Why an Aristotelian Account of Truth is (More or Less) all We Need

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ABSTRACT: This paper advances an account of truth that has as its starting point Aristotle's comments about truth at *Metaphysics* 1011b1. It argues that there are two key ideas in the Aristotelian account: that truth belongs to 'sayings that'; and that truth involves both what is said and what is. Beginning with the second of these apparent truisms, the paper argues for the crucial role of the distinction between 'what is said' and 'what is' in the understanding of truth, on the grounds that it is essential to the distinction between truth and falsity and, indeed, to the very possibility of any critical assessment of statements. However, this distinction cannot be used to ground any account of truth in terms that refer to anything other than truth - there is thus no relation that underlies truth even though truth may be construed (in a certain limited sense) relationally. Returning to the first point, it is argued that while truth should indeed be understood as belonging to statements, it should not be construed as attaching to 'propositions', but to uttered sentences. The account of truth advanced is minimalist, and yet not deflationist; objectivist, and yet not independent of actual linguistic practice.

KEYWORDS: Aristotle, Donald Davidson, Frederick Stoutland, Truth, Correspondence, Proposition, Belief, World

I. Fred Stoutland's philosophical work focussed around two primary topics – one being action, and the other, language. The two topics overlap – especially when approached from the broadly Wittgensteinian perspective that characterised Stoutland's work. Anscombe's *Intention*, for instance, a work foundational to the Wittgensteinian tradition in the philosophy of action, draws crucially on insights from the consideration of language in its

elucidation of intentional behaviour. The conjunction of action with language, and of both with mind, also characterises Davidson's work, and one way of reading a large part of Stoutland's engagement with Davidson is in terms of the working-through of the lessons that the philosophy of language has to teach us about the philosophy of action as well as mind – a working-through that Stoutland undertook with exceptional care.[1] Moreover, just as Stoutland's work on action looks to strip away some of the confusions and complications surrounding the philosophical thinking of action, turning attention back to what we actually *do*, so too, in his work on language, Stoutland was equally clear-headed and direct in his approach – and here Davidson also provided an important touchstone for his thinking. In what follows, my aim is to revisit a topic that was central to Davidson's work and of great interest to Stoutland[2] – the question of truth – with the idea of elaborating and defending a view of truth that I think would have been acceptable to Davidson and Stoutland, but also has affinities with hermeneutic thinking, and that, at least to some extent, can be seen to be presaged in Aristotle.

II. One of the most concise as well as the earliest statements concerning the nature of truth is given in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*: "To say (*legein*] that what is is not, or that what is not, is, is false; but to say that what is is, and what is not is not, is true (*alethes*]; and therefore also he who says that a thing is or is not will say either what is true or what is false" (Aristotle, 1933, 1011b1).[3] It is to this statement that Tarski refers as providing a standard of adequacy for his own formal definition of truth (in, among other places, Tarski 1944, 342-3). There are two notable features of this Aristotelian account: the first is that truth belongs to 'sayings that' – to statements (I leave to one side the issue as to whether it is adequate to treat all such 'saying that' in terms of simple affirmation or negation) ; the second is that, inasmuch as every 'saying that' involves that of which something is said, those statements are true in which things are as they are said to be – truth thus concerns a certain sort of conjunction of 'saying' with 'being'.

It is significant that Aristotle puts the latter point in a way that avoids any elaboration of the nature of the conjunction that might be at issue here – true statements simply say of what is that it is and of what is not that it is not – and so he avoids offering any alternative predicate that could do service in place of 'is true' or that might purport to provide clarification of it. The fact that we could construct such a predicate on the basis of Aristotle's words does not mean that Aristotle offers us such a predicate himself, and I would therefore resist Tarski's reading of the Aristotelian account (as one might also resist Tarski's understanding of his own account) as amounting, in any substantive sense, to a version of the correspondence theory of truth.[4]

Although Aristotle does not suggest it, there is one very good and simple reason (of which I shall have more to say below) for keeping to such a minimalist account: since truth belongs to statements, (and we may even say that, on this account, the idea of truth, as well as falsity, is itself bound up with what it is to be a statement), so any statement that attempts to provide an alternative predicate for 'is true' can itself be interrogated as to its truth or falsity, and so either regress or circularity threatens (here the spectre of the semantic paradoxes hovers in the background). We can, of course, ask of the Aristotelian formula whether it is true, but so long as we make no attempt to treat the formula as a strict definition this need not trouble us (one way of putting this is to say that Aristotle's account needs to be construed as 'extensionalist' rather than 'intensionalist').

The Aristotelian account of truth is one that, while it may seem platitudinous, is nevertheless relevant and instructive in relation to the contemporary discussion of truth. Indeed, I would suggest that Aristotle provides us with the basic elements that must guide any account of truth, while also indicating how such an account might go awry. The account of truth I will offer here is thus one that remains Aristotelian in its minimalist character, even though it also draws crucially on the work of Donald Davidson. My discussion will focus on the two points noted above that I suggested lay at the heart of the Aristotelian account: truth belongs to sayings

that; and truth belongs to the conjunction of saying and being. The first of these points has far-reaching implications for being able to articulate a conception of truth that is objectivist, and yet is not disconnected from actual communicative practice, and I shall return to it shortly, but the second, while it cannot be neglected, has also been the source of enormous difficulty. It is to the second that I will turn first.

III. As Donald Davidson points out: "the truth of an utterance depends on just two things: what the words as spoken mean, and how the world is arranged" (Davidson, 2001a, 139 – see also Stoutland, 2003, 28). That this is so does not, however, commit us to anything much beyond the account we have already met with in Aristotle, although it does make explicit the conjunction that appears to be central to the notion of truth – the conjunction of words and world, saying and being, what is said and what it is said of. The fact that truth involves this conjunction, and the widespread tendency to treat truth as therefore a *relation* between two distinct and separate elements, one linguistic and the other worldly, has frequently lead to attempts to do what Aristotle does not, and to characterise the conjunction at issue in ways that would indeed dispense with the notion of truth in favour of some independent and alternative characterisation of the 'relation' that is supposedly at work here (one that would also more strongly counterpose word and world). Yet, as I have already noted, any attempt to elucidate truth in terms of other notions – most often, of course, notions such as correspondence, coherence, or even pragmatic utility – leads to either circularity or regress, and while this may not have deterred attempts to provide such elucidation, those attempts serve only to demonstrate the futility of the project.

The impossibility of providing any account of truth in terms other than truth itself is evident, not only in terms of the way in which the concept of truth is already presupposed by any such attempt (including attempts to equate truth with forms of belief, that is, with forms of 'holding true'), but also, in related fashion, in the fact that any term that might be used in place of

truth, such as correspondence, invariably fails to be fully co-extensive with it. To put the point slightly differently, and by way of example, there are many different types of correspondence, and not every case of correspondence could count as a case of truth (two sentences that are the same in meaning can be said to correspond, but the correspondence does not make for truth). So if truth were to be understood in terms of correspondence, how would one pick out just that particular sort of correspondence that corresponds with truth?

The only possible answers here, which typically involve notions of correctness, accuracy and the like, all turn out to themselves depend upon the very notion that they are supposed to elucidate, namely, truth. So even if truth were to be understood as a certain sort of correspondence, it could only be that particular form of correspondence between statement and world that consists in 'being true of', and that therefore adds nothing to the concept of truth as such. There is, in fact, no relation, not correspondence or anything else, to which truth can be reduced or in terms of which it can be strictly defined. Indeed, the very attempt at such reduction or definition already involves a misunderstanding of what is at issue. Moreover, not only does the attempt to reduce truth itself to some sort of independently characterizable relation create problems, but so too does the need, within such a relational account, for the elements within that relation to be independently specifiable. Not only is this a problem in terms of being able to specify what it is to which true statements supposedly correspond (see Davidson 2005b, 39-41; see also Stoutland, 2003), and especially the difficulty in doing so without relying on a prior notion of truth, but it arises equally as an issue in respect of the identification of statements. If, as Davidson argues, truth is the key to understanding meaning (see eg. Davidson, 2001d), then there is no access to statements that is not already dependent upon access to truth and to the concept of truth.

The general form of the argument that leads to the refusal of any reductive or definitional account of truth is one that is perhaps most closely identified with Davidson's work, and not only his discussions of truth in

particular (most notably in the Dewey Lectures that form the first part of *Truth and Predication* (Davidson, 2005b)), but also his critique of the so-called "third dogma" of empiricism, the distinction between scheme and content (see Davidson, 2001b, 183-198). How might we understand the relation at issue in this distinction? Whatever concepts we use to try to capture the precise relationship at issue, argues Davidson, they finally reduce to some notion of simply 'being true' (see Davidson, 2001b, 193-194). Davidson's deployment of this argument in the context of the scheme-content distinction is particularly instructive since it indicates the way in which the question concerning our understanding of truth may be seen to connect up with what might otherwise be thought to be a broader question about the relation between, in general terms, language (or thought) and the world. The Davidsonian argument can thus be seen as having a twofold consequence: it shows that we cannot expect to analyse truth by looking to some more basic characterisation of the conjunction of language and world (truth is as basic as it gets), and that we cannot understand the conjunction of language and world other than by reference to the concept of truth.

The Davidsonian approach to truth is minimalist, but it nevertheless provides more of an account of truth than is to be found in the Tarskian account alone (an account on which it also depends), since the Davidsonian account does aim to provide some elucidation of truth, not by means of reductive definition or analysis, but, as can be seen from Davidson's discussion of the scheme-content distinction, in terms of the role it plays in relation to other concepts (see, for example, Davidson, 2005b, 49ff). Such an approach is also to be distinguished from those 'deflationist' accounts of truth that hold there is nothing more to say about truth than is given by means of a disquotational analysis – although whether the Tarskian account itself goes beyond a disquotational analysis is a moot point (see Davidson, 2005b, 11-12).

Inasmuch as the Davidsonian approach involves a minimalist, but not deflationary account of truth (one might say that it is *deflationary* without being *deflationist*), so too can it be seen as similarly minimalist in its

conception of how language and the world are conjoined – it is we might say, ontologically or metaphysically minimalist – refusing to allow any intermediaries in that conjunction, and, more specifically, refusing to construe language as itself some form of intermediary between us and the world. As Davidson writes, 'Language is not a medium through which we see; it does not mediate between us and the world…Language does not mirror or represent reality any more than our senses present us with no more than appearances… We do not see the world through language any more than we see the world through our eyes. We don't look *through* our eyes but *with* them" (Davidson, 2005a, 130). Yet even though Davidson rejects any representationalist account of language, just as he also rejects the scheme-content distinction, what he does not reject is the distinction that we have already encountered in Aristotle between what is said and what is – between our speaking and that about which we speak. This remains a crucial distinction since the very idea of statement, of a 'saying that', presupposes something about which something is said. The concept of truth is itself tied to this distinction, and in being so tied, truth appears as additionally tied to a set of other concepts with respect to which this distinction, or a close analogue of it, also plays a crucial role.

IV. It is, as I noted above, in the articulation of the conceptual interconnection at issue here that the Davidsonian account goes beyond the Tarskian account – what Tarski shows us is the connection between truth and meaning, but an adequate account of the 'structure and content' of truth must do more than merely demonstrate the role played by truth in relation to meaning. In fact, in Davidson, the structure and content of truth is given through an articulation of its role in making possible interpretation and interpersonal understanding – which also means situating truth in relation to belief and the 'affective attitudes' (Davidson, 2005b, 75). The concept of belief, for instance, understood as the attitude of holding true, depends on the concept of truth even while being distinct from it. Without truth we can make no sense of

belief – to have a belief in relation to some subject matter is already to take a stand in respect of the truth of some claim relevant to that subject matter – but that one has such a belief does not mean that what is believed is true. *Holding* true is thus distinct from *being* true (and without that distinction we can make no sense of the possibility of error), even though the concept of holding true itself depends upon the notion of being true (see Malpas, 1999, 117-127). In this respect, the concept of belief already brings with it the concept of truth, and, indeed, of truth as objective (that is, of truth as distinct from what we may hold to be true).

The Aristotelian account of truth with which I began can thus be viewed as both insisting on the distinction between what is said and what is, and yet as also holding back from any tendency to treat that distinction as amenable to any further analysis. In fact, while the attempt to find some alternative or more fundamental characterisation – to reduce truth to something other than truth – is a common move in philosophical discussions of truth, it is hard to see *why* this should be a move that we are required to make. Why should we not simply take truth to be a primitive or basic notion from the very outset? – in similar terms, why should we not begin with the conjunction of language and world as itself primitive, rather than looking to found that conjunction in some more primordial relation?

In the same way, and taking Davidson as our guide here, we might also question the necessity of finding some way of characterizing our own prior involvement with the world other than in terms of our capacity for speaking truly about it, or, as we may also put matters, in terms of our capacity for shared knowledge or action. The introduction of other intermediaries – especially as evident in the attempt to understand knowledge as grounded in some causal or representational relation – fares no better than the attempt to find some relationship that could substitute for the concept of truth. One might even say that it is our prior embeddedness in the world (which can be understood, in epistemic terms, as a matter of our already having 'a largely correct picture of a common world' – Davidson,

2005b, 74), and the fact that such embeddedness cannot itself be given any further reductive analysis, that is evident in the centrality and primacy of truth (see Malpas, 2009).

A proper understanding of the concept of truth thus leads to recognition of the incoherence, not merely of any form of relativism (the very concept of truth implies a notion of objectivity), but also of scepticism (since the concept of truth is already embedded within a structure in which our access to truth must be presupposed). What comes first here is not some 'relation' between independently characterizable elements, but a more basic conjunction or 'belonging-together' (to use a Heideggerian phrase – see Heidegger, 2002), in which the elements, although distinguishable, cannot be entirely sepaarted from one another. Our being *in language*, one might say, is also a being *in the world*, and our being in the world, is also a being i*n truth*. In this respect, the sort of minimalist position in respect of truth that is to be found in Davidson, and also, to some extent, in Stoutland, is one that can not only be seen to go back to Aristotle, but also connects up with the hermeneutical approach evident in Heidegger – an approach that takes truth to be fundamental to our relatedness to world rather than reducible to such relatedness (see Malpas, 2011).[5]

V. Let me now move back to the first of the two Aristotelian points that I identified at the outset: that truth belongs to 'sayings that', to statements. It should immediately be noted that to take truth as belonging to statements does not itself imply that truth therefore belongs to *propositions*, at least, not in the technical philosophical use of the term 'proposition' that has come to dominate most analytic philosophy. According to that use, propositions are equivalent to the senses that attach to sentences – different sentences that have the same sense or meaning thus state the same proposition. Moreover, on at least some accounts, they are also ontologically distinct from sentences in that they may exist independently of them. Thus, while there can be

sentences, or at least instances of sentences, only when there are speakers to utter them, propositions need not be dependent on speakers in this way.

VI. While it might be argued that the Aristotelian characterisation of truth as attaching to sayings that or to statements is ambiguous between truth as belonging to instances of sentences or to the senses of those sentences – ambiguous as between sentences (or sentence tokens) and propositions – there is certainly nothing in the Aristotelian account that requires the introduction of propositions as the bearers of truth rather than sentences. However, it might be thought that propositions are needed here inasmuch as there is surely a sense in which, if a sentence is true, then it is true whether or not anyone actually utters it – independently, indeed, of whether anyone exists to utter it. In that case, since it seems that there can be truths even when there are no sentences or speakers, truth cannot belong primarily to sentences, and we require propositions, existing independently of sentences or speakers, as the primary bearers of truth. The line of thinking may appear persuasive, and it is certainly not uncommon, but it is also leads to some philosophically problematic conclusions.

The first point to note is that in its focus on propositions, this line of thinking does indeed involve taking the primary truth bearers to be, not sentences, as we have seen, but the *senses* or *meanings* of sentences. Whatever else is said about propositions – whether or not they are taken to be independent of sentences – there is something odd about the very idea of taking truth to attach to senses or meanings. While the truth of statements is dependent, as Davidson reminds us, on the meanings of the words as well as on the way the world is, it is surely not the meanings that are properly true or false, but the statements. To treat propositions as truth bearers may be taken as already implying a conflation between statements and the meanings of statements at the same time as these are also, in a certain respect, distinguished. Although there is undoubtedly an ambiguity here that enables this conflation, it remains a conflation nonetheless.

The second and, perhaps, more important point begins with the observation that the only way of specifying any proposition is by means of some sentence. The idea that propositions are independent of sentences, such that they can exist even if there are no sentences, and that propositions are also the primary bearers of truth, has the peculiar consequence that truth must be able to attach to propositions even in cases when there are no sentences that could specify the propositions to which truth attaches. While it may be argued that this does not provide any clinching argument against truth as belonging primarily to propositions, it does indicate something of the oddity of the position in question. One is forced to argue, on this account, that the specification of a proposition by means of a sentence must be completely irrelevant to the existence of the proposition as such, and as a consequence, propositions have to be understood as indeed 'Platonic' entities that exist independently of any actual linguistic and communicative context. The idea of the proposition is thus seen to depend upon a complete separation of propositionality, and so also of meaning or sense, from any of the usual contexts in which it might play a role.

In fact, what underpins the idea of the proposition that is at issue here is a conception of meaning or sense as entirely autonomous and self-contained such that it need have no real connection with any larger communicative, behavioural or cognitive framework. Yet one of the characteristic lessons of the Quinean approach to language that has been so influential in twentieth century philosophy, and that is itself the staring point for Davidson's thinking, has been the inadequacy of any conception of meaning as somehow independent in this way. It is perhaps only in Davidson's work, however, that the real implications of such an approach have become fully evident. On a Davidsonian approach, meaning is not to be understood other than in terms of the role it plays in relation to other concepts such as belief, desire, and truth (a point already presaged in the brief mention above of the difficulty in elucidating statements independently of truth), and, at a more specific level, in terms of the interpretive connections

that are made between particular utterances, and between particular attitudes, utterances, actions, as well as the environmental circumstances of speakers (see especially Davidson, 2001d; see also Malpas, 1992).

If we assume this Davidsonian approach (and it seems to me that there are very good reasons why we should), then there can be no significance to be attached to a notion of 'meaning' or 'sense' that stands outside of the structure of thought and action, attitude and behaviour, knowledge and communication, or that somehow exists independently of it. Moreover, if this applies to 'meaning' and to 'sense', then it must apply no less to the notion of the 'proposition' (a point that is rather less evident in Quine than it is in Davidson). This does not mean that all talk of propositionality has to be abandoned (although we may be left wondering just what role the notion of proposition plays that could not be satisfied by other concepts), but what it does mean is the idea of the proposition cannot be the idea of something that stands apart from sentences or that exists independently of them. A proposition may be identified with the 'sense' of a sentence (with its content), but it will be no more than that, and there will no reason for us to be forced into the peculiar position of making such 'senses', and so 'propositions', the primary bearers of truth.

From a Davidsonian perspective the rejection of propositions as having any significant role to play here (something that is perhaps most clearly evident in *Truth and Predication* (Davidson 2005b)) can already be seen to be implied by the Davidsonian rejection of representationalist construals of the relation between language and the world that I discussed briefly above. Not only do we not need propositions as truth bearers, but we do not need them as intermediaries that will enable us to get from utterances or uttered sentences to meanings, or from meanings to the things in the world to which utterances might be supposed to refer. Meaning, like truth, can only be understood in terms of the way it is embedded within the dynamic context of actual communicative engagement – a context that already involves speakers in relation to other speakers and to their worldly surroundings (a point that is

evident early on in Davidson's work in his own defence of a sentential account of truth against the objections of P. F. Strawson (Davidson, 2001c, 43-44)).

Returning to the original Aristotelian claim that truth belongs to 'sayings that', to statements, we can now read this as meaning that truth belongs to particular uttered sentences (whether written or spoken), that is, to instances of sentences or sentence tokens. As a result, of course, there can be truths only so long as there are sentences, or more particularly, so long as there are utterances (particular 'sayings that'), and thus only so long as there are speakers. Consequently Davidson can state that "Nothing in the world, no object or event, would be true or false if there were not thinking creatures" (Davidson, 2005b, 7), and in this he echoes a similar claim made by Martin Heidegger that "'There is' truth only in so far as Dasein is and so long as Dasein is" (Heidegger, 1962, 269; see also Malpas, 1992, 260ff). Truth, then, is not eternal, since the sentences to which truth attaches, and the speakers that utter those sentences, are not eternal.

Understanding truth as belonging to sentences in this way, and so understanding it as belonging in an ongoing communicative practice, is already to embrace a conception of truth very different from that which is commonly assumed. While on the one hand, truth has to be understood as both objective and accessible, it also has to be recognised as contingent and historical – and this is so just inasmuch as the uttered sentences to which truth attaches are themselves contingent and historical. There is, then, no single body of truths that have existed and will exist for all time, since there is no single body of uttered sentences that have existed and will exist in this way (moreover, the indeterminacy of meaning that follows from the interpretive context in which meaning always arises means that one cannot attach clear sense even to the notion of a 'single' body of sentences here). The tendency to think that the objectivity of truth requires its 'eternity' is simply mistaken – objectivity resides in our everyday engagement with others and with the world. It is this engagement that is given partial articulation in the structure

that Davidson refers to as 'the triangle … relating speaker, interpreter and the world'' (Davidson, 2005b, 75) and not in any notion of an eternal existence somehow independent of that engagement.

VII. If the foregoing considerations are accepted, then it would seem that those few lines from Aristotle's *Metaphysics* that I quoted near the start of this discussion do indeed provide more or less all we need in terms of an account of truth – so long, of course, as we understand those lines aright. Understanding truth as belonging to 'sayings that', and as involving both what is said and that of which it is said is enough to enable us to set out the core elements in an adequate, but necessarily minimalist, account of truth – an account that preserves a sense of truth's objectivity, accessibility, and also its historicality. Admittedly, in the foregoing discussion, I have said rather more than Aristotle says in those few quoted lines, and my account has also been one that may be thought to have supplemented Aristotle rather heavily with Davidson. That this should be so, however, is perhaps more a reflection of the philosophical history that follows on from Aristotle (as well as Davidson's own significance in the most recent stages of that history) than of any inadequacy on the part of the original Aristotelian statement. Significantly, however, this 'Aristotelian' account is one that seems to accord with Stoutland and Davidson, and so can perhaps also be said to fit with a certain Wittgensteinian mode of thought (evident, if in different ways, in both thinkers), as well as with the sort of hermeneutic thinking (admittedly only briefly gestured towards here) that is evident in Heidegger.

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Notes

[1] Perhaps nowhere better demonstrated than in Stoutland, 2011 – an essay that provides an important corrective to the rather careless readings of Davidson that abound in work on the philosophy of action in particular.

[2] It is the focus of a number of essays including Stoutland, 1999a, 1999b, 2002, 2003.

[3] Aristotle deals with truth elsewhere in the *Metaphysics*, at 1027b18ff and 1051a34ff, but my discussion will be restricted to the earlier passage

[4] See Tarski, 1944, 343; for an interesting discussion of Tarski's defence of the correspondence account as this also relates to Aristotle, see Woleński, 1989, 105-110.

[5] In Malpas, 1992, I set out an account that also drew Davidson together with Heidegger on the question of truth. However, I was then still inclined, like

Davidson at one point, to suppose that some minimal notion of correspondence (and so too some notion of 'relation') could be used in the elucidation of truth, just as I was also inclined to retain the language of 'realism'. Like Davidson, I was largely persuaded to abandon the language of both 'correspondence' and 'realism' (in even a minimal sense) by Rorty – see especially his comments on my position in Rorty, 1999, 41-42, n.22 – even though I remained unpersuaded, again like Davidson, by Rorty's exhortations in favour of the abandonment of truth as a significant notion altogether. It is perhaps worth noting the shift that also occurred in Stoutland's position, especially as regards Davidson and the question of truth, away from an anti-realist reading (see Stoutland, 1982a, 1982b) towards a similar 'minimalism' to that outlined here (see Stoutland, 1999a).