Review of “Truth and Predication”

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In this short book, Donald Davidson rehearses his views about the nature of truth and its central role in our understanding of language, sketches a selective history of the problem of predication from Plato to the present, and proposes a solution. As its title suggests, the book falls naturally into two parts. The first three chapters reprint with relatively minor changes the John Dewey Lectures delivered at Columbia in 1989, and published subsequently in *The Journal of Philosophy* (Vol. 87, No. 6, Jun., 1990, pp. 279-328) under the title “The Structure and Content of Truth”. The remaining four are concerned with the problem of explaining the semantic role of predicates, which Davidson associates with the traditional problem of the unity of the proposition. These latter are based on the Hermes lectures delivered originally in 2001 at the University of Perugia, and published subsequently in Italian.

Davidson begins by defending Tarski against those who argue that his definition of truth for a language has nothing whatsoever to tell us about our ordinary intuitive concept of truth. Yet he also contends that there is more to this concept than is to be found in Tarski’s deflationary account. For Davidson, the task is to connect the abstract linguistic structure identified by Tarski, and reflected in the clauses of his definition, with the actual behavior of language users (chapter 1). What more is there then to truth? Davidson rejects both what he calls epistemic theories, i.e. ones which tie truth to our own cognitive capacities (e.g. truth as warranted assertability) and realist (i.e. correspondence) theories. The former fall short because they fail to do justice to the role of truth as an intersubjective standard, the latter because Frege’s slingshot argument—whose conclusion is that all true sentences have the same reference—demonstrates that there is nothing non-trivial to which a true sentence can correspond (chapter 2). In chapter 3, Davidson outlines his own approach to filling out the picture. He does not attempt to define our concept of truth—it is, he maintains, the semantic concept we understand best—but rather to spell out its relationship to the attitudes (beliefs, intentions, desires) of language users. On Davidson’s account, a Tarski-style theory of truth for a language $L$ comprises a finite set of axioms from which should follow a T-sentence for each sentence $s$ of $L$, i.e. a sentence of the form: ‘$s$’ is true in $L$ just in case $p$, where ‘$p$’ is a sentence of the language in which the theory is formulated. (In Tarski’s work, what Davidson treats as axioms are just the clauses in a recursive definition of satisfaction and ‘$p$’ is a translation of ‘$s$’ into the meta-language. Davidson does not allow himself the notion of translation however.) Since $L$ is supposed to be a language actually spoken by an individual or a community, a theory of truth for $L$ is an empirical theory with testable consequences:

A T-sentence says of a particular $L$-speaker that, every time he utters a given sentence, the utterance will be true if and only if certain conditions are satisfied... Thus, a theory of truth is
a theory for describing, explaining, understanding and predicting a basic aspect of verbal behavior. (p.54)

Davidson goes on to sketch how, by confirming its T-sentences, one might in principle be able to establish that the theory does in fact correctly characterize the truth predicate for $L$. The observable behavior of $L$-speakers provides the basic data. In particular, we note which $L$-sentences they hold true in given circumstances. (This does not assume that we know the content of these sentences, only that we can recognize when a speaker holds them to be true.) Then, guided by certain normative constraints, notably the so-called principle of charity, and utilizing tools from decision theory, he sets out to show how we may arrive step by step at an interpretation of the attitudes of $L$-speakers and eventually at truth conditions for all the sentences of $L$.

Next, Davidson turns to the problem of predication. The views of Plato and Aristotle are discussed in chapter 4. The former is credited with formulating the problem, but his attempts to address it in terms of the theory of forms are found wanting. A sentence like ‘Theaetetus sits’ comprises two words which apparently refer to two entities: a particular individual and a universal or property. It must be more than a list of two referring expressions however. What it says is that the entities to which it refers are related: the individual instantiates, say, the property. On this analysis then our sentence might better be written as ‘Theaetetus is sitting’ since it involves three entities: a particular, a universal and a relation, instantiation, which holds between them. However, a sentence is no more a list of three referring expressions than it is a list of two. What it says is that there is a certain relationship between Theaetetus, sitting and instantiation. So there are, it seems, four entities involved: an individual, a property, a binary relation and a ternary relation—and so on, viciously, $ad$ $infinitum$. The threat of some kind of regress is a central thread running through Davidson’s critical discussion, so much so that he claims: “The difficulty of avoiding one infinite regress or another might almost be said to be the problem of predication” (p.79).

More recent attempts to address the problem by Russell and Strawson, it is argued in chapter 5, are no more successful at avoiding a regress. Only Quine and Sellars escape because they decline to associate a predicate with any sort of entity such as a property or universal. However, their efforts too fall short of providing an adequate account of predication.

In chapter 6, Davidson expatiates on the connection between truth and predication: not only is having a truth value “the simplest and clearest mark of the unity of sentences” (p.120), but “the truth conditions of any sentence capable of truth or falsity depend, among other things, on the semantic function of one or more predicates” (p.124). This leads him into a discussion of Frege, a philosopher who was well aware of this connection. On Frege’s account of predication, predicates express concepts, functions from objects to truth values, with the result that a sentence, the value of the function expressed by its predicate applied to the objects denoted by its singular terms, forms a semantic unit whose connection to truth and falsity is apparent. However, the price to be paid for these virtues is that sentences are themselves now singular terms which denote objects, namely truth values. Although Davidson accords Frege’s views more respect than he does those of most of the other figures he considers, he concludes nonetheless that the problem of predication remains unsolved.

The stage has now been set for Davidson’s own account of predication in the final chapter. This is provided by his version of Tarski’s theory of truth and, in particular, by the satisfaction relation which holds between expressions, either sentences or open formulas, of the specified language $L$ and (infinite sequences of) objects. On Tarski’s account, satisfaction conditions for logically complex expressions are given in terms of the satisfaction conditions for their logically simpler components. However, in the
logically simple case, the satisfaction of a sentence or predicate is explained in terms of its translation into the meta-language. As I noted earlier, Davidson does not allow himself to assume a translation between $L$ and the language of the interpreter, so he describes the situation in the following terms: “there is an axiom for each sentence with an unstructured predicate (its spaces filled with variables or names) specifying the conditions under which that sentence is satisfied by a particular sequence” (p.160). To see what this amounts too, consider a simple example. Suppose the language under investigation is a fragment $G$ of German, then an axiom of our theory of truth for $G$ might read: an object satisfies ‘sitzt’ just in case it sits. (Strictly speaking, it is infinite sequences of objects that satisfy predicates but we can ignore this technicality for present purposes.) This may seem at first glance to lack explanatory force but, from Davidson’s perspective, principles of this sort are indeed sufficient to account for the semantic role played by predicates. In effect, predicates are characterized in terms of the true sentences in which they occur. Of course, this is not Tarski’s order of explanation. He defines truth in terms of satisfaction. For Davidson, on the other hand, truth is taken for granted and “satisfaction can be taken to be whatever relation yields a correct account of truth” (p.34). The utterances of language users, the observational data which a theory of truth is responsible for explaining and predicting, consist of whole sentences. Parsing these in terms of logical operators, names, predicates and the like serves only to generate a theoretical infrastructure to further this purpose. Hence, for him, a theory of predication need only explain how predicates function within this linguistic structure. (As an aside, a similar analysis of predication has been given, apparently independently, by Asbjørn Steglich-Petersen; see his “Davidson, truth, and semantic unity”, *Sats - Nordic Journal of Philosophy*, 4: 124-146, 2003.)

The moral Davidson draws from his discussion is that it is hopeless to attempt to explain predication by interpreting predicates as entities of some kind. Yet a Tarski-style semantics is usually presented as doing exactly that. Just as names are assigned objects, so each predicate is assigned a set to be its extension; then an object $o$ is said to satisfy a predicate $P$ just in case $o$ is a member of the extension of $P$. Of course, Davidson too acknowledges that predicates have extensions, but for him they play no explanatory role. (On his account, the satisfaction relation determines the extension rather than vice versa.) He dismisses this version of Tarski semantics, which he calls the standard semantics, as obviously unable to explain the role of the predicate in, for example, the sentence ‘Theaetetus sits’:

In the sentence ‘Theaetetus is a member of the set of seated objects’ the predicate ‘sits’ does not appear; the new predicate is the predicate ‘is a member of’, the semantic role of which is not given... The two-place predicates ‘instantiates’ and ‘is a member of’ are the expressions the role of which we want to explain. (p.158)

It seems to me that this last claim is mistaken. A feature of Davidson’s account of predication, which he mentions almost in passing but whose implications he seems to ignore is:

...that it gives an account of how each predicate in a language contributes to the truth conditions of the sentences in which it occurs, but that it gives no general explanation of predication. It is true that no such general explanation emerges. What does emerge is a method for specifying the role of each and every predicate in a specific language; (p.161)

Davidson undertakes to explain the role of each and every predicate of some particular language using the language of the interpreter or semantic theorist whose workings are not called into question. In Tarskian terms, predication in the object language is explained using a meta-language the role of whose predicates is taken for granted. But ‘is a member of’ in the above quotation belongs to the latter, rather
than to the language whose predicates are under investigation and, as such, it merely specifies “the conditions under which that sentence [‘Theaetetus sits’] is satisfied by a particular sequence”. In consequence, the first step of the regress which is presumably Davidson’s concern is blocked. Of course, if we now set out to explain the role of meta-linguistic predicates, that task would have to be carried out using a meta-meta-language, the role of whose predicates would in turn be left unexplained, and so on. Although in theory this process may be continued indefinitely, it does not generate a vicious regress but merely reflects a basic feature of Tarski’s approach to semantics according to which our presumed understanding of the meta-language enables us to use it to explain semantic features of the object language. (Consider, for example, his statement of satisfaction conditions for the logical particles.)

Davidson would likely not endorse this way of presenting the matter. Because he wants to apply Tarski’s methods to natural language, he is unwilling to rule out semantically closed languages or to enforce a rigid distinction between language levels. To guard against the threat of paradox, he prefers to leave unspecified the precise limits of the language to which a particular semantic theory applies: “Truth... is relative to a language and we never know exactly what the language is” (p.3). Nevertheless, his proposed solution to the problem of predication assumes a distinction between the language whose semantics is under investigation and the language employed by the investigator. If these two languages coincide completely, we can reformulate his earlier objection to the standard semantics so that it applies to his own proposal as well:

In the sentence ‘Theaetetus satisfies “sits”’ the predicate ‘sits’ does not appear (only its name does); the new predicate is the predicate ‘satisfies’, the semantic role of which is not given. The two-place predicate ‘satisfies’ is the expression the role of which we want to explain.

If ‘satisfies’ is allowed to be one of the predicates of the language under investigation, we are embarked upon the familiar regress. If it is not, then we need to use yet another language to explain its semantic role. Nor does it help to argue that, since Davidson explains satisfaction in terms of truth and our grasp of the latter concept is assumed, the demand for an explanation has already been met. This misses the point: it is not our grasp of satisfaction that is being questioned—anymore than, in the above quotation, it is our grasp of the membership relation, or the concept of being seated for that matter—but the semantic role of the predicate.

The lesson to be drawn from Davidson’s application of Tarski’s semantic methods to the problem of predication is not the futility of attempting to interpret predicates as expressing or referring to single entities but rather the familiar lesson that Tarski himself drew when introducing the semantic concept of truth, namely that only by distinguishing between the language whose semantics we are giving and the language in which our theorizing takes place can we avoid conceptual problems. This is not to criticize Davidson’s account of predication per se, which accords well with his overall approach to language, nor even to criticize that approach itself. My point is only that, contrary to what Davidson seems to think, it is not obvious that predication poses insoluble problems for adherents to the traditional view according to which the semantic properties of predicates must be learned before we can understand the sentences in which they figure. Provided that one observes a distinction between object- and meta-language, as Davidson himself is forced to do (or so it seems to me), it is possible to interpret predicates directly without generating a regress and to salvage, perhaps in modified form, some at least of the positions which he has dismissed as hopeless.

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