Why Do We Need a Theory of Truth? *

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Abstract

Over the years, the discussions of what the concept of truth is, and of what a theory of truth can do or ought to be, have always been the important in Davidson’s philosophy, but they have been so for different reasons and relative to different questions. At the beginning, when the question was asked about what the nature (or the meaning) of meaning is or what a theory of meaning is supposed to do, the concept of truth was fundamental as well as primitive because the Tarski-style theory of truth had to be implemented in order to accomplish Davidson’s ingenious design for constructing his theory of meaning. Then, when the question was directly related to the concern with what a theory of truth ought to be or what Tarski’s theory of truth amounts to, Davidson argued for that we should reject attempts to provide a “right” or “substantial” theory for the concept of truth, or to offer the so-called correct characterization of Tarski’s view of truth. Finally, the concept of truth itself became one of Davidson’s two main interests (the other one was “objectivity”), because he was aware that Tarski’s style truth definitions or theories didn’t
really exhaust the content of the concept of truth, and he wanted to answer the question as to whether truth is a goal of inquiry.

From a Davidsonian point of view, instead of asking what a theory of meaning is a theory of, it is more appropriate to ask what a theory of meaning is a theory for. It seems as well to ask what a theory of truth is a theory for fits Davidson’s philosophy far better than asking what a theory of truth is a theory of. Davidson’s theory of meaning is not a theory for defining the general concept of meaning, neither is a theory of truth in Davidsonian style a theory for defining the general concept of truth.

The concept of truth is essential and central, but it is not definable and cannot be reduced to other concepts that are simpler, clearer, or more basic. Davidson’s arguments show that while correspondence, coherence and pragmatic theories inflate or pump too much unnecessary content into the concept of truth, deflationary theories ignore or underestimate its important role in our understanding of natural language. If, as Davidson claims, “it is folly to try to define the concept of truth”, either in an explicit or in an implicit way, why do we still need a theory of truth? I want to argue that we may not need any theory of truth on the metaphysical level, but we do need a theory of truth on the linguistic level—that is, the language-involving level on which truth can explicate the concept of meaning, and has intimate connection with belief or other intentional attitudes. This useful theory of truth will be brought out by exploring a theory of truth based on Tarski’s style and a theory of rational decision as developed by Ramsey’s version of Bayesian decision theory.

**Keywords:** theory of truth, truth, Davidson, Tarski
I. The Concept of Truth and the Theories of Truth

When we study the concept of truth or try to find a definition for the concept, it does not necessarily lead us to the construction of a theory of truth. Correspondingly, when we endeavor to form a theory of truth, we are not required to focus on the concept of truth itself, nor are we forced to provide any definition for the concept. This situation is very similar to that we find in discussions of the concept of meaning and the theories of meaning. The conceptual analysis of certain concept does not necessarily connect with a theoretical construction bearing on the very concept at issue. A lot of philosophical discussions concerning the nature or the definition of the concept of meaning need not be regarded as constructing a theory of meaning. Some philosophical projects aiming at producing a theory of meaning may not be concerned with the nature of the concept of meaning, and one could do the theory of meaning without even taking up the concept of meaning. However, it is worth noting that there is an important difference between the cases of truth and meaning. The point that needs to be made is this: while we might have a theory of meaning without using or involving the concept of meaning, the construction of a theory of truth, if not directed to define the concept of truth, still presupposes or relies on the very concept of truth. Why is the

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1 Consider a theory of meaning in the Davidsonian style in which “the one thing meanings do not seem to do is oil the wheels of a theory of meaning—at least as long as we require of such a theory that it non-trivially give the meaning of every sentence in the language.” (Davidson, 1967: 20)
concept of truth so fundamental for constructing a theory of truth, or indeed any theory? Why do we need a theory of truth?

Michael Lynch, in the “Introduction” for his book *The Nature of Truth*, distinguishes all kinds of “Robust theories of truth” from the “Deflationary theories of truth” based on the starting point (or question): “Does truth have a nature?” So, it is natural for him to sort out various theories just depending on whether the attitudes toward the starting question are positive or negative. However, Lynch also notices “there is a growing consensus among some philosophers that neither traditional robust theories nor deflationary theories are right.” If it is so, then he claims that “we must find new ways to think about this old concept.” (Lynch, 2001: 5) It is my belief that we could find a new way to think about the old concept of truth in this article — that is, viewing the concept from a theory of truth based on the linguistic perspective or language-involving phenomena.

Dealing with the concept of truth can be a quite different philosophical concern from constructing a theory of truth, although the two different concerns may be closely related. A distinction Michael Devitt has introduced can help us here. In order to tell what exactly the difference is between the deflationary theory of truth and the correspondence theory of truth, Devitt attempts to make a distinction between the metaphysical and linguistic issues (or foci) with respect to these discussions of truth. He claims that “[w]hereas the focus of the correspondence theory is on the nature and role of truth, the focus of the deflationary theory is on the nature and role of the truth term, for example, of ‘true’. The former focus is metaphysical; the latter, linguistic.” (Devitt, 2001: 580) According to the distinction made by Devitt, it seems that if the focus of our theory is the concept of truth, then the theory should be
regarded as a kind of metaphysical theory; while if the focus of the theory is on the truth term, then the theory should be linguistic in kind. Devitt’s distinction, it seems to me, is not only misleading (because the distinction might miss or obscure what the truly significant difference is between the correspondence theory and the deflationary theory), but also too trivial (because it is so obvious to treat the nature of truth as an metaphysical issue and the meaning of truth term as a linguistic issue), and too narrow at best (because it cannot capture the whole picture of the debates among so many different theories of truth existing in contemporary philosophy).

Contrast to what Devitt has suggested, I propose to draw a distinction between the metaphysical level and the linguistic level when we discuss the issues concerning the theory of truth (rather than concerning the concept of truth). Different from Devitt’s proposal, my distinction of the different levels is based on what we try to ask the theory of truth for or why we need to construct such a theory (rather than being based on what the object the theory focuses). A theory of truth on the metaphysical level (I will call this MT) is a theory concerning with the nature and the role of the concept of truth, aiming at providing a definition or an explication for the concept. A theory of truth on the linguistic (or language-involving) level (LT for short) is a theory purporting to explain how various linguistic phenomena, such as communication, understanding, and interpretation, are possible by relating the concept of truth with other semantic concepts such as that of meaning and that of belief. We may also say that MT is a theory focusing on the concept of truth, whereas LT is a theory of truth focusing on ordinary linguistic phenomena.

I’d mentioned the needed distinction just so there is no ambiguity. I think
most contemporary discussions regarding the concept of truth have been loaded with traditional metaphysical burdens and many varieties of theories of truth are metaphysical in nature. Most contemporary theories of truth are concerned with the nature of truth, and hope to find the definition and philosophical significances of the concept. This situation should remind us of the controversy over the concept “universal” begun in medieval times. Just like the three different kinds of metaphysical theories of universals (i.e., realism, conceptualism, and nominalism respectively), I suggest that there are three matching metaphysical theories with respect to the concept of truth too. Comparable to realism about “universals”, we have the correspondence theory of truth; to conceptualism about “universals”, we have the coherence theory of truth and the pragmatic theory of truth; and to nominalism about “universals”, the deflationary theory of truth. The last two groups of theories of truth, just like their counterpart parts in the theories of universals, are anti-realist in nature.

The debates between realism and anti-realism can be characterized as the controversies as to whether there is at least something real that is not dependent on the human minds for its being. However, the controversies are not as simple as they look, because the domains or the objects in question vary with different contexts and discussions. For example, common-sense realists would assert that there is at least something existing in the physical world (the world in which we live) that is not dependent on the human minds, while common-sense anti-realists deny this. Scientific realists assert that there are at least some theoretical entities dealt in scientific theories that are not dependent

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on human minds for their beings, while scientific anti-realists deny that there are any of these independent entities. Realism about “universals” is a theory asserting that universals exist independent of human minds, while anti-realism about “universals” denies any such realistic universal. Realism about “truth” or alethic realism is a theory asserting that what makes a sentence or belief true is not merely dependent on the human minds, while anti-realism about truth denies that there is any mind-independent truth-maker. It is therefore important to notice the multi-domains (or different objects) involved in the realism-antirealism debates, if we want to make the best of this controversy.

II. Do We Need a Theory of Truth?

The question regarding whether we need a theory of truth or not has been raised by some philosophers, for examples, by Stephen Leeds (Leeds, 1978), Scott Soames (Soames, 1984), and Michael Williams (Williams, 1986). Their answers to this question cannot simply be put as “yes” or “no”. This way of viewing the issue will not only be misleading but also miss the point. There are two main reasons for this: (1) the concerns and the perspectives for the question might be quite different; (2) the very idea of what a theory of truth ought to be might not be unequivocal. As far as I understand, Leeds and Soames are concerned with what Tarski’s concept of truth is supposed to mean, and how to justify, in one way or another, the legitimacy of Tarski’s theory of

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3 The term “alethic realism” (or Realism with a capital “R”) comes from William Alston’s book, *A Realist Conception of Truth*, in which the term is meant to stand for “realism concerning truth”.
truth. Williams, on the other hand, is concerned with epistemological issues and he challenges (based on his deflationary view of truth) people to think why we need any theory of truth along something like the lines proposed by correspondence theorists or coherence theorists. After showing that we don’t really establish the need for a substantial notion of truth in the contexts of scientific realism, naturalized epistemology and Putnam’s internal realism, Williams concludes by putting forward his doubt about that “we epistemologists need a theory of truth” at all (Williams, 1986: 241).

Williams’s doubt regarding whether we need a theory of truth or not is closely related to his deflationary view of truth; he doubts that truth is the name of a genuine property and so also that truth needs any explanation or definition from defenders of correspondence or coherence theories. But even if the deflationary view of truth were correct, the conclusion that a theory of truth is not needed does not necessarily follow. The consideration here has gone beyond what the nature of truth is, it has reached the more general question of what ought, and what ought not, to be expected from a theory of truth. Indeed, it can be directly connected to the question of what a theory of truth ought to be.

Soames has nicely generalized three main things that we may generally expect a theory of truth to do (Soames, 1984: 411). According to Soames’s proposal, a theory of truth is generally expected:

(i) to give the meaning of natural-language truth predicates;
(ii) to replace such predicates with substitutes, often formally defined, designed to further some reductionist program; or
(iii) to use some antecedently understood notion of truth for broader
philosophical purposes, such as explicating the notion of meaning or defending one or another metaphysical view.

With respect to Soames’s classification, we may expect that there are at least three different kinds of theories of truth. Let’s call them T1 (corresponding to (i)), T2 (to (ii)) and T3 (to (iii)) respectively.

The reason why Soames classifies these three different expectations for a theory of truth is to clarify what Tarski’s theory of truth is meant to do. He claims that Tarski’s definition of truth is neither an attempt to analyze the meaning of natural-language truth predicates (not a theory in the sense of T1), nor an attempt to use the notion of truth for broad philosophical purposes (not a theory in the sense of T3 either). Tarski’s theory of truth is not a theory in the sense of T1 (not an attempt to give the meaning of natural-language truth predicates) because he restricts his definition to cases in which truth is predicated of sentences of certain formalized languages only. Nor is his theory of truth a theory in the sense of T3 (not an attempt to use the notion of truth for broad philosophical purposes) because for Tarski the concept of truth itself is just what has to be explicated and legitimated. Tarski’s goal, according to Soames’s understanding, is to replace truth predicates used in our natural languages with certain restricted but formally defined substitutes. Tarski’s reductionist program of replacing natural-language truth predicates by the formally designed substitutes has two motivations: first, to remove the doubts of certain scientifically minded truth skeptics; second, to eliminate what he takes to be the inconsistency in our ordinary notion of truth brought out by the liar paradox. Therefore, Tarski’s theory of truth should be understood as a theory in the sense of T2.
It is not my concern here to evaluate whether Soames’s interpretation of Tarski’s theory of truth is correct or not. I have to admit that Soames’s classification of different kinds of theories of truth with respect to what the theories may try to do helps to clarify some potential confusion and misunderstandings. However, I also have to point out that Soames’s classification is *ad hoc* at best. As I mentioned above, his distinction of what one can expect from a theory of truth is meant to locate Tarski’s theory in the right place in order to clarify and justify Tarski’s reductionist program for the concept of truth. Besides, the distinction between T1 and T2 is not needed. The only reason Soames separates the expectation for a theory of truth involved in T1 from that in T2 seems to be that he wants to emphasize what Tarski has done for the concept of truth must be viewed in the context of a formalized language rather than any natural language. And the reason why Tarski restricts his explications of truth within the context of a formalized language is to avoid some truth skepticism and the well-known liar paradox. However, if our concern here is with what we may expect a theory of truth to do or what a theory of truth ought to be, T1 (giving the meaning of natural-language truth predicates) and T2 (replacing natural-language truth predicates with formally defined substitutes) are both fundamentally metaphysical in nature. The differences between T1 and T2 will depend on what the theory takes to be its metaphysical standpoint (i.e., whether we could reductively define the concept of truth or find the nature for it, or we could only minimally interpret or understand the truth predicate (or the truth term) in natural languages). The concerns about the truth skeptics or the liar paradox, and about its possible scope applied to formalized or natural languages are beside the point, or at
least are not directly related to the issue. T1 and T2 are, according to my
distinction drawn above, both theories of truth based on the sense of MT. T3
can be regarded as a kind of LT, because the purpose of that theory is not to
define the concept of truth or to find the nature of it, but rather to use some
antecedently understood notion of truth for broader philosophical purposes (for
shedding light on various linguistic phenomena as I see it). Therefore, I
generalize two main things that we may generally expect a theory of truth to
do (corresponding to the distinction between MT and LT): either (i) to find the
nature of the truth and to define the concept, or (ii) to explain how various
language-based phenomena, such as communication, understanding, and
interpretation, are possible.

With this distinction at hand, we can go back and scrutinize again
Williams’s negative answer to the question whether we need a theory of truth.
Assuming a deflationary view of truth, we may agree with the claim that a
theory of truth in the sense of MT is not needed, because this view strongly
opposes the idea that we should think of truth as having a nature; and even if
we could give a “theory” for the concept of truth in that sense, the theory will
still be trivial and non-substantial. I think the fundamental reason for
Williams’s doubt about the need for a theory of truth is his deflationist attitude
toward the concept of truth. In other words, he doesn’t want to see a theory (as
provided by both correspondence and coherence theorists) that would pump
any more content or add any more nature into the concept of truth. But if this
was the only reason, while I might agree that we don’t need a theory of truth in
the sense of MT, I don’t see why we should give up pursuing a theory of truth
in the sense of LT, and in that sense, why we don’t need a theory of truth at all.
To see the significance of this question and the reason why I have my doubt about Williams's conclusion, I want to discuss Davidson’s views on the concept of truth and to see what he has said about the theory of truth. I believe that Davidson’s views can shed a great deal of light on the discussions here. In what follows, I will first briefly present what Davidson’s views are, and then, in light of these views, continue to pursue the answer to the question “Why do we still need a theory of truth?”

**III. Davidson’s Concept of Truth and Theory of Truth**

Over the years, the discussions of what the concept of truth is, and of what a theory of truth can do or ought to be, have always been important in Davidson’s philosophy, but they have been so for different reasons and relative to different questions. At the beginning, when the question was asked about what the meaning (or the nature) of meaning is or what a theory of meaning is supposed to do, the concept of truth was central and fundamental because the Tarski-style theory of truth had to be implemented in order to accomplish Davidson’s ingenious design for constructing his theory of meaning. Then, when the question was directly related to the concern with respect to what a theory of truth ought to be, or what on earth Tarski’s theory of truth amounts to, Davidson argued for that we should reject attempts to provide a “right” or “substantial” theory for the concept of truth, or to offer a correct characterization of Tarski’s view about truth. Finally, the concept of truth itself became one of Davidson’s two most central interests (the other one was “objectivity”), because he was aware of the fact that Tarski’s style truth
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definitions or theories didn’t really exhaust the content of the concept of truth, and he wanted to answer the question as to whether truth is a goal of inquiry.

In order to understand and evaluate Davidson’s views on the concept of truth and the theory of truth more precisely, it may be useful to summarize various views concerning the concept of truth and the theory of truth held by Davidson. Those views will be sorted by appeal to my distinction between MT and LT. As we shall see, Davidson’s claims regarding MT are all negative, while his claims concerning LT are more positive and show more interesting views about the concept of truth and approach toward the theory of truth.

[Davidson’s Metaphysical Claims about the Theories of Truth]

(M1) Correspondence theories of truth are empty as definitions, and the concept of truth is not “radically non-epistemic”; but these theories do capture the general intuition that truth depends on how the world is.

(M2) Coherence and pragmatic theories of truth are mistaken in concluding that reality and truth are merely constructs of thought, and the concepts of truth is not “radically epistemic”; but these theories have the merits of relating the concept of truth to human concerns, like language, belief, thought and intentional action, and it is these connections which make truth the key to how mind apprehends the world.

(M3) A deflationary attitude to, or a disquotational view of, the concept of truth is not encouraged by reflection on Tarski’s work, and the prospects for a deflationary or a minimalist theory of truth are dim.
But Davidson is sympathetic with the deflationists because the attempts to pump more content into the concept of truth are not appealing for the most part their views can only serve negatively as avoiding well-marked dead ends and recognizable pitfalls.

(M4) The concept of truth is not definable, for it cannot be reduced to other concepts that are simpler, clearer, and more basic. The concept of truth may not be a goal of inquiry if it is to find substantiating evidence for our beliefs or to identify some entities for the concept to represent for or correspond to.

[Davidson’s Linguistic Claims about the Theories of Truth]

(L1) Truth, if it operates as a truth-functional connective, has its rhetoric function in conversation but is cognitively redundant.

(L2) The concept of truth is essential and central in the understanding of language. Without a grasp of the concept of truth, not only language, but thought itself, is impossible.

(L3) The concept of truth has a close connection with meaning. To some extent, meaning is dependent on truth.

(L4) The concept of truth is important for determining the contents of our beliefs and utterances. The content of truth can be brought out only by relating the concept to our speech, belief and the evaluative attitudes.

Claims (M1), (M2) and (M3) have appeared in several of Davidson’s articles and strongly suggest that Davidson does not side with any contemporary philosophical attempts to define the concept of truth. Those
attempts include correspondence theories of truth (or the “objective” theories so called by Davidson\(^4\)), coherence theories and pragmatic theories of truth that in one way or another make truth an epistemic concept (or the “subjective” theories), and minimalist or deflationary theories of truth—or as I prefer to call them, realist theories (the objective views), conceptualist theories (the subjective views) and nominalist theories (the deflationary views) about truth.

Realism about truth has its focus on ontology, because it tries to define truth in terms of some objective entities to which the truth bearers can correspond. However the focus turns out to be the fatal wound for the theory itself. It has always been challenged that the realists fail to individuate, identify, or locate the fact or part of reality, or of the world, to which a true sentence corresponds. Conceptualism about truth has its worries focused on epistemology, and concentrates on connecting truth to human thoughts, beliefs, desires, and intentions. While conceptualism tries to reduce truth to various epistemic concepts—justification, warranted assertability and idealized justified assertability, it cannot avoid the problem that even a set of coherent beliefs or ideally justified beliefs could end up being a massive error. We seem to have the obvious reason to believe that a theory of truth is not a theory of justification. Indeed the concept of truth may not be epistemic at all.\(^5\) Realists about truth hold on to their ontological commitment, and tie the concept of truth directly to the entities located in the objective reality. Conceptualists

\(^4\) For the discussions of, and the distinction between, objective and subjective views on truth, see Davidson’s “Epistemology and Truth”.

\(^5\) Davidson has also said, “coherence definitions or ‘theories’ have their attractions, but only as epistemic theories, and not as accounting for truth” (Davidson, 2000: 67).
about truth busy themselves weaving their epistemological web, and tie the concept of truth directly to the conceptual roles played in the web.

Nominalism about truth is mainly concerned with linguistic usage and logical notions. It wishes to explain the role of truth in linguistic acts like assenting to a proposition and in logical functions like a device of generalization. Nominalists, however, deny that there is anything more to truth than what is involved in the linguistic use or the logical function of the predicate “true”. Nominalism about truth seems to be a natural result of, first, dissatisfaction with realistic views and conceptualistic views of truth, and second, the inspiration provided by the formal correctness of Tarski’s theory of truth. The proponents of nominalism draw back from the unfruitful discussions of truth common to objective/subjective, realist/antirealist, and ontological/epistemic debates, and made the concept of truth a relatively trivial concept with no important connections with reality or any epistemic concept. In the meantime, they argue that the notion of truth in a given language seems to be completely captured by the so-called trivial truth definition or the “schema” involved in Tarski’s theory:

\[(T) \text{“p” is true if and only if } p\]

for each sentence “p” expressible in the language. With this recognition, nominalists make their first move to the redundant theory, and claim that the concept of truth is redundant because the occurrence of “true” in any instance of the schema (T) (or just a T-sentence) — say, “snow is white” is true if and only if snow is white — plays only a redundant role as part of a truth-functional connective. But soon they realize that “true” can and does play a
small role in our language; it has function in our ordinary talk. At least, to say of “snow is white” that it is true amounts to assenting to the sentence itself (that is, to the sentence “snow is white”). The function “true” plays in the T-sentence is disquotational because “true” can be attributed to a sentence “p” and this cancels the quotation out and brings us back to p itself. This is the nominalists’ second move on the way to the disquotational theory. But this move still doesn’t carry nominalism very far, for as some defenders of this view also know, it cannot be the whole story about how the word “true” is employed in our language. Paul Horwich, for example, presses the utility of the truth-predicate a step further, and sees the role of the truth-predicate as a device of generalization. But he still minimizes the meaning of the word “true” as merely consisting in the fact that “our overall use of it stems from our inclination to accept instances of the ‘equivalence schema’: the proposition u (that p) is true if and only if p” ([26], p.20).

The whole nominalistic move regarding truth is at best negative and partial. It is negative because while it limits the content of the concept of truth within the linguistic uses and avoids well-marked ontological and epistemological dead ends, it also disconnects, and isolates, the concept of truth from other close related concepts like beliefs, meaning, reality, and objectivity, thereby depriving truth of its vital and essential role in our intuition about the concept of truth and our understanding of ordinary language. It is partial because (as we will see) it cannot comprehend the complete crux of the T-sentence or the equivalence schema mostly mentioned and approved by itself, and so cannot grasp the full-blooded content of the concept of truth. But what is the main crux of T-sentences? How can we completely grasp the
general concept of truth? Or can we really grasp it after all? Are all prospects for pursuing the concept of truth negative? If not, what are some positive prospects for truth?

Claims (M1), (M2) and (M3) naturally lead us to Davidson’s negative conclusion made in claim (M4) that the concept of truth is indefinable. Davidson asks: “If all definitions of the general concept [of truth] fail, and none of the short paraphrases seem come close to capturing what is important or interesting about the concept, why do some of us persist in thinking it is interesting and important?” (Davidson, 2000: 70) And we have seen that what distinguishes much of the contemporary philosophical discussion of truth is that though there are many such formulas offered by realists, conceptualists and nominalists,6 none of them seem satisfying. Many philosophers have also maintained or tried to prove that truth is an indefinable concept.7 This idea that truth is indefinable has its root more firmly in the view that truth is a simple and basic concept. Sometimes, it is held that complex concepts are definable in terms of simple concepts, which are indefinable. We can use basic concepts to analyze other concepts, but they are too fundamental to be analyzed themselves. We cannot hope to underpin clear concepts with something more transparent or easier to grasp. If we have this kind of reductive definition in mind, and if we observe that the concept of truth has always been taken for granted as our starting point in the understanding of

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6 Davidson sees all of them as, if not attempts at definitions in the strict sense, attempts at substitutes for definitions. And in the case of truth, Davidson maintains that there is no short substitute. See this claim in Davidson, 1996: 276.

7 For example, G. E. Moore, Bertrand Russell, Gottlob Frege, and maybe Alfred Tarski, too.
other concepts, then we should accept the fact that whatever it is that makes this concept of truth so fundamental must also foreclose on the possibility of defining it. And if the goal of pursuing the concept of truth is to reach deeper into the bedrock of our conceptual systems or knowledge, then this goal will be unattainable and the pursuit a hopeless enterprise.

With all these negative trains of thought about truth in Davidson’s works, does it mean that truth just isn’t a goal Davidson thinks we should pursue? In an article titled “The Folly of Trying to Define Truth”, Davidson claims, as is suggested by the title, that truth is an indefinable concept. But then he continues to express his attitude toward the pursuit of truth as follows: “This [claim] does not mean we can say nothing revealing about it…Nor does the indefinability of truth imply that the concept is mysterious, ambiguous, or untrustworthy.” (Davidson, 1996: 265) And in a more recent paper titled “Truth Rehabilitated”, Davidson even attempts to explain, as is again suggested by his title, why the concept of truth should be restored to its key role in our understanding of the world and of the minds of agents. What is the key role the concept of truth plays in the whole business here? What are some positive themes Davidson can contribute to the issues regarding truth? In the reminder of this essay, I will discuss what we can learn about truth from the kind of truth theory Tarski provided.

What is the main crux of T-sentences? This is a question we raised earlier and it still remains unanswered. Almost everyone would agree that it is trivial to say “snow is white” is true if and only if snow is white, and many other T-sentences as well. But what does the triviality of T-sentences convey or suggest to us? Nominalists about truth get their deflationary views by
transforming the triviality of T-sentences into the triviality of the predication of “being true”, and so truth as a concept becomes totally trivial for them. This way of looking at T-sentences is, as I claimed early, only partial and one-sided. Nominalists only see that the left-hand side (“snow is white” is true) of the equivalence in the T-sentence can be reduced to the right-hand side (snow is white) of it, and so focus on the fact that the role the concept of truth plays in this direction is either disquotational or redundant, because whatever the concept of truth can do (in the case that “snow is white” is true) can be substituted by the simple assent to the sentence itself (that is, snow is white). But they fail to see the other direction, and in particular the fact that the triviality of T-sentences also reveals the indispensability of the predication of “being true”. The reason is simple. If the left-hand side of equivalence can be reduced to the right-hand side, then the right-hand side of equivalence can be reduced to the left-hand side too. The reduction in this direction shows that to assent to a sentence (that is, snow is white), we must be equipped with the concept of truth to attribute to the sentence itself (just in the case that “snow is white” is true). To make this point explicit, I would like to introduce a passage, in two parts, from Frege’s work (Frege, 1918: 328):

[Part 1]:

It may nevertheless be thought that we cannot recognize a property of a thing without at the same time realizing the thought that this thing has this property to be true. So with every property of a thing is joined a property of a thought, namely, that of truth.
It is also worthy of notice that the sentence “I smell the scent of violets” has just the same content as the sentence “it is true that I smell the scent of violets”. So it seems, then, that nothing is added to the thought by my ascribing to it the property of truth.

Part two of the passage tells a similar story to that of every nominalist. Seeing T-sentences from one direction, the concept of truth adds nothing more to our thought at all. But the formulation “it is true that I smell the scent of violets” seems to regard the concept of truth as something more like a logical operator rather than a genuine property. With respect to this way of reading T-sentences, I don’t think Davidson has any objection to it. If we look back to the positive themes I summarize above, the theme (L1) just is a claim that truth as a truth-functional connective is cognitively redundant. But Davidson is also willing to accept the concept of truth as a genuine property—a property that can be predicated of some beliefs or utterances.

Is the concept of truth as a genuine property really redundant? Part one of the passage denies that. Part one shows the other direction of reading the T-sentence and expresses the idea that the concept of truth is somehow presupposed and essential whenever we say or think that anything has any property whatsoever. Whenever we say or think that something has a certain property, for example, snow has the property of whiteness, Frege believes we are, in effect, saying or thinking that a certain thought is true—namely, the thought that snow does have the property of whiteness. So, whenever we say...
or think anything, we must have already been equipped with or implicitly invoked the concept of truth. This passage vindicates what I mean by saying the indispensability of the concept of truth. It is indispensable because if we are able to assent to a sentence (namely predicate some property of something), we have to previously grasp the concept of truth in accepting that sentence as true. Davidson’s positive view about truth in the theme (L2) is another vindication for seeing the triviality of T-sentences as serving to reveal the indispensability of truth. Davidson’s themes (L1) and (L2) perfectly represent both ways of focusing on the left-hand side and right-hand side of the equivalence in the T-sentences.

There is another interesting observation made by Davidson himself about the triviality of T-sentences. This observation is about the truth of T-sentences themselves rather than the concept of truth occurring within the formulations of T-sentence, and it will lead us again to the indispensability of truth. Davidson points out:

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\text{The triviality of T-sentences is a guarantee of their truth, and this guarantee is passed on by Tarski’s work to the ‘partial definitions’ of truth he provides. T-sentences are trivially true only if we know that the sentence described is identical with, or a translation of, the sentence that gives its truth conditions; but this is enough to display the sense in which we have a firm grasp of the general concept of truth. (Davidson, 1988: 179)}
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As most of people have realized, no definition in Tarski’s style is a definition of truth; each such definition involved in a T-sentence is a partial definition of
truth for a particular language. This is why Davidson prefers to formulate T-schema as

“p” is true-in-L if and only if p (where L is any particular language for which the truth theory is given)

rather than do it the original way. Tarski’s condition on satisfactory definitions of truth in L rests on the recognition that T-sentences are obviously true, and this recognition depends on our prior understanding of the more general concept of truth. Now if we are asked what this more general concept of truth is or what theory we could have for giving the truth condition of those T-sentences themselves, the only formally correct truth theory or truth definition seems to be a theory or definition that can formulate another T*-schema for all T-sentences, which says:

“T-sentence” is true-in-M if and only if T-sentence (where M is the meta-language in which the truth theory for L is given).

If we are asked the same question again regarding the truth of T*-sentences, we know we are forced into an infinite regress. The same result can be applied to the earlier point that whenever we say or think that something has a certain property, we are, in effect, saying or thinking that a certain thought (T’) is true. Whenever we say or think that T’ is true, it is just like we are saying or thinking that (T’) has a certain property (the property of being true), and therefore we are, in effect, saying or thinking another thought (T”, that is, “T’ has the property of being true”) is true. And T” has the property of being true if and only if the thought “T” has the property of being
true” is true, and so on. Again this will lead us into an infinite regress. Will this infinite regress cause any problem for the concept of truth? I see no harm in this infinite regress; in fact it adds more strength to the idea that the concept of truth is ultimately indispensable. Every time we go a step further in asking for the general truth about the truth itself, we get a firmer idea that we must have a grasp of the general concept of truth already in the pursuit of truth. We couldn’t appeal to or arrive at any other concept which is more general or fundamental than the concept of truth itself. The result reinforces the indefinability of truth, on the one hand, and the indispensability of truth, on the other. We should remember what Davidson says at the end of his article, “Epistemology and Truth”: “If we want to speak the truth about truth, we should say no more than need be.” (Davidson, 1988: 191) Have we said everything that need be said about the concept of truth? If not, what more need be?

IV. Why Do We Need a Theory of Truth?

We may still hope that a theory of truth can tell us something about the concept of truth. But can a theory of truth really provide what we need? It depends on what we want to know from the theory. Do we want a theory of truth in the sense of MT or the sense of LT? Recall that the original project Davidson had in mind was to construct a theory of meaning that incorporated Tarski’s theory of truth and modified it to fit our natural languages. But neither Tarski’s theory of truth nor Davidson’s modified theory of truth provided any strict definition for the substantial concept of truth itself. As noted above,
Tarski was not trying to define the concept of truth, but was employing that concept to characterize the semantic structure of specific languages. The so-called truth definition in his theory, if it could be called a definition, is only a definition of a truth predicate for each of a number of well-behaved languages. The truth definition in a Tarskian theory presupposes that we have a prior grasp of the concept of truth, that is, a prior grasp of the triviality of T-sentences. Davidson’s modified theory of truth, on the other hand, makes use of the formal structure that went into Tarski’s definitions and tries to modify and implement this structure or pattern into our ordinary natural languages. Davidson’s project is to seek a theory that would explain how we can grasp the meaning of the utterances on the occasion of communication, a theory that would provide an interpretation of all the utterances of a speaker, and that would show how knowledge of this theory will suffice to understand the utterances. The whole project was directed towards the construction of a satisfactory theory of meaning that would be able to do these jobs. And Davidson apparently thought that a theory of truth in Tarski’s style is the most ideal form for building up to such a theory. However, what has been accomplished by Davidson’s project has a great deal to do with the issue concerning what a theory of meaning can do, but not much to do with the concept of truth itself, because from the very beginning the concept of truth was taken to be primitive in order to shed light on the concept of meaning. Ironically, this turns out to be one of a few positive things we can know about the concept of truth, as the theme (L3) held by Davidson has claimed: the concept of truth has its connection with meaning, and to some extent, meaning is dependent on truth. This project gives little explanation, or no explanation at
all, of “the general concept of truth”.

Davidson more than once suggests that we should think of a theory of truth for a speaker in the same way we think of a theory of rational decision as developed by Ramsey’s version of Bayesian decision theory. Does this suggestion give us another hope for looking at the theory of truth from a new perspective? Yes and no! The answer is “yes” because Davidson’s intention here is to extend his original project (the project that constructs a satisfactory theory of meaning based on the formal structure modified from the theory of truth in Tarski’s style) to a new plan that would embed a theory of truth in a larger theory that includes more propositional attitudes: belief, desire, intention, meaning. As affirmed by the claim (L4), the genuine significance of truth can only be brought out by relating it to speech, belief and the evaluative attitudes. For Davidson, we are interested in the concept of truth only because there are actual objects and states of the world to which to apply it: utterances, states of belief, inscriptions. If we did not understand what it was for such entities to be true, we would not be able to determine the contents of these states, objects, and events. So, the plan that connects truth with those linguistic phenomena and human actions seems to try to assign contents to all the attitudes based on a prior grasp of truth. Does the theory of truth introduced in this new plan tell us anything about the general concept of truth? The answer will be “no” in this respect! That is, the theory of truth dealt by Davidson here is not a theory of truth in the sense of ML.

So, do we need a theory of truth? What is a theory of truth really a theory of? Is it really a theory of the general concept of “truth” per se? If Davidson is right, the question concerning a theory of truth should not be asked in this way.
The question should be oriented in another direction, as the question: what is a theory of truth really *a theory for*? If my understanding of Davidson’s view is correct, maybe we just don’t need a theory of truth at all—if what we ask for from a theory of truth is a definition or clear formulation of the general concept of truth. From a Davidsonian point of view, we don’t need any theory of truth either in the sense of T1 or in the sense of T2. But why does Davidson constantly use the theory of truth as if it could really reveal something truth about the concept of truth? The answer lies in Davidson’s own words:

1. “One effect of these reflections is to focus on the centrality of the concept of truth in the understanding of language; it is our grasp of this concept that permits us to make sense of the question whether a theory of truth for a language is correct. There is no reason to look for a prior, or independent, account of some referential relation.” (Davidson, 1990: 300)

2. “Truth is important, then, not because it is especially valuable or useful, though of course it may be on occasion, but because without the idea of truth we would not be thinking creatures, nor would we understand what it is for someone else to be a thinking creature. It is one thing to try to define the concept of truth, or capture its essence in a pithy summary phrase; it is another to trace its connections with other concepts.” (Davidson, 2000: 72-73)

3. “A theory of truth for a speaker, or group of speakers, while not a definition of the general concept of truth, does give a firm sense of what the concept is good for; it allows us to say, in a compact and clear way, what someone who understands that speaker, or those
speakers, knows. Such a theory also invites the question how an interpreter could confirm its truth—a question which without the theory could not be articulated.” (Davidson, 1983: 156)

Passages (1) and (2) tell us again how important and central the concept of truth is for the understanding of language and for being a thinking creature, but also that the concept of truth is fundamental and indefinable because whether a theory of truth is correct for a language already presupposes the pre-analytical concept of truth. It follows that a theory of truth in the sense of MT is either empty or trivial, and hence unacceptable. However, as (3) suggests, we may still want a theory of truth for a speaker or a group of speakers to see what the concept of truth is good for. At least, a theory of truth, as understood by Davidson on the basis of his modification of Tarski’s theory into a workable theory—serves to explicate the concepts of meaning, interpretation, and understanding, and even has a central role a more inclusive theory accommodating various prepositional attitudes and revealing the close relationship between the concept of truth and such attitudes. Such a theory is clearly philosophically significant and well serves its philosophical purposes. So, from a Davidsonian point of view, we do need a theory of truth, at least in the sense of LT.
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1-70.


Why Do We Need a Theory of Truth?*

未建國**

摘要

對於「什麼是真理」與「什麼是真理理論或真理理論的哲學意涵」的討論，一直是戴維森哲學中的重要主題，但在過去將近四十年的過程中，這些討論是隨著不同的問題背景而出現的。一開始當問及「什麼是意義的基本」和「一個意義理論究竟能做什麼」的問題時，「真理」被視為一個最基礎與原初的概念，因為戴維森巧妙的運用了塔斯基的真理理論，做為建構他自己的意義理論的基本架構。接下來當問題直接關連到「一個真理理論應該是什麼」和「究竟塔斯基的真理理論意味著什麼」時，戴維森表達並論證為什麼他拒絕接受一些真理理論（包括符應理論、實用理論）的理由，並反駁一般對於塔斯基的真理理論所做的不當詮釋。最後，「真理」概念本身已成為戴維森最有興趣的兩個關鍵問題之一（另一個是「客觀性」概念），其理由在於戴維森深知像塔斯基般的真理定義或分析並不能窮盡「真理」概念的內容，而戴維森也很想回答究竟「真理」概念是不是一個哲學上值得研究追尋的目標。

從一個戴維森式的觀點來看，與其詰問意義理論是一個針對什麼概念

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而發的理論，還不如詢問一個意義理論可以用來做什麼；同樣的道理，與其詢問真理理論是一個針對什麼概念而發的理論，還不如詢問一個真理理論可以用來做什麼。戴維森的意義理論並不是一個用來定義「意義」概念的理論，一個戴維森式的真理理論也不是一個用來定義「真理」概念的理論。「真理」概念是十分根本與核心的概念，它是無法被定義的，也不能被還原到其他更清楚與更基本的概念上。戴維森的論證顯示出：符應理論、融貫理論與實用理論的錯誤都在於輸入了太多不必要的內容於「真理」概念之中，而壓縮理論則忽略與低估了「真理」概念在語言的瞭解中之重要角色。如果誠如戴維森所言，「企圖去定義真理概念是一件愚蠢的事情」，那麼，為什麼我們還需要一個真理理論呢？我所要論證的是：我們也許不需要一個實質上在形上學�遷次為「真理」概念提供定義的真理理論，但我們確實需要一個語言學層次上的「真理理論」用來闡釋「意義」的概念，並彰顯「真理」與「信念」或其他有關意向性態度之間的緊密關連。這個哲學上深具意義的真理理論，一方面可以從類似像塔斯基般的真理理論中推演出來，另一方面也可以透過一種相近於理性決策理論之方式予以建構出來。

關鍵字：真理理論、真理、戴維森、塔斯基