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Edwards on truth pluralism

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ABSTRACT
I critically discuss Douglas Edwards’ construal of the debate over truth, and his case for truth pluralism. Toward the end I present a constructive suggestion on Edwards’ behalf. This suggestion avoids the problems I have presented, whatever in the end its fate.

KEYWORDS Truth; pluralism; deflationism; correspondence theory; superassertibility

1. Introduction

Douglas Edwards’ book The Metaphysics of Truth is an important contribution to the philosophical discussion of truth, where Edwards usefully brings together a number of different strands from the truth literature. A centrepiece of the book is Edwards’ argument for truth pluralism, the view that, roughly and in some way or other, truth consists in different things in different domains. I am not persuaded by the argument and I have concerns about Edwards’ general set-up when characterizing different theoretical options. In this note, I will describe why. Along the way, I will describe a way forward for those who are attracted to some form of the correspondence theory of truth, and present some concerns regarding viewing truth as superassertibility. Having criticized Edwards’ arguments and set-up, I will toward the end present a modified version of how Edwards sets things up. Whatever in the end its fate, the modified version avoids the concerns pressed here.

2. Edwards’ argument

Central to Edwards’ pluralism about truth is the principle
Edwards thinks that (TP) is correct, but different instances of the principle are true for different kinds of reasons. Sometimes a sentence of the form ‘a is F’ is true because the object referred to by the name has the property referred to by the predicate. Sometimes the object referred to by the name instead has the property because the sentence is true. Truth consists in different things in the two cases, as I will put it. To be precise when describing Edwards’ view, I should say that truth is determined by different properties in the two cases: where he gets into details regarding his preferred understanding he describes this is what he argues is the best version of the view. But for the most part such details will not matter to my discussion, and I will keep talking about what truth consists in as a way of gesturing at the view is. I will return to the specifics of Edwards’ favoured brand of pluralism only in section 5.

Edwards introduces the following theses corresponding to the two possibilities mentioned:

(R) ‘a is F’ is true because the object referred to by ‘a’ has the property referred to by ‘F’.

(NR) the object referred to by ‘a’ has the property referred to by ‘F’ because ‘a is F’ is true. (87)

‘R’ is for ‘representational’ and ‘NR’ is for ‘non-representational’. According to Edwards different kinds of theories of truth correspond to (R) and (NR): in the case of (R) prominent versions of the correspondence theory and in the case of (NR) pragmatist and coherentist theories of truth. Following Edwards, I will say that instances of (TP) whose order of determination is as described by (R) are responsive, and those whose order of determination is as described by (NR) are generative (88f).

A natural alternative view is that the direction of determination is always that stated by (R) – that is, all instances of (TP) are responsive. But Edwards thinks that such a view fails because it does not work in the case of discourse about mind-dependent matters.

Edwards has a corresponding discussion regarding properties. There Edwards takes as his point of departure the following principle about predicates and properties:

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1In the following, all references will be to Edwards (2018) unless where noted.
2See chapter 7.
3See chapter 4.
(P) The object referred to by ‘a’ falls under the predicate ‘F’ iff the object referred to by ‘a’ has the property referred to by ‘F’. (68)

As in the case of (TP), Edwards thinks that taking (P) as true, one can still ask about the direction of determination of individual instances. And as in the case of (TP), Edwards thinks that different instances of (P) differ in this regard. In the case of an example like ‘is metallic’, there is a right-to-left order of determination. But in the case of ‘is cool’ the order of determination is left-to-right. That is, ‘is metallic’ is responsive and ‘is cool’ is generative. (‘Is metallic’ and ‘is cool’ are both Edwards’ examples.)

I am not persuaded by Edwards’ reasoning in the case of (TP), and I am not persuaded in the case of (P). Focus first on (P) and consider the predicate ‘is cool’. What does seem plausible in cases like ‘is cool’ is that what is cool and not is determined by our attitudes about what is cool. But – and this is the central point – this is different from saying that the relevant instances of (P) are generative. For what determines the right-hand side to be true aren’t facts about what falls under ‘is cool’ but about what is taken to fall under ‘is cool’ (or better: what we would take to be cool under such-and-such conditions). It can be that facts about what is taken to fall under ‘is cool’ (or better: what is taken to be cool) determine what has the property of being cool and what does not have this property, and that in turn determines what falls under the predicate ‘is cool’. If that is so, than ‘is cool’ is responsive.

The lesson applies also in the case of (TP). It is not plausible that the object referred to by ‘Homer’ has the property referred to by ‘cool’ because ‘Homer is cool’ is true. What may be plausible is the different claim that the object referred to by ‘Homer’ has the property referred to by ‘cool’ because we take Homer to be cool (or better: would judge that Homer is cool under such-and-such conditions).

Edwards links the distinction drawn by appeal to the idea of different orders of determination to the distinction between sparse and abundant properties, holding that sparse properties are those corresponding to right-to-left readings of (P) and abundant ones are those corresponding to left-to-right readings of (P). He further cashes out the talk of sparse properties in terms of having a causal-explanatory role, and he cashes out that in turn by appeal to Wright’s notion of wide cosmological role. Something has wide cosmological role in Wright’s sense to the extent that it figures in explanations ‘other than, or other than via, our being in attitudinal states’ about this something (Wright 1992, 196f).
Consider what I will call *gerrymandered* properties, properties that intuitively do not correspond to any genuine similarity of any kind among the things that have the property.\(^4\) Paradigmatic examples are properties expressed by disjunctive predicates where the disjunctions have little or nothing to do with each other. One might have thought that for many predicates standing for gerrymandered properties, the direction of \(P\) is right-to-left. For example, when it comes to a property expressed by a disjunctive predicate of the kind mentioned, it would be so, so long as the direction is right-to-left for each property expressed by a predicate used in one of the disjuncts. But gerrymandered properties are paradigm examples of abundant properties.\(^5\)

I think this points to a general problem with Edwards’ suggestion regarding how to understand the distinction between sparse and abundant properties. On a common way of understanding this distinction, it is a distinction between properties that play a significant explanatory role and properties that do not do so. One might have thought that mind-independent properties can fail to play an explanatory role (as illustrated by the case of gerrymandered properties). And one might have thought that mind-dependent properties sometimes can play a significant explanatory role: the property of being money can be hugely explanatory. Edwards speaks of the sparse properties as ‘pre-existing’ and the abundant properties as ‘generated’. This may be correct given his understanding of ‘sparse’ and ‘abundant’. But given a more standard characterization of the sparse/abundant distinction it would be wrong. I already stressed that some gerrymandered objects are, in Edwards’ parlance, pre-existing. And some of Edwards’ ‘abundant’ – generated – properties could in principle be explanatory and count as sparse in a more standard sense. Of course, even if I am right and Edwards does not capture the sparse/abundant distinction as it is usually conceived, his distinction may be an important one – that is a separate matter.\(^6\) So one may think the only thing that is at issue is how to use the labels ‘sparse’ and

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\(^4\)When using ‘gerrymandered’ in this way, I am following established usage in philosophy. But ‘gerrymandered’ is unfortunate in that it suggests that the properties themselves are somehow concocted.

\(^5\)A different question concerning the set-up is this. Edwards’ \(P\) is, strikingly, metalinguistic. It centrally concerns predicates, and properties enter the picture as referents of predicates. The sparse/abundant distinction is a distinction between properties. One might wonder if it is possible for two predicates to refer to the same property, but being such that one has a left-to-right order of determination and the other has a right-to-left order of determination. If that is so, the property referred to would be both sparse and abundant, given how Edwards understands this distinction. There is of course a quick fix: to say that a property is sparse so long as at least one possible predicate referring to it is associated with a right-to-left order of determination.

\(^6\)In a footnote accompanying the part of the text where Edwards notes that that for him, the distinctions sparse/abundant and responsive/generative correspond to each other, Edwards says:
'abundant'. But my point is relevant for understanding the proper import of some of Edwards’ arguments.

Edwards offers the following argument to the effect that truth is not an abundant property:

If truth is an abundant property, then to have the property of being true is just to be in the extension of the predicate ‘is true’ (this is the definition of an abundant property). But, the extension of the predicate ‘is true’ is determined by the truth of sentences involving the predicate ‘is true’. The italicized instance of truth in the previous sentence indicates a role for the property of being true in the generation process of the abundant property of being true. This suggests that having the property of being true cannot simply be a matter of being in the extension of ‘is true’, because what is in that extension is determined by what is true. As a result, truth cannot be an abundant property: there has to be more to it than the extension of ‘is true’, as the extension of ‘is true’ is determined by what is true. (95)

This may be a good argument for why truth is not an abundant property in Edwards’ sense. But this does not show that truth cannot be an abundant property in a more standard sense. For some abundant properties – e.g. paradigmatic gerrymandered ones – are not generated. And it doesn’t mean that truth cannot be a mind-dependent property. For not all mind-dependent properties need be generated in Edwards’ specific sense. For a mind-dependent property need not be such that something has the property because something falls under a predicate ascribing the property. It can instead be that it is facts about what people take to have the property that determine what has the property.

Edwards takes the argument quoted to be an argument against the view that truth is everywhere deflationary, assuming this kind of deflationism to be committed to truth being an abundant property. But while it is natural to take the deflationist to be committed to truth being abundant in the standard sense – being non-explanatory – I do not see why the deflationist should be taken to be committed to taking truth to be generated.

Note that this terminology still applies if we are thinking about properties as classes, and classes as mind-independent. This is because, even if there is a vast number of classes, we still need to make sense of a predicate selecting a particular class, and thus having the particular extension it does, which will be dependent on our practices. (fn12, chapter 4)

The idea seems to be that an abundant property still is ‘generative’ even if we think of properties as classes and the class exists mind-independently: for what class is picked out by a given predicate still depends on our practices. But our practices always play a role regarding what class is picked out by a given predicate. That is not peculiar to the predicates that Edwards calls generative predicates.
3. Superassertibility

I have criticized Edwards’ main argument for pluralism about truth, saying that where Edwards sees a case for different orders of determination for different instances of (TP), what is plausible is something different. Where Edwards speaks of facts about what is true determining which objects have which properties what may be plausible is rather that facts about our attitudes about what is true determine which objects have which properties. I think this by itself is sufficient as a response to Edwards’ argument. But let me still look more closely at how Edwards conceives of truth for discourses where he takes the order of determination to be as describes by (NR). He thinks that a pragmatist or coherence theory may correctly describe how truth works for such discourses. Specifically, he turns to Crispin Wright’s notion of superassertibility, where

A statement is superassertible, … if and only if it is, or can be, warranted and some warrant for it would survive arbitrarily close scrutiny of its pedigree and arbitrarily extensive increments to or other forms of improvement of our information. (Wright 1992, 48. Quoted in Edwards, 92)

The idea is that for discourses where the order of determination is as described by (NR), truth consists in superassertibility. This is in the spirit of earlier pragmatist theories of truth. Edwards uses this idea to explain how truth on his account might work in the ‘institutional and social’ domain:

We can now show how truth can be understood in terms of superassertibility in the institutional and social domains. Consider the following explanation of the truth of the sentence ‘Andrew Cuomo is the Governor of New York’. The property of being the Governor of New York is an abundant property, so the possession of that property is not a matter of an object possessing some property mind- independently that causally interacts with our thought and talk. Instead, we should explain Andrew Cuomo’s possession of that property in a different way, and hence understand the truth of the sentence ‘Andrew Cuomo is the Governor of New York’ in a different way. The superassertibility model of truth gives us this account. The sentence is true just in case there is warrant available for it, and that warrant persists through future stages of inquiry. That warrant will involve the various steps that established Andrew Cuomo as the Governor of New York, involving the electoral process and his subsequent swearing in. Provided that all stands up, the sentence is true. (92)

The way Edwards understands this, then, is that we begin with facts about when ‘Andrew Cuomo is the Governor of New York’ is warranted, these facts in turn determine, given an understanding of truth as
superassertibility, when ‘Andrew Cuomo is the Governor of New York’ is superassertible and hence further when ‘Andrew Cuomo is the Governor of New York’ is true; and by (NR) this in turn determines that Andrew Cuomo has the property of being Governor of New York. This is one way of understanding the talk of superassertibility. Maybe it corresponds to how friends of understanding truth as superassertibility think of things. But I think it is a strange view, and if thinking of truth as consisting in superassertibility in some domains commits one to that view, that is a serious strike against thinking of truth that way. Consider a biconditional like those Edwards focuses on, but more straightforward:

(T) ‘a is F’ is true iff a is F.

Here too one can distinguish different orders of determination, if one can do so in the case of Edwards’ biconditionals.

(TL) a is F because ‘a is F’ is true

(TR) ‘a is F’ is true because a is F.

As I understand Edwards, he holds that if or when truth is superassertibility, (TL) represents the correct order of determination. I think this would be problematic for the friend of thinking of truth as sometimes consisting in superassertibility. For I think (TL) is deeply implausible.

I believe that thinking of truth as superassertibility does not commit to thinking that (TL) represents the correct order of determination. Since a’s being F has nothing to do with truth, it would appear that a theory of truth by itself is neutral on the issue of order of determination of instances of (T). Here are some possibilities. For example, one may think that truth consists in superassertibility but also accept (TR) and think that when a’s being F determines that ‘a is F’ is true, that also amounts to determining that ‘a is F’ is superassertible. Or one may think that facts about warrant for ‘a is F’ determine separately that a is F and that ‘a is F’ is true, so neither one of these latter facts determines the other: instead there is something that is the common source of both. And these are just some possibilities.

In his discussion of truth as superassertibility and the connection between this and the question of the order of determination of instances of (TP), Edwards also relates to Sally Haslanger’s well-known accounts of gender and race:

S is a man iff
i) S is regularly and for the most part observed or imagined to have certain bodily features presumed to be evidence of a male’s biological role in reproduction;

ii) that S has these features marks S within the dominant ideology of S’s society as someone who ought to occupy certain kinds of social position that are in fact privileged (and so motivates and justifies S’s occupying such a position); and

iii) the fact that S satisfies (i) and (ii) plays a role in S’s systematic privilege, i.e. along some dimension, S’s social position is privileged, and S’s satisfying (i) and (ii) plays a role in that dimension of privilege.

S is white iff:

i) S is observed or imagined to have certain bodily features presumed to be evidence of ancestral links to a certain geographical region, Western Europe;

ii) S’s having (or being imagined to have) these features marks them within the dominant ideology of S’s society as someone appropriately occupying a privileged social position (and so motivates and justifies their occupying such a position); and

iii) S’s satisfying (i) and (ii) plays (or would play) a role in their systematic privilege, i.e. S is along some dimension systematically privileged when in C, and satisfying (i) and (ii) plays (or would play) a role in that dimension of privilege.7

About these characterizations, Edwards remarks: ‘Given that we are understanding social truth in terms of superassertibility, we can view these conditions as being the conditions under which we are warranted in asserting the sentences “S is a man” and “S is white”’ (94).

Here is what is striking about this. There is absolutely nothing about Haslanger’s actual characterizations that suggest anything about superassertibility or about the conditions stated as conditions for warranted assertibility. She does not mention warrant at all. Instead the conditions are most naturally understood as conditions on what it is to be a man, or to be white. Given these accounts, these are mind-dependent properties. But the account does not proceed via warrant, and it does not proceed via what it is for sentences involving ‘man’ and ‘white’ to be true.

7Quoted from Edwards, 93. The characterization of being a man is from Haslanger (2000, 42); the characterization of being white is Edwards’ adaptation of what Haslanger (2000) says (44). Haslanger has ameliorative aspirations, and at least often presents these accounts not as accounts of the current concepts of gender and race but accounts of improved – ameliorated concepts of gender and race. Like Edwards, I will ride roughshod over this.
If anything, Haslanger’s accounts illustrate problems for Edwards. They display how one can treat certain properties as mind-dependent even while the account remains perfectly compatible with (R).

To stress, Edwards says ‘given that we are understanding social truth in terms of superassertibility’, so in the relevant part of the discussion he is taking such an understanding for granted and is just talking about how Haslanger’s characterization can be conceived of given such an understanding. But it is still relevant to note how strained it is to understand Haslanger this way.

4. Correspondence

Discussing the different forms a correspondence theory can take, Edwards (section 5.2) says that a correspondence theorist either can appeal to entities such as facts making truth-bearers true, or turn to a naturalistic, and, more specifically, causal theory of representation. He does not much discuss the idea of facts (89). He focuses more on a causal theory.

One reaction to the focus on a causal theory in Edwards (and the writings of other pluralists, such as Michael Lynch (2009, ch. 2)) is that a causal theory in the first instance is a theory of how it is determined what propositions are expressed by what linguistic items. One may think that the causal theory then just is not in the business to be a theory of what truth consists in, for it does not say anything about what the truth of propositions consists in. Someone with the naturalist inclinations Edwards professes may want to eschew talk of propositions. But my own view is that eschewing talk of propositions because of such inclinations is akin to not speaking of shoe sizes in terms of numbers because of such inclinations. Talk of propositions and talk of numbers is useful and for many purposes in practice indispensable.

Moreover, the point made can be made independently of appeal to such potentially offensive entities as propositions. Whether or not one takes ‘that’-clauses to designate entities, one can ask why it is true that thus-and-such, false that thus-and-so, etc. The causal theory is relevant to why sentences, like ‘there is water in the lake’ are true, but is less clearly relevant to the issue of why it is true that there is water in the lake.

Edwards and other pluralists sometimes argue against the correspondence theory along the following lines. If the correspondence theorist does not go beyond apparently platitudinous slogans such as ‘truth is correspondence with reality’, then the ‘theory’ is so empty of content as not to deserve to be called a theory. Any correspondence theory worthy of
the name must be more substantive. In principle, one could be more substantive by appealing to a specific ontology of ‘facts’, but that is problematic – and a more plausible way to go is to turn to theories of reference that appeal to causal relations. But once the correspondence theory has been developed that way, it can only be the correct theory in the case of some kinds of true representations – in some cases the theory is not applicable. This is an instance of the so-called scope problem. (Edwards discusses this explicitly in section 6.2.1.)

It may be worth pointing out that so long as it is accepted that one can read (TP) and similar principles as having different orders of determination, the correspondence theorist can simply claim that what her theory says, whether about truth generally or, on a pluralist view, about truth for a given domain of discourse, is that (TP) is true and has a right-to-left order of determination. That goes beyond mere slogans, and so is substantive enough. At the same time, it is not committing in either way just described. It does not involve commitment to a causal theory of reference, and it is at least not obviously committed to an ontology of facts. Of course, good questions can be raised about the talk of order of determination. But since Edwards’ own discussion is awash in such talk, any such questions are equally questions for Edwards.

It is natural, although obviously not the only option, to understand questions about order of determination as questions about grounding. Which side grounds which? An immediate possible concern is that this must be understood as a question about relations between facts – about which facts ground which – and one may have scruples about facts. But, again, insofar this is a concern, this is equally so for Edwards: if order of determination must be understood in terms of grounding and grounding is a problematic notion. More importantly, the talk of grounding need not by any means be understood in terms of facts. What expresses grounding can be understood to be an operator and not a predicate.

Edwards offers independent reasons for thinking that the causal theory fits naturally with a correspondence theory:

In both the Gödel and water cases there is some language-independent entity which constrains the use of a particular term in such a way that, when it comes to determining the referent of the corresponding term, this entity takes priority over any descriptive content we associate with the term: it is possible for most (if not all) of our descriptive beliefs about the referent to be false. What our words refer to is thus not something over which we have much control: what is important is how the use of our words is constrained by non-linguistic
entities. This fits naturally with the motivations for the correspondence theory of truth, which holds that truth is a matter of a relationship between language and the non-linguistic world, with the world being the thing that determines truth, as opposed to truth being the thing that determines the world. (90f)

Edwards appears to think that the causal theory fits with a correspondence theory – and it is natural to assume that he means that it does so in a way that a descriptivist theory does not – because of these considerations about language-independence. But a description theory too fits well with the view that ‘truth is a matter of a relationship between language and the non-linguistic world, with the world being the thing that determines truth, as opposed to truth being the thing that determines the world’. Whether something satisfies a given description can be determined by the world.

5. Edwards’ brand of truth pluralism

Edwards’ particular form of truth pluralism is what he calls determination pluralism. According to determination pluralism, there is a general, unified truth property, had by all truths regardless of the domain. The pluralism comes in through truths being determined to be true by different properties depending on the domain. Illustrating, Edwards suggests that the following claims are true

(Bc) In the chemical domain: ‘p’ is true iff ‘p’ causally corresponds.

(Bs) In the social domain: ‘p’ is true iff ‘p’ is superassertible.8

He then comments:

There is an order of determination on these biconditionals from right-to-left which reflects the explanatory primacy of the original conditionals. In the chemical domain, for example, it is because ‘p’ causally corresponds that ‘p’ is true, whereas it is not because ‘p’ is true that ‘p’ causally corresponds. The nature of each domain will thus specify a property the possession of which determines the possession of the separate truth property. Hence the name, ‘determination pluralism’. (126)

Here is one reflection on this idea. Suppose (Bs) is true and suppose moreover that, as Edwards thinks, when the claim that p is from the social domain, it is because p is superassertible that it is true that p. This is perfectly compatible with the order of determination not just failing to be as

described by (NR), but, more specifically, with the order of determination being as described by (R). It can be like this. That p is superassertible can determine that p, and that p in turn determines that it is true that p. For that matter, it can be that p determines p to be superassertible and that it turn determines that it is true that p. But then superassertibility can in some domains be what determines possession of the truth property even if the correspondence theory as I have described it is true globally.

A response on Edwards’ behalf might be that this just shows that the correspondence theory should not be construed as suggested. The thought would be that since, on the suggested construal of the correspondence theory, this theory would be compatible with truth being determined by superassertibility, this construal is too weak. But such a response appears to be in conflict with central aspects of Edwards’ own discussion, given how he himself associates the correspondence theory with (NR).

6. A way forward?

I have criticized Edwards’ case for a pluralist theory of truth. I have argued that he does not make a good case for thinking that the order of determination of an instance of (TP) ever is that corresponding to (NR). I have also argued that Edwards in fact helps the correspondence theorist go beyond platitudes in a reasonable way: what is distinctive about the correspondence theory, on the Edwards construal, is that it says that (TP) has the right-to-left order of determination described by (R).

But one should not overestimate the damage that my points, even if correct, threaten to do to Edwards’ case for pluralism. Edwards can regroup. Instead of saying that a theory distinct from correspondence theory correctly describes cases where the order of determination is as described by (NR) he can say that it correctly describes all cases where the order of determination fails to be that described by (R). That is, instead of committing himself to there being generative instances of (TP), he need only say that not all instances are responsive. I have cast doubt on the idea that the order of determination can ever be generative but that does not mean that it is always responsive. One possibility is that in some cases but not all the question of order of determination does not arise: in some cases but not all, that p and that p is true amount to the same thing. Another possibility is that the two sides are both determined by a third factor, as came up in the discussion of...
superassertibility. Facts about warrant can determine both that p, and separately, that p is true.

As mentioned above, I myself find it more natural to think that even where facts about warrant determine that p, it is then its being the case that p that in turn determines that p is true. This is compatible with the correspondence theory as characterized. Of course, the stance I prefer would need to be argued for.

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