Truth and the Magic of 'Is'

P. T. MacKENZIE

Introduction

Why do we want to say that the truth of a factual statement is dependent upon the way the world is and yet also want to say that to assert of a statement that it is true is to do little more than to assert that statement? Each inclination leads to a philosophical theory that seems to be incompatible with the other. The first leads to the Correspondence Theory of Truth and the second leads to the Redundancy-Performative Theory of Truth. If the Correspondence Theory is correct, it would seem that the other is mistaken and vice versa. And yet each inclination seems so well grounded that we cannot help but feel that the basics for each theory is essentially correct. It will not do, as has been done in the past, to present each theory with greater and greater sophistication on the assumption that if it is correct the other must be mistaken[1]. What we must do is give an account of truth which will show how it is possible that the truth of

[1] The controversy discussed here came to a head around the middle of the 20th Century. The Correspondence Theory, although it is traceable back to Aristotle, was presented with renewed vigour by L. Wittgenstein in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1923) and by B. Russell in his 'Lectures on Logical Atomism', *Monist* (1918).

What I call the Redundancy-Performative Theory finds its roots in F. P. Ramsey's 'Facts and Propositions', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, suppl. vol. 7 (1926) and in A. J. Ayer's *Language Truth and Logic* (1936). It was, however, presented in its most forceful form by P. F. Strawson in 'Truth', *Analysis* (1949).

The dispute between the two competing theories reaches its apex in the pages of The Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society supplementary volume 24 in 1950. The traditional Correspondence Theory was presented in a new sophisticated form by J. L. Austin and the Redundancy-Performative Theory was presented in a slightly modified form by P. F. Strawson.

Lurking in the wings of the whole dispute was A. Tarsky's 'Semantic Conception of Truth' *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol. 4. (1944).

The dispute has been revisited from time to time but has not, at least in my opinion, ever been resolved.

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a factual statement is dependent upon the way the world is and also, at the same time, that to say that a statement is true is to do little more that repeat the statement. In short we have here a paradox that must be resolved.

Now, it would seem that since truth has to do with statements if we want to resolve this paradox we must get clearer about the nature of statements. It is this that I propose to do. I am going to present a new way, and I think, a more perspicuous way of looking at statements which will show, I hope, that what lies at the bottom of the Correspondence Theory is correct and consistent with what lies at the bottom of the Redundancy Theory. I shall limit myself, for the most part, to the simplest of subject-predicate factual statements. I don't want to claim that all subject-predicate statements containing 'true' are redundant. For example, perhaps 'whatever the Pope says is true' is not redundant, but it still has to be explained why statements such as 'it is true that the pen is black' are.

Let us begin. Why is it that to say that it's true that the pen is on the table is to do much the same as to say that the pen is on the table, while to say that it's false that the pen is on the table is to do something very different from saying that the pen is on the table? That is, why is it that '"p" is true' is redundant in a way in which '"p" is false is not'? Of course if '"p" is true' is redundant '"p" is false' could not be redundant. But why isn't '"p" is false' redundant and '"p" is true' not redundant? Or why isn't it the case that neither is redundant? A superficial answer to why we say that '"p" is true' is redundant but '"p" is false' is not is that basically we use statements to tell people what is true and not what is false. But this answer, though it is correct as far as it goes, is misleading for it suggests that it is just a contingent matter—that things could be otherwise. But is this just a contingent matter; can we conceive of a world in which the basic use of statements is to tell people what is false? I think not, for in such a world when I say to you the 'the pen is black' you would take me as saying that the pen is not black. And so 'the pen is black' is true would still be redundant. The only difference is that it would mean what we now mean by 'the pen is not black' is true.

It strikes me as extraordinary that this asymmetry between true and false has never been noticed before. Granted it was noticed by both F. P. Ramsey in *The Foundations of Mathematics* and A. J. Ayer in *Language, Truth and Logic* that '"p" is false' is equivalent to 'not p' but this is a very different point from the point that '"p" is true' is equivalent to 'p'. The difference is that when I say that 'p' is true I do little more than say 'p'. But when I say that 'p' is false I do something very different from saying 'p'. This difference is marked

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out by the fact that if we want to get a suitable equivalence for 'p' making use of 'false' we must add 'not' to 'p'. This point might also be driven home by noticing that we cannot replace 'not p' with 'not p' is false', (but can with '"not p" is true'). If we want a suitable replacement for 'not p' (using 'false') we must make use of '"not not p" is false'.

Statements and Correspondence

On the way to solving the puzzle raised in the Introduction it might be helpful to look at the nature of statements. Wittgenstein said, in effect, in the *Tractatus* that what made it possible for a statement to be true is that it corresponded to the way things are. That in the statement elements are related to one another in the same way as they are in the corresponding fact. Wittgenstein got the idea from the use of model cars in a court of law to represent an accident. If model car A stands for my car and B stands for your car and they are related to one another in the same way as the cars were related in the accident then in effect we have in this *tableau vivant* a true statement of how things were at the scene of the accident.

Although this view of statements is very attractive, I think it is mistaken. One of the things that makes it deceptively attractive is that often we use pictures to make statements. If you are driving down the road and you see the picture of a running deer, you would take this as saying that deer are likely to cross. If you are about to park your car and you see a picture of a parked car with a line through it and a motorcycle with no line through it you might interpret this as saying that motorcycles are permitted to park but not cars.

Although it is tempting to interpret pictures as making statements, one must proceed with caution. Suppose that after seeing the picture of the deer along the side of the road you were to see the picture of a camel. You might interpret this as the claim that camels are also likely to cross but it may be no more than part of a bill board for Camel Cigarettes!

In order, however, to see what is basically wrong with the Correspondence Theory consider the following. We are walking across a desert where there is nothing more than flat sand. Suddenly we come across four rocks that are separated from one another. I look at them and say 'It's amazing but they are spatially related to one another in just the same way as the post office, the court house, city hall and the library are in our town. If you take the round rock

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on the left as the post office then everything falls into place.' Here we have a case of real correspondence. The way the rocks are spatially related corresponds to the way the civic buildings are related. But here, and this is the important point, we have nothing here that can be true or false. The only thing that could be true or false is a statement about how the rocks are related not the rocks themselves. The point that I am trying to make here is that we are tempted to say that statements are like pictures because often we use pictures, as we have seen, as statements. But if we look at pictures as they are in themselves, so to speak, they are not at all like statements. The picture does not say anything and is neither true nor false even though the figures in it may be related to one another in the same way as the post office, court house, city hall and library. We may make a true statement about how the rocks or the figures are related but the related rocks on their own do not make a statement.

The moral of the story is that strictly speaking statements cannot correspond to facts because the only thing that could be said to truly correspond to a given fact (the civic buildings standing in a certain relation to one another), is another fact (perhaps having to do with rocks) and facts just are, they are neither true nor false.

The importance of 'is'

If statements are not *tableau vivants* then (a) what are they (b) why is it redundant to say that they are true and (c) how do they manage to be true?

(a) When I say that Fred is black after giving the name 'Fred' to my pen, what I do is use one word (Fred) as a proper name to refer, perhaps to draw your attention, to what I am referring to, and then I use a second expression 'is black' to assert that Fred has the property of being black. What I do is something that anybody could do. Mr James could also say that Fred is black. If he were to do so both he and I would have asserted the same statement and that statement—Fred is black is true if and only if Fred is black.

(b) So now we have a thumbnail account of what a statement is. But we also have the beginnings of an explanation of why it is redundant to say that a statement is true—that the only thing I do when I assert that it's true that Fred is black is emphasize that Fred is black.

To get at this explanation, we must ask ourselves why statements are essentially assertive and how does this assertiveness

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manage to get lodged in statements? I used to think that it had something to do with symbols like ⊢ but then it struck me, as is often the case in philosophy, that this assertiveness is right in front of us. It is provided by the word 'is'.

(c) When I say that Fred *is* black I use the word 'is' to ascribe black to Fred. Nothing more is required. That is to say, symbols such as ⊢ are not required. As a result when I say it's true that Fred is black, my statement is redundant and yet the truth value of my statement depends on the way the world is—on whether Fred is or is not black.

As well using 'is' to attribute a property to an object, 'is' also used to assert an identity between two objects and to claim the existence of an object. In both cases the same point can be made. When I say that Clark Kent is Superman I assert that there is an identity between two entities. If there is an identity my statement is true and if not my statement is false. But in either case when I say it's true that Clark Kent is Superman my statement is redundant.

When I say that God is, I assert that there is such a being. If there is such a being my statement is true and if not it is false. And either case if I were to say that it's true that there is a God, my statement is redundant.

Let me put the whole argument in a different way. When I say 'Fred is black' I use the 'is' to ascribe the colour black to the pen. Thus instead I could have said 'I ascribe black to Fred' or even 'I hereby ascribe black to Fred'. Now, if I were to go on and say 'I correctly ascribe black to Fred' or 'I truly ascribe black to Fred' my statement would be redundant and yet whether I had correctly, that is truly, ascribed black to Fred would depend on how things were in the world—whether or not Fred was black.

The beauty of 'is' is that it makes it unnecessary to use such locutions as 'I ascribe black to Fred'. All I have to say is 'Fred is black'. The 'is' does the work. And this is why it is redundant to say that it is true that Fred is black even though the truth of my statement is dependent on the way things are in the world.

But now it might be asked, if statements are essentially of the form 'x *is* y.' or 'x *is*.' then how can they be true or false? Surely there must be some part of them that maps what is out there that makes it possible for them to be true or false. This worry is reflected in John Searle's *Speech Acts* (p. 31)[2], and is echoed in a number of other places.

According to Searle the general form of a speech act is f(p) where

[2] J. L. Searle, *Speech Acts* (Cambridge: CUP, 1970), 31.

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f can be replaced by a partial speech act such as warn, ask, promise, state and the like and p can be replaced by the propositional content of the completed speech act. So for example f(p) could be filled in by 'I warn that it's going to snow.' Here, 'I warn that it is going to snow' would be expressed by W(S).

The form of 'Fred is black' when used just to assert that Fred is black is ⊢ (A). Here ⊢ is the sign of assertion. Searle goes on, in effect, to claim that the anatomy of p in f(p) is SP where S stands for the subject and P stands for the predicate. Thus the final analysis of 'I warn that Fred is black' would be something like W (FB) and the final analysis of 'It's the case that Fred is black' would be ⊢ (FB).

The trouble with Searle's analysis is it puts asserting on the same level as warning. If I am right, unless asserting is an integral part of making a statement we have nothing that can be true or false. Why is this so? Well, on Searle's account the proper analysis of ⊢ (FB) would be something like 'It is the case that Fred being black' but 'Fred being black' is not something that can be either true or false until we introduce 'is'. But if we introduce 'is' we don't need the assertion sign. F *is* B takes care itself. The assertion sign ⊢ is not required.

This excursus into Searle enables us to see more clearly how it is possible for statements to be either true or false. It is possible for 'Fred is black' to be true, not because it offers a picture that could correspond, but by saying how things are. If Fred is black, the statement is true and if not it is false. When I say that Fred is black I use 'Fred' to refer to the pen, 'black' to identify the colour I want ascribe and 'is' to ascribe that colour to Fred. If things are as I say they are my statement is true and if not it is false.

So now we have the complete solution to the paradox. You will recall the paradox is that both the Correspondence Theory in some form, and the Redundancy-Performative seemed to be correct and yet it also seemed that if one is correct the other must be mistaken. The solution to this paradox is that once we are aware of the magic of 'is', that is the assertiveness of 'is' we can see why it is redundant to say it's true that Fred is black and yet the truth of that statement requires that Fred be black. And this we find out by taking a look at Fred.

Hypothetical and Negative Statements

It might be wondered how hypotheticals are possible if the assertive force is built right in. How could I say something like 'I didn't say I

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will go to the picnic what I said was if it is sunny I will go to the picnic'? How can my claim that I will go to the picnic be conditional if that assertive force is built right in?

The solution to this difficulty is really quite simple. The assertive force in 'I will go to the picnic' is also present in 'If it is sunny I will go to the picnic' but is *bracketed* by the overall hypothetical. But notice that the overall hypothetical is assertive. Otherwise it would be impossible for it to be either true or false. Thus the final form of 'If the sun shines, I will go to the picnic' would be something like 'It is the case that if the sun is shining I will go to the picnic' or to return to our previous example of the fountain pen, the final form of 'If Fred is a Parker pen then Fred is black' will be something like 'It is the case that [if (F is P) then (F is B)]'. I don't see any difficulty with that.

Peter Geach[3] once had the following difficulty with the assertive force in hypotheticals. He rightly claimed that in order for

if p then q
p
———
∴q

to be valid the first occurrence of p must have the same sense as the second. He also felt that the assertive force is present in the second occurrence of p but not in the first. But if the first occurrence of p has no assertive force and the second does then the sense of p in the first premise is different from in the second and so the argument form is not valid. Thus, using the assertion sign notation, the form of modus ponens for Geach would be

⊢ (if p then q)
⊢p
———————
∴⊢q

and this is not valid. However, again using the notation that I would suggest, I think the proper presentation of this form would be

It *is* the case that [if (S *is* P) then (R *is* O)]

S *is* P

———————

∴ R *is* O

and there is nothing invalid about this.

[3] P. Geach, 'Assertion', *Philosophical Review*, 74 (1965), 449–65.

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Negation

But what about negation? It seems on my account negative statements have a contradictory air. If, on the other hand, statements were like pictures then, I could present a picture of the civic buildings (used in a previous example,) and either put a negation sign in front of the picture or a slash-through it and this will tell us that things are not as they are pictured. But if statements are not like pictures and if they have an integral assertive aspect then when I say, for example, that Fred is not red then I seem to be asserting that Fred is red and denying it at the same time.

This contradictory air has been felt by many writers. For example, Anscombe in her *Introduction to Wittgenstein's Tractatus*[4] once remarked 'What is mysterious about negation is that something's not being the case should be capable of being something that is the case.' The way out of this difficulty is to insist that the negation sign brackets what is asserted. We start out with 'Fred is not red' and replace it with 'It is not the case that Fred is red', this is symbolized by ~ (F is R). We are still saying that what is not the case is the case as Anscombe pointed out but since what is not the case is bracketed no problems arise.

However, this is still not quite complete because the assertion seems to be also build right into the negation sign and this might be thought to present difficulties. No doubt assertion is built in. It has to be. ~ (F is R) is a statement and statements are essentially assertive. We can overcome this difficulty in the same way as before. We expand ~ (F is R) into Is ~ (F is R) and then bracket the part after the first 'Is'. Thus its final analysis is Is [~ (F is R)] and this is sufficient, I think, to dispel the appearance of contradictoriness. Or if you like we could express it as 'It *is* the case that [~ (F is R]'.

Other Kinds of Statements

Not all statements are of the 'is' and its associative varieties. We also have statements like 'Jones has the gun' and 'Smith kicked the ball' and there is nothing issy (to coin a word) about them. I don't think these other kinds of statements present a problem. The assertive force is perhaps most obvious in issy statements but once we have noticed it there we can also detect it in other places.

The statement 'Smith kicked the ball' is just as assertive as 'The

[4] E. Anscombe, *Introduction to Wittgenstein's Tractatus* (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1959), 70.

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pen is black'. In 'The pen is black' the speaker ascribes black to the pen and in 'Smith kicked the ball' the speaker ascribes the action of kicking the ball to Smith. As a result whether or not the statement is true depends on whether Smith kicked the ball and yet as a result of the assertive force that is present the statement 'It's true that Smith kicked the ball' is redundant.

Perhaps the assertive force is not as obvious in 'Jones has the gun' but at least this much can be said. In 'Jones has the gun' the speaker ascribes the feature of possessing the gun to Jones and so it would be redundant for him to say that it is true that Jones has the gun. And yet whether the statement is true depends on what is out there—whether or not Jones has the gun.

Summary

We know that the truth of a statement is dependent upon the way the world is and we also know that to say that a statement is true is to do little more than to make that statement. Yet if the truth of a statement is dependent upon the way the world is, it looks as though it should be the case that to say that a statement is true is to make a substantial statement. Hence we have a paradox. The way out of the paradox is to examine what happens when a simple subject-predicate statement is made. What happens is that the speaker refers to an object and ascribes a property to it. When I say that Fred is black, I use 'Fred' to refer to the pen, 'black' to identify the colour and 'is' to ascribe the latter to the former. Whether my statement is true or false, depends on the way things are and yet because of the ascriptive force of 'is' if I were to say instead 'It's true that Fred is black' my statement would be redundant[5].

University of Saskatchewan, Canada

[5] There is a confusion that has been lurking in the background of the previous discussion that I now want to clear up. It is this:

It is often said that the reason 'It is true that snow is white' for example, is redundant is that the statement

A. '"Snow is white" is true if only if snow is white'

is an analytically true statement and that what is said on the left side of 'if and only if' is logically equivalent to what is said on the right side. What needs to be noticed here that if '"snow is white"' operates as a pure proper name without any descriptive content then there is no logical equivalence and so no redundancy in 'The statement "snow is white" is true'.

If we let S be the proper name of the statement in question, we get

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B. 'S is true if and only if snow is white.'

And here it can be easily seen that there is no logical equivalence or analyticity and so no redundancy in

C. 'S is true'.

And so none in '"Snow is white" is true' provided of course that 'snow is white' operates as a pure proper name.

I think the explanation why we think that A supports the claim that statements like 'It's true that snow is white.' are redundant is that as a rule what we have on the left side of 'if and only if' is not a pure proper name but a presentation of the very same statement. Of course you couldn't put Fido the dog in a statement but only the name of Fido, but since statements are linguistic entities and not physical things there is no reason why the statement in itself could not be presented in another statement for examination. If 'Snow is white' acts as the presentation of the statement itself and not a proper name then.

D. '"Snow is white" is true if and only if snow is white'

expresses a logical equivalence and as a result '"Snow is white" is true.' is redundant. But if Snow is white' is used as a pure proper name then there is no logical equivalence only a contingent equivalence. This has the result that '"Snow is white" is true.' is not redundant. (A standard example of a logical equivalence would be: 'Lady is a vixen if and only if Lady is a female fox.' A standard example of a contingent equivalence would be: 'Butter will melt if and only if you heat it.')

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