On the Identity Theory of Truth

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I. Introduction

In his recent 'A Prolegomenon to an Identity Theory of Truth'[1] Stewart Candlish discusses the so called *identity theory of truth*. His aim in the article is to clear away initial difficulties that apparently stand in the way of developing the budding theory.

In this paper I discuss exactly one of the alleged difficulties facing the identity theory. My aim is to help the identity theory by arguing, very briefly, that the difficulty is merely apparent.

II. The Alleged Difficulty

The alleged difficulty emerges from an attempt to specify a satisfactory definition of the identity theory of truth. Candlish puts the problem as follows. (I quote at length for the sake of clarity.)

> The best attempt at a formally satisfactory definition that I know of is this:
>
> The proposition that *p* is true if and only if *p* is identical with a fact… .
>
> But there is something wrong with this. What is wrong is that its truth requires merely that each true proposition is identical with some fact or other: it does not specify *which* fact has to be identical with the proposition for the proposition to be true. But what the identity theory requires is not that a true proposition be identical with *some fact or other*, it is that it be identical with the *right* fact… . Can we get this requirement of identity with the *right* fact into a general account?[2]

The difficulty, then, is to find a way of specifying the 'right' fact with which a truth is supposed to be identical. Candlish pursues a number of options each of which, by his own lights, fails. He concludes that the problem is indeed serious; however, he suggests that there may be room for consolation. He puts the matter thus:

> All of this does not look promising. We could, however, take heart at the thought that *if* the identity theory is fatally damaged by the

[1] This journal, Vol. **74** 1999, pp. 190–220

[2] Candlish, ibid., p. 203.

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> difficulty of getting a general expression of it, then the correspondence theory stands no chance of survival either.[3]

Candlish may well be right about the fate of the correspondence theory, and his words of consolation may well comfort many. Still, it would be better to have a genuine solution to the alleged difficulty—the difficulty of specifying the 'right' fact. One way of solving the problem is to *dissolve* it. That is the aim of the next section.

III. A Dissolution

The aim of this section is to dissolve the alleged difficulty of specifying the *right* fact. The strategy of so dissolving is straightforward. I note briefly that the alleged difficulty presupposes that there are *wrong* facts; I then argue that there cannot be any such wrong facts.

To begin, recall the initial definition of the identity theory:

> I) The proposition that *p* is true if and only if *p* is identical with a fact.

The alleged difficulty with (I) is that it fails to specify the 'right fact' with which *p* is *identical*. The presupposition, here, is that there could be more than one candidate for the right fact—though all but one of these candidates are *wrong* facts. The important question, then, is whether this presupposition is correct.

The question is: Could there be more than one 'right fact'? The answer is straightforwardly 'no'. The argument is as follows. Let *p* be a truth. Then there is some fact (or other) with which *p* is identical. Now, any candidate for being the *right fact* with which *p* is identical must have the following property: *being identical with p*. In other words, if α is a candidate for being the 'right fact', then α is identical with *p*. But there is *exactly one* entity with which *p* is identical—on pain of there being identical entities which differ with respect to some property, which, given the uncontroversial *indiscernibility of identicals*, is impossible. Given, then, that there is exactly one entity with which *p* is identical, there is accordingly exactly one right fact, in which case there are no 'wrong facts'.

One might object, here, that the proposed dissolution assumes more than just the indiscernibility of identicals.[4] In particular, the argument assumes that, for some given proposition, *p*, the context

[3] Candlish, ibid., p. 204.

[4] Stewart Candlish raised the following worry in discussion, for which I am grateful. My response to the worry is likewise indebted to discussion with Candlish.

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'… is identical with *p*' determines a property. This, the objection runs, may not be correct. At the very least, the assumption requires argument.

What should be said in response to this concern? Unfortunately, I must admit that I do not share the worry that *being identical with p* (for some given *p*) might not be a property. Perhaps the property is an odd sort of property, but it seems to be a property as much as other garden variety properties—for example, *being taller than b* (for some given individual *b*). Perhaps the worry is that identity is a *binary relation*, and, for whatever reason, there simply is no such *unary* relation as *being identical with b*, or *being identical with p*. Let us suppose that this is correct. Still, my proposed dissolution goes through provided we admit that if $b=c$ then (necessarily) *b* and *c* stand in precisely the same *n*-ary relations (for all natural numbers *n*). For in this case anything to which *b* is R^n-related (for any *n*-ary relation R^n) is something to which *c* is likewise R^n-related, in which case $b=b$ and $c=c$ *only if* $b=c$ and $c=b$. Given this result, the worry that there is no such property specified by '… is identical with *p*' is not a pressing worry; the dissolution can proceed without the assumption that *being identical with p* is a property.

Hence, the presupposition that there is more than one possible candidate for being the 'right fact' with which a truth is identical, is false. If *p* is identical with some fact or other, then *p* is identical with *exactly one* fact. There cannot be any wrong facts. Accordingly, definition (I), contrary to Candlish, does *not* fall prey to the alleged difficulty of specifying the 'right fact'.

Before closing let me respond to one potential objection. One might object that even though there can be at most one 'right fact', definition (I) does not tell us *which* fact is the (admittedly unique) right fact. For this reason, the objection may run, definition (I) remains inadequate.

What should be said in reply to this objection? In many respects I am not sure what to say. Indeed, I do not see the problem. Suppose that *p* is true. Then, by (I), we may infer that there is some fact with which *p* is identical. By the foregoing considerations (against the alleged 'right fact' difficulty), we know that there is exactly one fact with which *p* is identical. At this stage, perhaps someone may well ask: 'But with *which* fact is *p* identical?' I am not sure what we gain by answering this question; however, I think that there is at least one sure answer: namely, *p* is identical with the fact that *p*. In other words, if one wishes to know with which fact the truth *that grass is green* is identical, we can safely tell her that it is identical with *the fact that grass is green*. If she protests that this is an *uninformative* answer, we must ask her to specify what, exactly,

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she expects. At this stage, I do not know what else she may be expecting.

IV. Closing Remarks

Candlish's paper aimed to clear away difficulties that stood in the way of developing the identity theory of truth. There was one difficulty, however, that he did not clear away, namely the difficulty in specifying *right facts* (as it were). In this paper I have attempted to clear away this difficulty and thereby aid in the ongoing development of the identity theory. I hope that this has been accomplished.[5]

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[5] I am grateful to Edmund Gettier for discussion of related issues. I am also grateful to Stewart Candlish both for discussion and for helpful (and lively) feedback on earlier drafts. Finally, thanks go to Katrina Higgins for many helpful conversations.

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