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Why the Minimalist Cannot Reduce Facts to True Propositions

P aul Horwich aims to capture the major claims of what he calls the *correspondence intuition* by means of his minimal conception of truth. In his view, the correspondence intuition can be characterized as follows:

> ... minimalism ... does not deny that truths do correspond – in some sense – to the facts; it acknowledges that statements owe their truth to the nature of reality; [..] It is indeed undeniable that whenever a proposition or an utterance is true, it is true because something in the world is a certain way – something typically external to the proposition or utterance.[1]

According to this quote, the correspondence intuition consists of at least two claims:

> (1) Truths correspond (in some sense) to the facts.
> (2) Statements owe their truth to the nature of reality.

The first claim is a vague and intuitive formulation of the essence of the correspondence theory of truth. The second claim expresses a more general intuition. It represents an intuitive version of the so-called truthmaker principle, which claims that truths are made true by portions of reality.

Horwich is aware of the fact that it is necessary to give (1) und (2) a *specific* interpretation to be able to capture the correspondence intuition on the basis of the minimal conception of truth. Not every possible interpretation of (1) and (2) is compatible with the minimal conception of truth.[2] Horwich expresses this fact as follows:

> The correspondence conception of truth involves two claims: (1) that truths correspond to reality; and (2) that such correspondence is what truth essentially is.

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[1] Horwich (1998, p. 104).
[2] A strategy to capture intuition (2) from the minimalist point of view is presented in McGrath (2003).

> And the minimalist response [..] is to concede the first of these theses (properly
> understood) but to deny the second.[3]

Therefore, it is necessary for the minimalist to find an interpretation of (1) that is compatible with the claim that the correspondence to reality is *not* what truth essentially is. Horwich assumes that this goal can be achieved if we interpret (1) as follows:

(1') True propositions (=truths) are identical with facts.[4]

Is that a promising strategy? It depends on whether the identification of truths with facts can (i) be carried out and is (ii) compatible with the minimal conception of truth. I will argue that both is not the case. There are indeed several possibilities to identify true propositions with facts. But either this strategies cannot be carried out in an adequate way or they are not compatible with the minimal conception of truth. Therefore, Horwich's strategy fails to capture (1) by means of the minimal conception of truth.

From the deflationist point of view, the reduction of facts to true propositions seems to have certain merits. It provides ontological economy and it *deflates* the concept of fact. For instance, if facts are identical with true propositions they cannot have the explanatory function that a correspondence theorist claims them to have. According to Julian Dodd, who thinks that a certain variant of the identification of facts and true propositions can be carried out and is compatible with the minimal conception of truth, these two aspects of the identification of true propositions with facts are the major motivations for the reduction of facts to true propositions:

> The most powerful motivation for identifying facts with true thoughts is that of ontological economy.[5]

> … the modest identity theory constitutes a response to an error made (about the nature of facts) by correspondence theorist, and it is his role which requires use of the concept of identity. [..] Deflationism can only be argued for effectively once the correspondence theory has been dismantled.[6]

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[3] Horwich (1998, p. 116).
[4] According to Horwich, the primary bearers of truth are proposition; (Horwich (1998, p. 16; p. 129; p. 133)).
[5] Dodd (2000, p. 81).
[6] Dodd (2000, p. 126; p. 128).

A successful identification of true propositions with facts requires the satisfaction of two conditions: It must be compatible with our basic intuitions and assumptions about the nature of propositions *and* about the nature of facts.

There are, I think, three types of conceptions of propositions that seem to be worth considering in connection with a reduction of facts to true propositions: (a) conceptions of propositions that regard propositions as concrete entities (=as constituents of reality), (b) conceptions that regard propositions as abstract entities that contain constituents of reality, and (c) conceptions that regard propositions as abstract entities that contain no constituents of reality. I will now discuss the reduction of facts to true propositions in a threefold way: I will choose one example of each of the three distinguished types of conceptions of propositions to demonstrate that a reduction of facts to true propositions can either not be carried out in an adequate way or is incompatible with minimalism.

Let us start with a conception of propositions of type (a). This conception regards propositions as states of affairs (according to Armstrong). For Armstrong an (obtaining) state of affairs is nothing else than the instantiation of a universal by an object (or the instantiation of an n-place relation by n objects).[7] Is it possible to identify true propositions with facts on this basis? Two problems seem to speak against this possibility. The first problem concerns false propositions, the second negative facts.

If we regard a true proposition as the instantiation of a universal by an object (or the instantiation of an n-place relation by n objects) what are false propositions against this background? A realist about possible worlds seems to be able to explain what contingently false propositions are against this background: a contingently false proposition (in the actual world) is the instantiation of a universal by an object (or the instantiation of an n-place relation by n objects) in at least one possible world that is not identical with the actual world. But the realist about possible worlds cannot explain what necessarily false propositions are on the same basis. An actualist about possible worlds can neither explain what contingently false propositions are, nor what necessarily false propositions are. He might try to regard false propositions as ordered n-tuples of objects and universals or relations. But firstly this strategy presupposes an abstract realism about universals, and secondly it cannot accommodate all false propositions, be-

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[7] Armstrong (1997, p. 115f); Dodd (2000, p. 2-14).

cause there are some false propositions which are about objects that do not exist in the actual world.[8]

As similar point is made by Dodd:

> Neither can states of affaires serve as propositions, for the simple reason that such an account of propositions is unable to leave room for a proposition's being false.[9]

Negative facts as well seem to be a problem of this first kind of identification of facts with true propositions. The true proposition that snow is not yellow is not identical with any (obtaining) state of affairs in the actual world. (The only colour-property that is instantiated by snow is the property of *whiteness*.) Therefore, it seems to be not a fact that snow is not yellow on the basis of the identification of obtaining states of affairs with facts. But it is a fact indeed. Therefore, there seems to be no plausible way of capturing negative facts on the basis of the identification of states of affairs with facts. The first cited kind of an identification of true propositions with facts is inadequate because of the mentioned two reasons.

As an example of a conception of propositions of type (b) we may choose so-called Russellian propositions. Russellian propositions are normally regarded as ordered n-tuples that contain, if they are ordered pairs, an object and a property, and if they are n>2-placed tuples, they contain n objects and an n-placed relation. Almost for the same reasons as the identification of states of affairs with facts, the identification of Russellian propositions with facts is problematic. It seems impossible to explain what false propositions are if we treat propositions as Russellian propositions. Because Russellian propositions are abstract entities, there seems to be no way either for an actualist or for a realist about possible worlds to explain what contingently false propositions are *ontologically*. The only and very crude way for the realist about possible worlds to accommodate this problem would be to supply the constituents of Russellian propositions with an index that explains in which possible world they exist or are instantiated. Only then, it seems possible for the realist about possible worlds to explain the difference between a contingently false and a contingently true Russellian proposition. A contingently false proposition would then be a proposition that contains objects, a property or a relation, that exist or are instanti-

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[8] See: Dodd (2000, p. 66-70).
[9] Dodd (2000, p. 113).

ated in a possible world that is not identical with the actual world. But the problem with this strategy is that nearly every object exists in more than one possible world, nearly every property is instantiated in more than one possible world. And that means that nearly every Russellian proposition is true in more than one possible world. Therefore, the strategy of indexing the constituents of Russellian propositions as entities of a certain possible world seems to be an arbitrary or hopeless procedure. Therefore, if we treat propositions as Russellian propositions then there seems to be no way of explaining what either contingently or necessarily false propositions are.

Negative facts confront the identification of true Russellian propositions with facts with a second unsolvable problem. In the actual world, it is a fact that snow is not yellow, but there is no true Russellian proposition that could be identified with this fact; (because there is no property of being not yellow.) Therefore, we cannot accomplish the identification of true propositions with facts on the basis of a Russellian conception of propositions.

After showing that two apparently possible kinds of identification of true propositions with facts cannot be accomplished, I will now demonstrate that although the third kind of identification of true propositions with facts can be carried out in an adequate way, as Dodd already pointed out, this conception however is not as Horwich and Dodd think compatible with minimalism. We may choose so-called Fregean propositions as an example of propositions of type (c). Fregean propositions can be treated in analogy to Russellian propositions as ordered n-tuples. The difference between Russellian propositions and Fregean propositions concerns the constituents of the propositions. While Russellian propositions contain objects, properties and relations as constituents, Fregean propositions contain only senses (or concepts) as constituents: senses of singular terms, predicate terms, relational terms etc. On the basis of identifying Fregean propositions with facts, it is no problem to explain what false propositions are and to constitute negative facts. But this kind of identification has a different problem that concerns its compatibility with minimalism. How can the difference between true and false Fregean propositions be explained? I will now show that the truth or falsehood of a Fregean proposition cannot be explained on the basis of an intrinsic property of such a proposition. And this fact has negative consequences for the compatibility of this third identity conception with minimalism. Let us demonstrate this by means of an example. The proposition that snow is white is true. The proposition that snow is yellow is false. Which fact explains the difference in truth-value

between these two propositions. Both propositions contain only senses (or concepts). But it does not only depend on the senses (or concepts) a proposition contains whether it is true or false. There must be some property beyond those and therefore an extrinsic property of a Fregean proposition that explains the difference. A similar point may be made by considering a further example. In the actual world it is a fact that snow is white and therefore the proposition that snow is white is true. But the actual world might be such that it is not the fact that snow is white. And therefore the proposition that snow is white would not be true. But the proposition that snow is white has the same intrinsic properties if snow is white as it would have, if snow would not be white. Therefore, it must be an extrinsic property that explains the difference between the truth and falsity of a Fregean proposition. And this is not only true of Fregean propositions as we conceived them; it is true of all propositions of type (c). It is not a matter of the intrinsic properties of abstract entities whether a proposition is false or true. And propositions of type (c) are and contain only abstract entities. The truth of such propositions depends on an extrinsic property and therefore partly on the existence of entities that exist independently of these propositions.[10]

In how far is our conclusion that the difference between true and false abstract propositions can only be explained on the basis of an extrinsic property a problem for the compatibility of the third mentioned kind of identification of true propositions with facts with minimalism? Minimalism holds two central theses: (A) The property of truth cannot be reductively defined (and has therefore no underlying nature).[11] (B) The property of truth is not an extrinsic property (that might obtain between truthbearers and so-called truthmakers)[12]. But if the difference between true and false abstract propositions can only be explained on the basis of an extrinsic property then the property of truth of such a proposition can be *reduced* to an underlying extrinsic property. And therefore the *underling nature* of the property of truth of such a proposition is constituted by an extrinsic property (that might obtain between bearers of truth and so-called truthmakers). We may therefore conclude the following: Horwich argues that (1) is compatible with deflationism if it is interpreted as (1'). As we have seen two of three possibilities to reduce facts to true propositions cannot be carried out in an adequate way. And the third kind of identification of true proposi-

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[10] See: Dodd (2000, p.72-74; p. 123-128).
[11] Horwich (1998, p.5; p.120f; p.125; p.138; p.142. p.145).
[12] Horwich (1998, p. 2; p.105f; p. 116; p.141f).

tions with facts is incompatible with minimalism. Therefore it is not possible for the minimalist to reduce facts to true propositions and to capture the intuition (1) on this basis.

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