

Philosophy 143z

Truth

Course Web Site: <http://www.courses.fas.harvard.edu/~phil143z>

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General Remarks on the Course

Philosophers have been worrying about truth for just about as long as there've been philosophers. They've worried about what truth is; about what kinds of things are true; about what it is for one of these things to be true; about how its being true is related to our knowing or thinking that it is true; and so on. But why should philosophers worry about these things? This is itself a philosophical question. Some philosophers, Deflationists, think that there is *nothing of philosophical interest to be said about truth*. According to these philosophers, the concept of truth is *boring* and philosophers shouldn't worry so much about it.

However that may be, there are three kinds of reasons philosophers have *thought* the concept of truth was interesting. First, philosophers have often concerned themselves with *norms of correct reasoning*, that is, with logic, and the concept of truth seems to play an important role here. For example, a *valid inference* is one which is *truth-preserving*, whose conclusion must be true if its premises are. The concept of validity, of a 'norm of reasoning', seems to be tied up with the concept of truth. Second, philosophy has long concerned itself with *representation*, with our capacity to think about, or to make claims about, the world. A fundamental feature of representations seems to be that they can be right or wrong, true or false. Not only that, but in some sense a primary goal of thought is, or at least seems to be, the acquisition of true rather than false beliefs. It is because thought aims at truth that valid inferences are *good* inferences: Being truth-preserving is a good thing for an inference to be because we infer new beliefs from old ones and we want our beliefs to be true. Questions about truth thus appear to bear directly on questions about representation (or meaning). Finally, there is an intimate connection between truth and metaphysics. The nature of the connection is controversial, but consider, for example, the view that, for something to be true, we must be able to come to know that it is true: On this view, *how things are* depends upon *what we are capable of knowing*. That amounts to a form of Idealism, a form of the view that how the world is is in some sense or other determined, or constrained, by the mind.

We shall not discuss any of these issues directly: The course is less ambitious, the goal being that students should acquire the necessary background to appreciate contemporary discussions of these issues. But we shall touch on each of them at one time or another. Indeed, a concern with these issues will shape the course in ways on which I shall comment when that seems appropriate.

The course will be structured as follows. We shall begin by looking at some famous papers on truth written in the 1950s, attempting to extract from these papers a sense of the importance of *Convention T*, which, so to speak, *generalizes* sentences of the following form:

The sentence "Snow is white" is true if, and only if, snow is white.

The sentence "Grass is green" is true if, and only if, grass is green.

I hope that these sentences seem true. Convention T states that they are true, and that *all sentences of the same form are true*. This fundamental principle, which has guided philosophical thinking about truth for over sixty years, has seemed to some to embody the idea that whether a sentence is true is determined by relevant features of the world: Thus, whether the sentence "Snow is white" is true depends upon *whether snow is white*; whether "Grass is green" is true, upon *whether grass is green*. Indeed, some philosophers are so impressed by Convention T that they think that *all that needs to be, or can be, said about truth is said by Convention T*. This is Deflationism, in one of its forms, and we shall spend some time explaining and evaluating this position. Having disposed of it, we shall discuss what significance Convention T has even if it is not the whole story about truth.

There is a *big* problem with Convention T, though: Obvious as it may seem, it is paradoxical. Convention T tells us that

The sentence “The sentence written in tiny type on the syllabus for Phil 143z is not true” is true if, and only if, the sentence written in tiny type on the syllabus for Phil 143z is not true

But it happens that, as a matter of empirical fact, the sentence written in tiny type on the syllabus for Phil 143z *is* the sentence “The sentence written in tiny type on the syllabus for Phil 143z is not true”. So, by the laws of identity, we have:

The sentence “The sentence written in tiny type on the syllabus for Phil 143z is not true” is true if, and only if, the sentence “The sentence written in tiny type on the syllabus for Phil 143z is not true” is not true

And that’s a flat contradiction, of the form ‘ $p \equiv \neg p$ ’. This is *the Liar Paradox*.

One might think this is just foolish, that there is an easy solution: Isn’t a sentence’s referring to itself fishy? But that sentences should be able to refer to themselves in this way *is essential to the proof of one of the most important mathematical theorems of this century*, Gödel’s incompleteness theorem. More generally, it is, roughly, *a theorem of arithmetic* that sentences can refer to themselves in this way. So what the Liar Paradox shows is no less than this: That one can not, on pain of contradiction, *both* accept all instances of Convention T *and* accept all truths of arithmetic. Something has to give.

Just what has to give is an interesting question. We shall spend the second half of the course discussing it.

The sentence written in tiny type on the syllabus for Phil 143z is not true.

Prerequisites

We shall be reading and discussing a good deal of formal (mathematical) work on truth. Students should therefore have taken and understood Quantitative Reasoning 22 (or an equivalent course) and should be comfortable with mathematical argumentation (i.e., proofs). If you have doubts about your preparation in this respect, please speak to the instructor before registering to take the course for credit.

Course Structure and Requirements

The course will meet Monday and Wednesday, at 1pm, in Emerson 104. An undergraduate section for the course will meet most Fridays, also at 1pm, though we shall have lecture on Friday the first week and on weeks in which there is a Monday holiday (see the syllabus for the exact dates). The section will be taught by a teaching fellow, if enrollment should warrant the appointment of one, or by the Instructor, if not. There will also be a graduate section, which is open *only* to graduate students in Philosophy and the time for which will be arranged after study cards are due.

Every student in the course will be required to submit two papers. A list of topics for the first paper will be announced on 15 October; the paper itself will be due on 29 October. The second paper will be due the last day of classes, 13 December, on a topic chosen by the student and approved by the instructor. These will be relatively short papers, of about 5-7 pages, with a *maximum length* of 2000 words (or about 7 standard pages). I really do mean *maximum* (and know how to count).

There will also be a final exam for the course. It will cover, for the most part, the formal material on the liar paradox we shall study in the second half.

Readings

Unfortunately, there is no collection of articles on truth suitable for our purposes. I would like to have been able to produce a “sourcebook”, containing xeroxes of the various articles, and then have these distributed, for the cost of the photocopying, in the department office. Unfortunately, however, copyright law currently prohibits this, making no distinction between uses of copyrighted material for educational purposes and uses for commercial purposes, nor caring at all whether what is charged for sourcebooks merely covers the costs of photocopying or exceeds it. Each of you, however, is free to make a copy of the relevant reading materials, for your own personal use, in accord with the “fair use” provisions of the law. So, what we’re going to have to do is this: I’ll put both the books and journals from which the various articles come, and individual copies of them, on reserve in Robbins Library. It will be up to each of you to make copies of the articles along the way, or to make a copy of the complete packet. *Please make your copies from the photocopies, not from the journals or the books*, to protect them.

If any of this bothers you, write your senator or representative.

Syllabus

For each meeting, there are both *required* and *optional* readings: The former are in standard type; the latter, in smaller type. The optional readings are listed for the benefit of those who find a given topic of special interest: No student should feel compelled to read all of the optional materials. What we shall be reading is, in general, sufficiently difficult that one should expect to have to read each article at least three times before really having a deep understanding of it. (Indeed, one could make this same comment about *most* philosophical writing.) Those who decide to write a paper (especially the longer paper) on a particular topic should, however, have a look at the optional readings connected with it.

The questions which follow each reading are intended to help students focus their attention. Each of the articles raises a large number of different issues and concerns, not all of which will be discussed in class. I shall, as was said above, be trying to trace a thread through what we are reading. In one sense, the questions are intended simply to give students some idea what I consider important for present purposes. There are thus no formal assignments connected with the questions: But it would not be a bad idea to write a page or so on each reading, attempting to sketch some kind of answer to them. For one thing, this will encourage critical thinking about the readings; for another, it is a good way to make oneself *write*. Writing is not just a way of presenting one's ideas to others: It is a means for making them clearer to oneself.

12 September

Introductory Meeting

A Classic Debate, and the Role of the Concept of Truth

14 & 17 September

J.L. Austin, "Truth", and P.F. Strawson, "Truth", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* (1950), pp. 111-56.

J.L. Austin, "Unfair to Facts", in his *Philosophical Papers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979); P.F. Strawson, "Truth: A Re-consideration of Austin's Views", in his *Logico-Linguistic Papers* (London: Methuen, 1971).

Questions: Austin wants to claim that a sentence like "It is true that snow is white" makes reference to a *statement* and asserts that a certain correspondence obtains between this statement and a fact. What does Austin mean by "statement" and "fact"? What sort of correspondence does he think is asserted? What sorts of views does he take himself to be opposing?

Strawson insists that to say "It is true that snow is white" is just to say, as it were, in other words, "Snow is white". Why does he want to make this claim? How and why does he think it alone serves to undermine Austin's view? What additional problems does he have with the details of Austin's position?

19 September

A.J. Ayer, "Truth", *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 25 (1953), pp. 183-200.

A.J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (New York: Dover, 1952), Ch. 5; F.P. Ramsey, "The Foundations of Mathematics", in his *Foundations of Mathematics and Other Logical Essays* (London: Routledge, 1954).

Questions: Ayer wants to insist, as against Strawson, that the concept of truth is not 'superfluous'. Still, he agrees with Strawson that Convention T amounts to a complete explanation of the meaning of the word 'true'. But then, he wants to deny that the philosophical problem of truth is thereby solved. How can Ayer hold all three of these views simultaneously? What sorts of problems does Ayer think Strawson's view leaves unaddressed? How does Ayer propose to solve these problems himself?

24 September

Alfred Tarski, "The Semantic Conception of Truth and the Foundations of Semantics", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 4 (1944), pp. 341-75, esp. pp. 341-55.

Richard Kirkham, *Theories of Truth*, Ch. 5.

- 26 September
- Questions:* What does Tarski think the Liar Paradox shows about our intuitive notion of truth? How is Convention T supposed to be related to our intuitive notion of truth? What are an object-language and a meta-language? How does distinguishing between them help us to solve the liar paradox?
- Michael Dummett, "Truth", in his *Truth and Other Enigmas* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), pp. 1-24. You need not pay close attention to the Postscript.
- Michael Dummett, "The Philosophical Basis of Intuitionistic Logic" and "The Reality of the Past", in *Truth and Other Enigmas*; "Language and Truth" and "The Source of the Concept of Truth", in *The Seas of Language*.
- Questions:* Why does Dummett think that it is a fundamental problem with 'classical' theories of truth that they ignore the connection between truth and meaning? Why is the primary sense of 'true' and 'false' fundamentally connected with the notion of assertion? How and why does this lead Dummett to want to deny that we have any grasp of a concept of truth according to which what is true can exceed what we can, in principle, know to be true? What is the real point of the example of *character*?

Deflationism

- 1 & 3 October
- Paul Horwich, *Truth* (Cambridge MA: Blackwell, 1990), Chs. 1, 5.
- Dorothy Grover, Joseph Camp, and Nuel Belnap, "A Prosentential Theory of Truth", *Philosophical Studies* 27 (1975), pp. 73-125, and other of Grover's papers reprinted in her *A Prosentential Theory of Truth* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992); Harry Field, "The Deflationary Conception of Truth", in G. MacDonald and C. Wright, eds., *Fact, Science and Morality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), pp. 55-117; Vann McGee, "Maximal Consistent Sets of T-Sentences", *Journal of Philosophical Logic* 21 (1992), pp. 235-41.
- Questions:* What is the primary motivation for Horwich's view? What does he mean by saying that truth is not a 'substantive property'? How does he think the 'minimal theory of truth' explains the role truth plays in logic? Can the minimal theory play any role in the explanation of why, if a given sentence A is true, and if 'A → B' is also true, then B must itself be true? Can the minimal theory acknowledge the distinction between saying that A follows from B and saying that the conditional 'A → B' is valid?
- 8 October
10 October
- No Class: Columbus Day Holiday*
- Hilary Putnam, "Does the Deflationary Theory of Truth Solve All Philosophical Problems?" in his *Words and Life* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), pp. 264-78.
- Hilary Putnam, "On Truth" and "A Comparison of Something with Something Else", in *Words and Life*.
- Questions:* Putnam of course wants to answer "No!" But why does he think that deflationism is committed to the view that truth amounts simply to assertibility? Why does he think this is a problem?
- 12 October
- Note: Because of the Columbus Day holiday, we will have class, and not section, this Friday.*
- Donald Davidson, "The Folly of Trying to Define Truth", *Journal of Philosophy* 93 (1996), pp. 263-78.
- Donald Davidson, "Truth and Meaning", "True to the Facts", "In Defense of Convention T", "Radical Interpretation" and "The Method of Truth in Metaphysics", in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*.
- Questions:* How does Davidson think the concepts of truth and meaning are related? In what way does he think Tarski's work can be applied in the study of meaning? Does Davidson think that this study of meaning will, at the same time, throw light on the concept of truth?
- 15 October
- David Wiggins, "What Would Be a Substantial Theory of Truth?", in Zaak van Straaten, ed., *Philosophical Subjects* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), pp. 189-221.

Donald Davidson, "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge", in E. LePore, ed., *Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986).

Questions: Wiggins wants to suggest that a broadly Davidsonian approach to questions about meaning will, in the end, throw a great deal of light on the concept of truth. In particular, Wiggins wants to suggest that (1) a proper account of meaning requires a theory which yields theorems of the form

"Snow is white" is ϕ if, and only if, snow is white

(2) that truth should be *identified* with whatever is best suited to play the role of ϕ here, and (3) that such theories should be evaluated in terms of their capacity to help us 'make sense' of speakers. The first and third claims are essentially Davidson's. Why does Wiggins make the second claim? What does he think we can say about truth, simply on the basis of these three claims? What important claims about truth does he think do *not* follow just from these three claims?

Topics for short paper made available

Tarski's Theory of Truth

17 & 22 October

Formal Background (Handout)

George Boolos and Richard Jeffrey, *Computability and Logic*, 3rd. ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), esp. Ch. 15; Stephen Yablo, "Paradox Without Self-Reference", *Analysis* 53 (1993), pp. 251-2.

Important things to come to understand: Basic logic with constants and function symbols; elementary arithmetic; computable, or recursive, functions and their representability in elementary arithmetic; Gödel numbering and the diagonal lemma; the use of the diagonal lemma in generating the liar paradox; Tarski's theorem on the indefinability of truth.

24 & 29 October

Handout: *Tarski's Theory of Truth*

Alfred Tarski, "The Concept of Truth in Formalized Languages", in his *Logic, Semantics, Metamathematics* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983). Handout: *Truth-theories for Fragments of PA*.

29 October

Short paper due

The Philosophical Significance of Tarski's Theory of Truth

31 October

Hartry Field, "Tarski's Theory of Truth", *Journal of Philosophy* (1972), pp. 347-75.

For a very different sort of view, Donald Davidson, "True to the Facts", in his *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*.

Questions: What does Field think Tarski was trying to do? Why is this an important thing to do? Plainly, Field does not think Tarski succeeded: What does he think needs to be done to complete Tarski's project? Does Field's distinction between 'T1' and 'T2' reflect something present in Tarski's work already? If so, can we acknowledge this distinction and its import without accepting physicalism?

5 November

John Etchemendy, "Tarski on Truth and Logical Consequence", *Journal of Symbolic Logic* 53 (1988), pp. 57-79.

John Etchemendy, *The Concept of Logical Consequence* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1990); Scott Soames, "What is a Theory of Truth?" *Journal of Philosophy* 81 (1984), pp. 411-29, and *Understanding Truth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

Questions: Etchemendy is highly critical of philosophers who find Tarski's work to be of philosophical value. What value does he think Tarski ascribed to his work? What criticisms does Etchemendy make of the claim that Tarski's work on truth is of substantial philosophical importance? What does he think is needed instead of, or in addition to, Tarski's theory of truth?

- 7 November Richard G. Heck, Jr., “Tarski, Truth, and Semantics”, *Philosophical Review* 106 (1997), pp. 533-54.
Questions: Heck makes a number of distinctions that he accuses Etchemendy of neglecting, including the distinction between axiomatic theories of truth and definitions of truth. How, if at all, is this distinction related to Field’s T1 and T2?
Note: Since I wrote this paper, I’ve said much of what I’ve got to say about the subject in it. I hope this meeting will, even more than usual, primarily be driven by discussion.
- 12 November *No Class: Veterans’ Day Holiday*
 14 November Charles Parsons, “The Liar Paradox”, in his *Mathematics in Philosophy*, pp. 221-67. You need not read the Postscript now, but should have a look at it after we have discussed Kripke.
 Tyler Burge, “Semantical Paradox”, *Journal of Philosophy* 76 (1979), pp. 169-98.
Questions: What is the ‘strengthened liar paradox’ and what problem does Parsons think it raises for Tarski? What is the Tarskian ‘hierarchy’ and what is Parsons’s attitude towards it? What problem does Parsons think the liar paradox really raises?
- 16 November *Note: Because of the Veterans’ Day holiday, we will have class, and not section, this Friday.*
 Michael Glanzberg, “The Liar in Context”, *Philosophical Studies* 103 (2001), pp. 217-51.

Kripke’s Theory of Truth

- 19 & 21 November Saul Kripke, “An Outline of a Theory of Truth”, *Journal of Philosophy* (1975), pp. 690-716, esp. pp. 690-702.
 Michael Kremer, “Kripke and the Logic of Truth”, *Journal of Philosophical Logic* 17 (1988), pp. 225-78; Melvin Fitting, “Note on the Mathematical Aspects of Kripke’s Theory of Truth”, *Notre Dame Journal of Formal Logic* 27 (1986), pp. 75-88; Vann McGee, “Applying Kripke’s Theory of Truth”, *Journal of Philosophy* 86 (1989), pp. 530-9.
Questions: What are Kripke’s main objections to Tarski’s treatment of truth? Why does this lead Kripke to search for a way of allowing a language ‘to contain its own truth-predicate’? What does Kripke think our most central intuitions about truth are? How are these related to Convention T? How do these central intuitions motivate the notion of *groundedness*, and what is its role in Kripke’s theory?
Note: Do not worry about the more mathematical parts of Kripke’s paper. We will discuss those separately.
- 23 November *No Section: Thanksgiving Holiday*
 26 & 28 November Handout: *Kripke’s Theory of Truth*
 3 December *No Class*
 Prof. Heck will be speaking this day at a conference in honor of Tarski’s 100th birthday, held at Boston University. Members of the class are encouraged, if able, to attend at least the afternoon session, which runs from 2-5pm. (There is another, in the morning, that runs from 10-12am.) The conference is held in the Terrace Lounge of the George Sherman Union, at 775 Commonwealth Ave, in Boston. That is on the Green B line—I believe at the BU Central stop.
 Handout: *Truth and Inductive Definability*
 Vann McGee, *Truth, Vagueness, and Paradox* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991); Stephen Yablo, “Grounding Dependence and Paradox”, *Journal of Philosophical Logic* 11 (1982), pp. 117-38.
- 5 & 10 December *To Be Announced*
- 12 December *Last Day of Classes: Second Short Paper Due*
 13 December