

The T-Schema and the Epistemic Conception of Truth

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RESUMEN

Se suele suponer de manera bastante general que cualquier explicación satisfactoria de la verdad tiene que aceptar todas (o casi todas) las instancias del siguiente esquema T: es verdad que p si y sólo si p . Por ello, cualquier argumento que muestre la incompatibilidad con este esquema de una explicación dada de la verdad resultaría dañina para la explicación en cuestión. Los argumentos de incompatibilidad se dirigen algunas veces en contra de la concepción epistémica de la verdad para la que la verdad es alguna suerte de justificabilidad racional idealizada o aseverabilidad garantizada. Un inquietante argumento de este género ha sido presentado recientemente por William Alston. El objetivo de este artículo es discutir y socavar el argumento de Alston.

ABSTRACT

It is widely assumed that any satisfactory account of truth has to accept all (or nearly all) instances of the following T-schema: it is true that p if and only if p . Hence any argument showing the incompatibility of a given account of truth with this schema would be damaging for the account in question. Incompatibility arguments are sometimes directed against the epistemic conception of truth, for which truth is some sort of idealized rational justifiability or warranted assertibility. An intriguing argument of that kind has been recently put forward by William Alston. The aim of the paper is to discuss and undermine Alston's argument.

It is widely assumed that any satisfactory account of truth has to accept all (or nearly all) instances of the following truth schema (T-schema for short): it is true that p if and only if p ; or, in another formulation, the proposition that p is true if and only if p . One may even argue that the schema is so crucial to our common notion of truth that to have the correct grasp of the latter means to endorse the schema and its various instances as primitively compelling, as holding in virtue of the concepts involved, and thus knowable a priori.¹ Hence any argument showing the incompatibility of a given account of truth with the schema would be damaging for the account in question.

Incompatibility arguments are sometimes directed against the epistemic conception of truth, according to which truth is some sort of idealized rational justifiability or warranted assertibility. An intriguing argument of that kind has recently been put forward by William Alston (1996); (2001).² In what follows I will first present the main steps of this argument and its assumptions. Subsequently I will focus on Alston's reading of the T-schema.

I: THE INCOMPATIBILITY CHALLENGE

The epistemic theory of truth is often envisaged as an account or explication of our ordinary or common notion of truth. That is to say, its proponents just want to make explicit what we mean by calling a given proposition or statement true, what the ascription of the truth predicate really amounts to. According to the epistemic account “to say of a belief that it is true is to say that it would be justifiable in a situation in which all relevant evidence (reasons, considerations) is readily available” [Alston (1996), p. 194]. That is to say, the proponents of that account identify truth with some positive epistemic status of beliefs, or propositions, or statements [Alston (2001), p. 57]. For Alston such an account, irrespective of other difficulties, seems to be incompatible with the T-schema, since according to that schema the necessary and sufficient condition of its being true that p is just p , that is, the fact that p . There is nothing epistemic in that condition, and thus neither justifiability of any kind nor warranted assertibility is a constitutive part of our ordinary concept of truth. Here is how Alston puts that incompatibility charge (he calls it an “intensional argument”):

It is true that p if and only if p . Moreover, any such biconditional is necessarily, conceptually true; it is rendered true by the concept of truth. Since the fact that p is (necessarily) both necessary and sufficient for its being true that p , that leaves no room for an epistemic necessary or sufficient condition for truth. Nothing more is required for its being true that p than just the fact that p ; and nothing less will suffice. How then can some epistemic status of the proposition (belief, statement) that p be necessary and sufficient for the truth of p ? It seems clear that the imposition of an epistemic necessary and sufficient condition for truth runs into conflict with the T-schema [Alston (1996), p. 209].

The passage makes reasonably clear that the charge is based not only on the T-schema but also on what may be slightly misleadingly called the F-schema³: p if and only if it is a fact that p . The latter schema makes explicit the way in which p is construed in the argument. For Alston himself the relationship between those two schemata is quite intimate; the latter is, as he puts it “just below the surface” of the T-schema [Alston (1996), p. 38; see also Alston (2001), p. 51]. By the transitivity of the biconditional one can generate from those two principles the following TF-schema: it is true that p if and only if it is a fact that p . Since Alston claims that this schema specifies a *necessarily* both necessary and sufficient condition for its being true that p , it is presumably justified to assume that he takes it to have the same status as the T-schema, namely that it is also true as a matter of *conceptual* necessity. (After all, Alston believes that he is for the most part engaged in elucidation of what constitutes our ordinary or common notion of truth, of what are its con-

stitutive or necessary components). That in turn requires the same status for the F-schema. If one agrees that the T-schema is conceptually necessary because it is “rendered true by the concept of true,” then, by the same token, one may suppose that the F-schema is conceptually necessary in virtue of its crucial concept. That is to say, it has to be “rendered true by the concept of fact.” Alston makes clear that facts are for him “full-blooded constituents of reality” and — in most cases at least — “genuine denizens of the extralinguistic, extraintentional world” [Alston (1996), p. 39].⁴ They are simply states of affairs that really obtain. Under that construal the statement “it is a fact that p ” can be equivalent, as a matter of conceptual necessity, to p only if p purports to stand for that what is really the case. Thus the F-schema records the platitude according to which what is the case is a certain fact. And of course, it holds in virtue of the notion of a fact, because it is the notion of an obtaining state of affairs, of that which is the case. Now comes the last step of Alston’s intensional argument: since according to the TF-schema the necessary and sufficient condition for the truth of a given proposition p is the fact that p , which in order to be that condition does not have to meet any epistemic requirements (for instance, to be knowable or justifiable), it seems obvious that there is no place for anything epistemic in the condition that is necessary and sufficient to make a given proposition p true (except for such rare cases in which the proposition in question is itself about epistemic matters). Thus the epistemic conception of truth, that describes the condition in terms of justifiability, is at odds with our ordinary notion of truth, and especially with the T-schema constitutive of that notion.

II. THREE CONSTRUALS OF THE T-SCHEMA

Arguably the crucial assumption at work here is a certain reading of the T-schema. It is certainly a distinctively realist construal of that schema. Alston considers it as a statement to the effect that a proposition is true if and only if something is the case in the world that realizes the content of the proposition in question. That is to say, the biconditional links the ascription of truth to a certain proposition with a piece of the world specified by that proposition, which is — as the F-schema advises us — a certain fact. Thus the T-schema establishes a strongly dyadic relationship holding between two heterogeneous items: an abstract entity called a proposition and, in most cases, a particular bit of reality, a worldly fact or state of affairs. The latter somehow makes the former true, is the necessary and sufficient condition for possessing the property of truth by the proposition in question.

That is not a plausible way of reading Alston’s position, one may object. It is very unlikely he would be prepared to claim that the biconditional proposition in question consists of a certain constituent proposition ascribing

the concept or property of truth, and some piece of reality. What he has in mind is something uncontroversial and noncommittal, as one can see from the following statement: “The T-schema can be turned into a statement by substituting the same declarative sentence for both occurrences of ‘p’, restricting substitutends, of course, to sentences that can be used to make statements” [Alston (1996), p. 27]. That suggests that on the right-hand side of the biconditional we do not have any piece of reality, any worldly or full-blooded fact, but rather a statement or proposition about the world. Therefore there is nothing extraordinary about the biconditional in question: it does not join two heterogenous items, that is, an abstract proposition and a worldly fact, but merely two different propositions or statements.

On the other hand, Alston makes it clear that he does not read the T-schema merely as a biconditional joining two propositions. For instance, he maintains that the schema amounts to the claim “that a proposition is true when its ‘content’ is ‘realized’ in the way things are” [Alston (1996), p. 30]. Perhaps this line of thought is the most perspicuous in his assumption of a very close relationship between the T-schema and F-schema. He boldly suggests that if one takes any instantiation of the T-schema, let us say, “The proposition that sugar is sweet is true if and only if sugar is sweet,” then by endorsing it we hold that sugar being sweet makes the proposition in question true. And that in turn amounts to saying that the fact that sugar is sweet makes the proposition true. This is why one can say that the F-schema is just “just below the surface” of the T-schema.

But how to combine that line of thought with the objection mentioned above, which does not seem completely pointless? I think the only coherent picture of Alston’s account of the T-schema would be as follows. Of course, the biconditional in question does not relate two entities completely different in kind, namely an abstract proposition and — in most cases — a certain worldly item, but merely two propositions, statements, or sentences. However, the proposition on the right-hand side of the conditional is usually about the world; its content is, so to speak, transparent onto the world itself. Thus in going from the left-hand side to the right-hand side of the T-schema, or rather — more accurately — of most of its instances, one is involved in semantic descent that leads into the world itself, into the way things are (going in the opposite direction is of course to be involved in semantic ascent). That is, no doubt, quite a realist account of the T-schema.

Is there any alternative to that realist construal of the T-schema? Alston thinks that there is but he finds it unacceptable. It is the epistemic construal according to which the ascription of truth to a proposition amounts to the statement that the proposition is epistemically justified, or warrantably assertible, or may be correctly and properly asserted. Alston attributes that construal to Crispin Wright (1992) and argues against it in the following intuitive way:

Take a particular instantiation of the schema [T-schema]: 'It is true that sugar is sweet if and only if sugar is sweet.' The proposition on the right hand of the equivalence is about sugar; it attributes sweetness to sugar. It says nothing whatever about warranted assertibility; it says nothing of any kind about assertion or about the conditions under which an assertion is proper, correct, or in order. It asserts a fact about a substance, a foodstuff [Alston (1996), p. 218].

One can admit that Alston is right in his criticism, but wonder whether it really applies to Wright and other philosophers resistant to the straightforwardly realistic reading of the T-schema. It is far more likely that Wright suggests a pretty neutral reading of the T-schema according to which it relates the ascription of truth to a given proposition with that proposition itself. Thus he would presumably agree with Alston that on the right-hand side of the instantiated biconditional or equivalence we have a proposition about sugar, and not about its warranted assertibility, etc., but at the same time he would probably insist that irrespective of what the proposition on the right-hand side is explicitly about, it has — in many of its occurrences — a certain status: it is assertorically used, it is presented as warrantably assertible, etc. Of course, in the present context one has to put that point carefully, since what is directly assertible here, or assertorically used, is the biconditional, and not its clauses. However, it seems plausible that by asserting it one is committed to holding that the right-hand side of the biconditional is assertible when the left-hand side of it is assertible, and vice versa. Thus, to avoid possible misunderstandings, one should say that in the T-schema the right-hand side *p* is presented as conditionally assertible.⁵ Moreover, contrary to the realist reading of the T-schema, on the right-hand side we have not a piece of reality or a worldly fact "shining through" the proposition, but simply a proposition about a piece of reality or some worldly event. Thus, to be suitably precise, one should not say that the sweetness of sugar is the necessary and sufficient condition for the truth of the proposition that sugar is sweet, but rather, more carefully, that the proper assertoric use of the proposition that sugar is sweet is the necessary and sufficient condition for the ascription of truth to the proposition that sugar is sweet. Of course, a further and complicated matter is a satisfactory account of what constitutes the proper assertoric use. Nevertheless, it is at least obvious that the account presupposing realism is not the only one available or defensible.⁶

Let us take stock. Alston suggests that there are only two ways of reading the T-schema: one distinctively realist and the other explicitly epistemic. I take this suggestion to be wrong. There is a third way of understanding the T-schema, very basic and neutral. It is rather clear that under the neutral or genuinely minimal construal of the T-schema, Alston's incompatibility argument fails. And perhaps there is an important lesson to be learned from that failure: if one wants to produce a decisive refutation of the epistemic theory

of truth, one should not expect to achieve that purpose by showing that the theory cannot incorporate the T-schema.⁷

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NOTES

¹ For example, Paul Horwich writes that those instances “are *epistemologically fundamental*: we do not arrive at them, or seek to justify our acceptance of them, on the basis of anything more obvious or more immediately known” [Horwich (2001), p. 559].

² Another succinct attempt of similar kind has been undertaken by Musgrave (1997). However, Musgrave does not aim to show that the T-schema is incompatible with the epistemic conception of truth *simpliciter*, but merely that when it is combined with the epistemic conception of truth, one gets a patently absurd view of an idealistic sort. The suggestion that the T-schema is incompatible with epistemic, or pragmatic, or coherence theories of truth may also be found in a recent paper by David Lewis (2001), p. 275. Lewis holds that the schema and its various instances are manifestly a priori, unlike the biconditionals ensuing from epistemic, or pragmatic, or coherence theories. However, one may rebut this suggestion (provided the suitable construal of the T-schema) by insisting that those biconditionals are not manifestly or *prima facie* a priori, but they can be shown to be a priori on rational elucidation; that is, they can be *secunda facie* a priori.

³ Misleadingly, because the term “F-schema” can also quite naturally stand for something like the following principle for false propositions or statements: it is false that *p* if and only if not *p*.

⁴ In that respect Alston’s position is similar to that of J.L. Austin who — in his famous debate with P.F. Strawson — argued that facts are worldly items. To accommodate various criticisms of that position Alston concedes that the “mode of reality” of facts is “quite different from that of substances, states, properties of substances, and events” [Alston (1996), p. 41], but without any attempt to explain in what this peculiar “mode of reality” is supposed to consist. Be that as it may, that position still faces a serious challenge, since careful consideration of various ordinary contexts in which the word “fact” is deployed seems to favour the view that facts should not be placed in the world, along with other familiar entities. See e.g. Rundle (1993), pp. 9–22.

⁵ Apparently the matter would be much simpler within the framework of intuitionistic logic, where one is entitled to assert a biconditional only when both its sides are assertible.

⁶ Williamson (1996) discusses the main views on assertion, and defends himself in greater detail the knowledge-based account that in fact presupposes realism. But he also mentions warrant accounts that take an explicitly antirealist line.

⁷ An early ancestor of this paper was presented at 11th International Congress of Logic, Methodology and Philosophy of Science, Cracow, August 1999, where I

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