out, according to what the criterion told us. But at the moment we have no criterion. A substantial theory of truth is supposed to give us one.

Moreover, McDowell's care in distinguishing a theory whose primary role is to state the contents of sentences of an object language, from a theory of truth, removes what may have seemed a barrier to accommodating certain sorts of differences of meaning within a theory of this general form. The standard 'filling' for a T-sentence—'is true if and only if'—suggests that what goes into the blanks must at the left hand end designate the sort of object language sentence to which the predicate 'true' applies, and must at the right hand end be the sort of metalanguage sentence that can form the antecedent or consequent of a material conditional. But McDowell's insistence that the standard filling is not obligatory helps to open our eyes to the possibility of a filling which does the same work without imposing such a grammatical restriction and which, hence, enables the same process of meaning specification to extend to what are traditionally regarded as matters of force.

<sup>14</sup> J. McDowell, 'Anti-realism and the epistemology of understanding', J. Bouveresse and H. Parret, eds., *Meaning and Understanding*, New York, Berlin, 1981, pp. 225–48; at pp. 228–9.

McDowell suggests the filling

(3) 'can be used to assert that'.

Of course, he has already restricted the theory to assertions—to 'the language's indicative sentences'. Except in that it actually hints at this restriction, (3) is no different from

(4) 'can be used to say that'.

However, (3) and (4) might still seem to restrict the kinds of sentences we can use to fill the blanks. On the right hand side, in particular, we are still effectively restricted to indicative sentences; for English grammar will not allow anything else to fill the gap in this sort of 'that' clause. But at this point we can appeal to Davidson's own construal of the logical form of such English constructions, to establish that the restriction is without substance.

Davidson advocates the so-called *paratactic analysis* of 'saying that',<sup>15</sup> which takes the logical form of a sentence such as 'Ramsey said that truth is redundant' to be

(5) Truth is redundant. Ramsey said that.

This analysis allows that the clause which appears after 'that' in the original sentence is *used*, rather than *mentioned*, and hence makes sense of the intuition that in translating this remark about Ramsey into another language, we should not leave this clause in English. (We are not *quoting* Ramsey.)

As I said, the present relevance of this proposal is that it frees us from grammatical restrictions on the nature of 'that . . .' clauses.

(6) Make truth redundant. Ramsey said that.

makes as much sense as (5). So indeed does

(7) Is truth redundant? Ramsey said that.

Of course, in this case we would be inclined to say 'Ramsey *asked* that', but this is incidental. The important point is that, just as in (5), the imperative and interrogative sentences in (6) and (7) are used rather than mentioned. We are not reporting Ramsey's exact words. We are *samesaying*, as Davidson puts it,<sup>16</sup> in our own words.

Applying the same analysis to (4), the 'filler' we derived from McDowell, we find that the theorems of resulting sub-theory can be regarded as having the form

(8) *s* can be used to say this: *p*

and that there is now nothing in the form of these theorems to prevent the sub-theory from extending to the non-indicative sentences of the object language. If the object language contains imperatives, for example, there is

<sup>15</sup> D. Davidson, 'On saying that', *Synthese*, 1968–9, pp. 130–46.

<sup>16</sup> 'On saying that', p. 140.

now nothing to prevent the sub-theory giving us their meaning in the same way it does for indicatives: by *using* a metalanguage sentence, and telling us that this sentence says the same thing as the given sentence of the object language.<sup>17</sup>

It now appears that the preferred form for what was supposed to be a theory of the *content* of the sentences of the object language, makes no distinction between differences in content (or sense) and differences in force. The tasks that the radical interpreter initially consigned to the separate theory of force are in fact taken care of by the so-called sub-theory. The significance of the force indicators of the object language—its imperative and interrogative moods, for example—is explained in the same way as that of sense-modifying expressions: by the use of corresponding constructions in the metalanguage. The supplementary theory, originally thought of as a theory of force, survives, at most, in a force-neutral account of the activity of *saying*; a mere gloss to the main theory, whose main task would be to distinguish the full-blooded *use* of sentences from other sorts of appearances in writing and in speech.

This need not mean that there is no longer a place for the notion of force; only that the distinction between force and sense will not be reflected in the structure of the radical interpreter's theories, in the way that has usually been supposed. As long as we draw such distinctions in the metalanguage, the process of interpretation will draw corresponding distinctions in the object language. But the process makes no intrinsic demands on such distinctions, which suggests that we cannot find an elucidation of fact-stating/non-fact-stating distinction (or, what is supposed to come to the same thing, a substantial theory of truth) on the requirements of radical interpretation.

If this conclusion seems surprising, I think the impression stems from a distorted view of the aim of radical interpretation. Radical interpretation is most naturally seen as a program of systematic translation of the sayings of others into one's own language. 'Sayings' here means sayings of all kinds—as many kinds as we need to understand what our subjects are saying. From this point of view, the introduction of a Fregean sense/force distinction looks rather odd; a case of changing horses in mid-stream. If samesaying provides an adequate interpretation of some of the utterances our subjects produce, why shouldn't we expect it to work (and count as adequate) for all of them? After all, a person who learns a new language by living among its speakers does not employ one method on constructions which modify sense and another on those that modify force. Everything gets translated to and from the home language in just the same way.

<sup>17</sup> Here the fact that the metalanguage sentence is still *used* rather than *mentioned* means that the theory is still distinguished from a translation manual in the way that truth theorists have been keen to stress. (See, for example, G. Evans and J. McDowell, eds., *Truth and Meaning: Essays in Semantics*, Oxford University Press, 1976, p. x.)

Thus, from the radical interpreter's natural perspective, there is an odd discontinuity in a truth-theoretical theory of meaning. However, the truth-theoretic literature tends to emphasize the indicative part of language, often to the apparent exclusion of all the rest. The emphasis is understandable, given the programme's roots in Frege and Tarski; and as we've seen, truth theorists are well aware of the need to accommodate the non-indicative. But its effect is that 'saying' comes to be thought of as meaning *asserting*; and the radical interpreter's program of *samesaying* comes to be identified with the task of specifying the contents of assertoric utterances.

It is from this distorted but widely shared perspective that the present conclusion seems surprising. Indeed, it appears as a threat to the Fregean distinction between sense and force. In fact it is no such thing. It simply reflects the fact that the radical interpreter and the meaning theorist work to different programs. In one sense, both are concerned to identify differences of meaning. But only the meaning theorist need necessarily be concerned with *differences* of differences of meaning: in other words, with categorizing differences of meaning under headings such as 'sense' and 'force'.

5. I have been arguing that radical interpretation is indifferent to the indicative mood. Nothing in the radical interpreter's program demands special attention to indicative utterances. It seems to follow that nothing internal to that program can be expected to explain the significance of the indicative mood. In particular, radical interpretation will not yield a substantial theory of truth.

In this section I want to consider four objections to this conclusion. These will claim to be reasons for doubting that the radical interpreter's program will be served by an extended meaning-specifying theory of the kind I have described—a theory which treats non-indicatives in the same way as indicatives. (It will be convenient to have a label for the component of meaning specified by such a theory. I shall say that such a theory specifies the *substance* of a sentence or utterance.)

(i) A first objection might stem from the received view concerning the empirical grounds of a theory of radical interpretation: the view that 'the evidential base . . . will consist of facts about the circumstances under which speakers hold sentences of their language to be true.'<sup>18</sup> It might be claimed that the radical interpreter's theory will need to embody a sub-theory of the kind McDowell describes, in order properly to reflect its empirical base.

However, the objection is easily turned. The available 'facts about circumstances under which speakers hold sentences of their language to be true' cannot exceed the available facts about circumstances under which speakers are prepared to *utter* these sentences, with serious intent. Adding the truth predicate does not help to distinguish the literal utterances from all

<sup>18</sup> D. Davidson, 'Belief and the basis of meaning', *Synthese*, 1974, pp. 309–24; at p. 320.

the rest; and does not, for example, help us to decide whether reluctance to make an utterance is due to politeness or disbelief. (The subject who is too polite to say ‘You linguists all look the same to me’, will no doubt be too polite to assent to the suggestion that we linguists all look the same to him.)

On the other hand, to insist on framing the evidence in terms of ‘holding true’ is to restrict one’s gaze, quite unnecessarily, to those sentences which can be held true. It is far from clear that such a restriction is possible; for it depends on being able to distinguish (what will be interpreted as) the indicative sentences, at a very early stage of the proceedings. But even if it is possible, there can be nothing to be gained by it—far better to collect facts about the circumstances in which sentences of all kinds are seriously uttered. The facts about ‘holding true’ can then be distilled, if necessary, when we have distinguished the indicatives. And the residue will do us nothing but good. (The interpreter’s standard question will thus be, not ‘Would you assent to this: . . .?’ , but ‘Would it be appropriate to say this: . . .?’.)

(ii) A second objection might invoke what seems now to be a standard defence of the Fregean distinction between sense and force. I think it stems from Dummett<sup>19</sup> (who uses it against what he takes to be Wittgenstein’s rejection of this distinction). This defence rests on two intuitions: that the meaning of words and sub-sentential expressions is to be explained in terms of their contribution to the meaning of complete sentences; and that there is close connection between the meaning of sentences such as ‘Feed the dog’, ‘Are you feeding the dog?’ and ‘You are feeding the dog’, despite their differences in grammatical mood. We might call these the *common-multiple requirement* and the *common-factor requirement*, respectively.

A Fregean notion of sense meets the first requirement by saying that the *sense* of a word consists in its contribution to the senses of sentences, and the second by saying that sentences in different moods can share a common sentential content.<sup>20</sup> By invoking the same notion in both cases, the Fregean also meets what is perhaps a third requirement: that words be shown to make the same sort of contribution to sentences in different moods.<sup>21</sup>

It is undoubtedly a point in favour of the Fregean account that it meets these intuitions in such an elegant manner. However, the advantage will be shared by any account that merely broadens the Fregean notion of sense, by expanding the theory of content at the expense of the theory of force. Thus suppose (as the present account envisages) that the supplementary theory of force is reduced to an account of the notion of *saying*—of the serious independent use of a sentence of any mood. The difference between ‘You

<sup>19</sup> Frege, pp. 360–2.

<sup>20</sup> Frege himself seems to have been unwilling to endorse this account of the connection between an indicative and the corresponding imperative. See Dummett, Frege, pp. 307–8.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. C. McGinn, ‘Semantics for nonindicative sentences’, *Philosophical Studies*, 1977, p. 301; and M. Platts, *Reference, Truth and Reality*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980, p. 3.

are feeding the dog' and 'Are you feeding the dog?' is now to be regarded as a matter of what I have called substance. (Substance is that factor in meaning specified by the extended sub-theory.) But the intuition that these sentences have meaning in common is still explained by the fact that in the representation of their logical form, they lie on different branches of the same tree: they are constructed from a common core. In fact, unless we have reason to introduce an operator corresponding to the indicative mood, then the second sentence is actually constructed from the first by the addition of the interrogative operator. Syntactically, things are just as they seem to the orthodox Fregean. The difference is that whereas the Fregean takes this operator to signal a change of force, rather than a change of sense, we have as yet found no reason to make such a distinction. Thus we have as yet found no reason to distinguish the interrogative mood from, say, the negation operator. Both signal changes of substance.

The common-multiple requirement will be handled in much the same way. The meaning of a word or sub-sentential expression will be said to consist in its contribution to the substance of sentences in which it occurs. The difference is that, whereas the Fregean thinks that this contribution is fully determined in the *indicative* sentences in which a given word occurs, the present account leaves open another possibility. If there are non-indicatives which are not themselves constructed from indicatives (in the way we have just taken sentential questions to be), it is possible that the meaning of these non-indicatives will play an essential part in determining the meaning of some of the words in a language. One way to construct such a language might be to join, say, the imperative part of one language to the non-imperative part of a different one: for example, to adopt the convention that orders are to be given in Ancient Greek, while everything else is to be said in English. (In any case, the present view is bound to say that the non-indicative mood indicators themselves are sub-sentential components whose meaning does not consist in their contribution to the substance of indicative sentences.)

(iii) Another objection to the present proposal might claim that it simply ignores the path which leads McDowell (as other truth theorists) to say that a content-specifying theory is a theory of truth. McDowell speaks of the 'truistic connection between the content of an assertion and a familiar notion of truth', which 'guarantees, as the merest platitude, that a correct specification of what can be asserted, by the assertoric utterance of a sentence, cannot but be a specification of the condition under which the sentence is true.' He says that 'the platitude guarantees' that if we substitute 'is true if and only if' for whatever fills the gap in the theorems of the content—specifying theory, we get something 'which yields a truth in the same circumstances . . . and gives a more tractable target than that of the direct assault.'<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> 'Anti-realism and the epistemology of understanding', pp. 228–9.

Ignoring, for the moment, the question of tractability, we see that the substitution depends on the assumption that the theory applies only to the indicative sentences of the object language (or to those sayings of its speakers whose English samesayings are indicative in form). We have seen that this restriction is inessential. Nothing prevents us aiming, initially, at a more ambitious meaning-specifying theory than the one McDowell envisages. The more ambitious theory no longer restricts itself to indicative sentences; and hence no longer allows us to read the filling of its theorems as ‘is true if and only if’. Given the more general theory we could, of course, consider its indicative fragment. This fragment will give us a theory of sense and of truth, in the way that McDowell describes. However, it is clear that this theory will not *explain* the force/sense distinction, or the fact that truth is restricted to indicatives. Rather it takes this for granted.

(iv) At this point the truth theorist might object that the justification for restricting one’s initial meaning-specifying theory to the indicatives lies precisely in the advantages of expressing its theorems in the predicative form exemplified in (2). This objection is best coupled with another. The main thing that recommends a truth-theoretic approach to a theory of meaning is its ability to deliver plausible recursive clauses for at least some of the sentence-forming operations of natural language, while at the same time keeping faith with the intuition that an adequate theory of meaning will give us the meanings of expressions of the object language by *using*, rather than *mentioning*, expressions of the metalanguage. As McDowell says, a truth theory therefore ‘provides a more tractable target than a direct assault’. It might be thought that this virtue justifies what otherwise seems a needless complexity: the restriction of the substance-specifying theory to indicative sentences, and the consequent introduction of a separate theory of force.

This objection depends on the assumption that it is impossible to express the theorems of the general substance-specifying theory in the predicative form of (1). In other words, it turns on the impossibility of a predicate  $\phi$  such that for *any* sentence  $p$ , ‘“ $p$ ” is  $\phi$ ’ can be used to say that  $p$ —i.e., such that

(9) ‘“ $p$ ” is  $\phi$ ’ can be used to say this:  $p$ .

Now, in a sense we have already encountered such a predicate, in Strawson’s amen or reassertion theory of truth. Recall that the reason that that theory could not provide a substantial account of truth, in Wiggins’s sense, was that it could not explain why ‘true’ should not be used to endorse any sort of utterance whatsoever. In other words, it could not hope to explain the significance of grammatical mood. However, this point can now be turned to our advantage.

Imagine for a moment that the description ‘true’ could be applied to any

sort of sentence whatsoever, its significance being given by a generalized equivalence principle:

$$(10) \text{ 'p' is true } \Leftrightarrow p.$$

The theorems of our general substance-specifying theory could then be written in the predicative form of (2). So the desirability of such a form could not constitute the grounds for a discontinuity in a program of radical interpretation, corresponding to the boundary between McDowell's content-specifying sub-theory and his separate theory of force. Our generalized truth theory would do what an orthodox truth theory does, but do it more generally. Certainly we could carve the orthodox theory out of the general one—but only if we already knew what to cut away.

This suggests that someone who wants to found a substantial theory of truth on a discontinuity in the program of radical interpretation, had better find a reason why we should not generalize the equivalence principle, and hence apply 'true' to non-indicatives. Moreover, they had better find a reason to which someone who wants to explain assertion in terms of truth is allowed to appeal. (This is the hard part. After all, there is surely *some* reason why we don't use 'true' in this way.)

The problem is that the question 'Why can't we apply the description "true" to non-indicatives?' seems to be equivalent to the question 'Why can't we express non-indicative utterances in indicative form?' For on the one hand, if we could apply 'true' to non-indicatives, the generalized equivalence principle would guarantee that "'p" is true' would be an indicative way of saying what is said by the non-indicative 'p'. Conversely, if every non-indicative had an indicative paraphrase, it would be easy to extend the description 'true' to non-indicatives. However, the latter question—'Why can't we express non-indicatives in indicative form?'—was the very question that a substantial theory of truth was supposed to answer, in explaining the significance of grammatical mood. Earlier I gave another example of this sort of problem. I said that it would be no use to explain the indicative mood as a conventional marker of assertoric force, if we could not identify assertoric force independently of grammatical mood. Similarly, it is no help to explain the indicative in terms of 'aiming at truth', if we have nothing but the grammar itself to prevent us applying a truth predicate to non-indicatives, such that they too could be said to be aimed at truth.

6. I have been arguing that of itself, radical interpretation does not impose or require a distinctive treatment of indicatives and, hence, that it cannot be the source of a notion of truth capable of explaining the significance of grammatical mood. I now want to show that the problem is not specific to this approach to a substantial theory of truth. Any proposal to explain assertion in terms of truth runs into the same sort of trouble. Substantial or not, no account of truth can ignore the striking connection between truth



and grammar—the fact that only indicative utterances are ordinarily held to be true or false. There are two main sorts of attitude that an account of truth can take to this connection. It is either something the account is obliged to explain, or a fact that the account is entitled to take for granted. But for a substantial theory of truth, neither attitude seems acceptable.

Thus suppose, firstly, that such a theory takes the view that it should explain this connection. The explanation will need to appeal to some difference between indicatives and non-indicatives, apart from the difference to be explained (i.e., the fact that only indicatives are treated as true or false). The relevant underlying difference will presumably be that only indicatives are assertions. But if assertion is characterized in terms of truth, the proposed explanation amounts to the suggestion that indicatives (unlike non-indicatives) have truth values because indicative utterances (unlike non-indicatives) are governed by the convention that speakers aim to utter true ones; roughly, the indicative is the mark of that convention.

It may not be obvious that this suggestion is circular. But let us take an example: why is an utterance such as ‘Make the tea’ not regarded as having a truth value? Because it is not an assertion. How do we know it is not an assertion? It is not aimed at truth. How do we know it is not aimed at truth? Not because ordinary usage does not give it a truth value; that would obviously be circular. But the alternative seems to be to appeal to the connection we are supposed to be explaining—to the fact that ‘Make the tea’ is not an indicative.

What, then, if a substantial theory of truth takes the view that the connection does not call for explanation—if it takes for granted that only indicatives have truth values? The problem now is that the proposal that assertions are those utterances that are aimed at truth, seems to collapse into the suggestion that assertions are those utterances that are indicative. The resulting view is incapable of both the tasks for which we wanted an account of assertion: to *explain* the significance of grammatical mood, and to settle non-factualist claims within the indicative mood.

I mentioned in § 1 that if assertions are to be characterized in terms of the convention that they aim at truth, truth must be considered a property of the members of a class of unasserted sentences: those sentences whose independent utterance would normally be taken as an assertion. ‘Make the tea’ is not supposed to qualify, for example, because it contains a syntactical marker of non-assertoric force (i.e., the imperative mood). The problem is to characterize this class of sentence, independently of the distinction that the convention is supposed to underpin. We do not see that there is a problem here if we take for granted the connection between truth and the indicative mood; but in that case we lose our grip on the two issues that give content to the problem of the nature of assertion.

Thus it seems to me that with respect to the connection between mood and truth, a substantial theory of truth is bound to take for granted what it

ought to explain. In general, as from the radical interpreter's perspective, the indicative mood and the truth predicate stand (and fall out) together. An account of assertion has a duty to explain the grammar. However, to explain the significance of the grammar is also to explain the significance of the truth predicate; and it is surely unlikely that we can do that, from a standpoint which takes truth itself to be fundamental.

Moreover, the requirement that truth be primarily a property of unasserted sentences raises a related (and perhaps more familiar) problem for a substantial theory of truth. For if truth is thus prior to assertion, we can imagine a group of speakers who follow the convention that they aim to utter *false* sentences. This convention seems no less useful than the ordinary one for purposes of communication. If one of these speakers says 'I've made the tea', then knowing the convention we know what he means. He means that he has not made the tea. However, what he *said* was supposed to be false. (We were imagining that he follows the convention of trying to utter false sentences.) But the truth value of a sentence depends on what it means. If he meant that he had not made the tea, then if we agree we should say that the sentence he uttered was true, not false. 'For a sentence is true if things are as we say they are by means of it; and if by "*p*" we mean " $\sim p$ ", and things are as we mean them, then "*p*" is on the new interpretation true and not false.'<sup>23</sup>

Both of these arguments elaborate a point I raised in section 1. They illustrate the absurdity of the idea that sentences could be considered to have truth values (or indeed meanings) in advance of an understanding of their conventional linguistic role. On the contrary: a sentence can meaningfully be taken to have a truth value only in virtue of the understanding that its conventional use is such as to admit a standard of right and wrong, of correctness and incorrectness. (This is a minimum requirement; presumably not just any standard will do.) The true sentences are those whose utterance would be correct, according to this standard. In other words (now taking for granted what we are trying to explain), a true sentence is true in virtue of the fact that it would be correct to assert it—which reduces the claim that in making assertions we aim to speak the truth, to the truism that in making assertions, we aim to do so correctly.

7. Back now to Wiggins. Wiggins claims to derive 'the marks of a theory of truth' from the anthropological constraints on a Davidsonian program of radical interpretation. I have argued, however, that the project of radical interpretation does not yield the kind of distinction that a substantial theory of truth is supposed to underpin. If we already have the distinction,

<sup>23</sup> The point has a radical interpreter's ring to it, but the sentence comes from the *Tractatus* (4.062). It is quoted by Dummett (*Frege*, p. 318), who agrees with Wittgenstein on this point, and accepts that it entails that the class of true sentences cannot be identified independently of the 'principle . . . according to which the use of assertoric sentences consists in trying to utter only the true ones' (p. 320). I take it that this explains Dummett's apparent reluctance to take this principle to *characterize* assertion (see n. 6 above).

interpretation will reflect it. But the distinction needs to come from somewhere else. From where, then, does Wiggins get his marks of truth? The answer is that they all turn out to depend on other forms of the distinction that a substantial theory of truth is supposed to elucidate. Wiggins takes for granted the notions of assertion and belief.

Thus Wiggins's 'first mark of assertibility (and so of truth)' consists in 'assertibility's being *the primary dimension of assessment for sentences*, or that property which sentences have *normally* to be construed as aiming to enjoy'. If there were no such norm, Wiggins says, 'interpretation would either be impossible . . . or unjustifiable'.<sup>24</sup> Wiggins's point seems to be that unless we take utterance to be constrained by such a norm, we will be unable to take seriously anything that our speakers say. But only the implicit assumption that by 'utterance' we mean 'assertion' can justify Wiggins's way of stating the constraint. Certainly we need to assume that by and large our subjects are speaking seriously—that they mean what they say—but only in the case of assertions does this amount to the assumption that they are aiming to speak the truth.

As for Wiggins's remaining marks of truth, they make essential use of the claim that 'language . . . *par excellence* . . . is the vehicle for the communication and expression of belief'.<sup>25</sup> However, if we were granted the notion of belief (and expression of belief) on which Wiggins here relies, we could quite well characterize the fact-stating use of language in terms of the expression of belief. All other versions of the distinction would flow from the distinction between those utterances whose standard function is to express a belief, and those that standardly do something else. So from this perspective we would not need a substantial theory of truth. The appropriate questions would rather be: What is the truth predicate *for*? And why should it be particularly associated with expressions of belief, rather than with other sorts of utterance? The proper approach would be to consider the *function* of the truth predicate, with reference to the notion of expression of belief. Some of the considerations to which Wiggins appeals might find a place in such an account, but the general orientation would be quite different. Rather than construing assertion as that sort of utterance whose 'basic aim . . . is to be true',<sup>26</sup> we would be seeking to explain, in effect, the fact that language treats the expression of belief as *having such an aim*—the fact, in other words, that such expressions are commended or criticized as if their purpose was to hit some target.

Here the most plausible suggestion is that the explanation lies in the value

<sup>24</sup> 'What would be a substantial theory of truth?', p. 205.

<sup>25</sup> 'What would be a substantial theory of truth?', p. 205. Thus: 'The argument for [the third mark] . . . is similar to the argument for the second mark in turning upon the notion of belief' (pp. 208–9); 'the fourth mark [is] simply . . . a condensation of the first, second and third . . .' (p. 211); and as for the fifth mark, 'it is a norm of rational belief that one is *committed* to conform one's beliefs to this requirement; and the interpretation of beliefs as beliefs has to see belief as *answerable* to it' (p. 212).

<sup>26</sup> 'What would be a substantial theory of truth?', p. 202.

of disagreement, argument, and informed consensus. Roughly speaking, the behavioural effects of beliefs are such that it is in everybody's interests to compare their beliefs to those of others, and to behave as if agreement is good and disagreement is bad—in other words, to behave as if there is a common goal for which everybody is aiming. On such a view it will be the pretence that there is such a target that does the primary work. What we can say about truth will be what follows from an understanding of the appropriate features of such a goal, given its intended function.

Unlike a substantial theory of truth, this functional approach is far from silent on the two issues which confront an account of assertion. On the one hand, it promises to explain why non-indicatives are not treated as true and false: if the value of disagreement lies in the behavioural consequences of belief, there will be no reason to disagree about utterances that do not express beliefs. On the other, the functional theory seems to allow for borderline cases—cases in which there is often, but not always, reason to disagree and seek consensus—and hence allow room for non-factualist treatments of certain classes of indicative utterances. For example, we might admit the possibility of moral relativism, and yet say that there is always a *prima facie* case for seeking conformity in moral attitudes. The former fact will distinguish moral statements from the expressions of genuine beliefs, while the latter will explain why the expressions of moral attitudes take indicative form.

Obviously much more needs to be said about this.<sup>27</sup> These remarks are intended simply to illustrate the orientation we might expect a theory of truth to take, once it is recognized firstly that there is a problem about the nature of assertion, and secondly that we cannot hope to solve it by appealing to truth. The interesting point, it seems to me, is that whatever else we need to appeal to in explaining the nature of assertion also becomes available to an account of truth. The theory of truth thus stands to benefit not only from the lifting of the impossible demand that it give us an account of assertoric discourse, but also from the fruits of cashing that demand elsewhere.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>27</sup> I have said a little more in H. Price, “‘Could a question be true?’: Assent and the basis of meaning”, *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 1983, pp. 353–64. One crucial question (not addressed in that paper) concerns the nature of the explanatory base for such a theory. For example, if we want to explain the notion of truth in terms of its function in the belief-expressing part of language, we should not rely on a notion of belief which itself needs to appeal to truth (perhaps to distinguish beliefs from other sorts of attitude). I discuss these issues in *Statement of Fact*, Blackwell, forthcoming.

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