

Introduction:  
To the *Oxford Handbook of Truth*

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Editor

Readers hold before them a volume under the title ‘Handbook of Truth’. A title like this suggests something very demanding: a book to keep at hand in which to find truths. Such a book would be useful indeed! But we might imagine it to be so long as to be unwieldy. After all, such a book would in effect have to list all truths, or at least enough of them to be worthy of the title ‘handbook’.

But there is no such book, and I doubt there could ever be one. For all the folly involved in editing a large handbook, I certainly did not set out to edit *that* book. But care about wording reminds us the book that does not exist would have been better called the *Handbook of Truths*. The book presented here is rather a *Handbook of Truth*. Its topic is not all truths, enumerated for convenient use, but simply truth.

In some ways, the topic that this Handbook is easy state. Truth is a property, that has been of great interest to philosophy and beyond for about as long as we have a history for philosophy. It is a topic of active research in many branches of philosophy, notably metaphysics and logic, among others. That property is the topic of this Handbook. Essays in this volume will explore the basic nature of the property of truth, i.e. its underlying metaphysical and logical properties. Others explore its role in such areas as ethics and science and mathematics, and so on. They do so from a number of perspectives, both historical and systematic. They use various techniques and approaches, from metaphysics, ethics, philosophy of science, logic, and many others.

Experts will recognize, of course, that most any claim about truth is controversial, including ones I presupposed in stating the topic of this Handbook. Whether truth is really a substantial property with any underlying

metaphysics, whether there are interesting logical questions about truth, and so on, are all points that have been challenged over the years. I am reminded of the way J. L. Austin started his classic paper “Truth:”<sup>1</sup>

“What is truth?” said jesting Pilate, and would not stay for an answer. Pilate was in advance of his time. For “truth” itself is an abstract noun, a camel, that is, of a logical construction, which cannot get past the eye even of a grammarian. We approach it cap and categories in hand: we ask ourselves whether Truth is a substance (the Truth, the Body of Knowledge), or a quality (something like the colour red, inhering in truths), or a relation (“correspondence”). But philosophers should take something more nearly their own size to strain at. What needs discussing rather is the use, or certain uses, of the word “true.” *In vino*, possibly, “*veritas*,” but in sober symposium “*verum*.”

Philosophers have indeed approached truth with categories, and maybe caps, in hand (its status as a camel I shall not guess at); and indeed some philosophers have seen some questions about the nature of truth to be too much to strain at, and have urged us to cut them down to a smaller size.

A Handbook of truth seeks to review these many sorts of issues about truth itself: what, if any, metaphysical or logical nature the property of truth has, what its connections with other areas of inquiry might be, how it has been addressed over the years, and what theories have been developed. All of these topics are represented in this Handbook. I shall not try to summarize each essay the Handbook offers. Instead, I shall offer an overview of the themes this Handbook addresses, and how the essays in it contribute to them.

## 1 Historical Themes

The study of truth is old. How old is hard to say, but we know the presocratics had a great deal to say about truth (as even casual readers of Plato will see). So it is old indeed, and for all we know, may have started with the dawn of philosophical thinking. It is inviting to speculate about how thinking about

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<sup>1</sup>J. L. Austin, “Truth,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes* 24, 1950, pp. 111–128.

core philosophical topics like the nature of truth arose so long ago, but we do at least have some evidence that they did.

From as far back as we have records, truth has from time to time been a topic of intense philosophical investigation. Important thinking about truth occurred in the medieval period, for instance. Metaphysics and logic were both lively topics in that time, and the study of truth flourished. In a somewhat different way, it also flourished in the post-Kantian period, though with concerns about idealism more in the forefront than logic. Not every historical period has seen truth as a primary philosophical subject, however. It is often said that the early modern period did not focus much on the theory of truth, as epistemology was of paramount concern.

This Handbook offers a few samplings of these historical issues, though a detailed study of all of them is beyond what any one volume can do. There are two sections devoted specifically to the history of the study of truth; though of course, many of the essays in the volume address historical issues. One section, entitled ‘Ancient and Modern Theories of Truth’, addresses the earlier history. An essay here reviews central ideas of Plato and Aristotle on truth, which will give readers an introduction to how truth was approached in the ancient period. Some of the many topics in medieval theories of truth are also surveyed, along with some of their metaphysical, epistemological, and theological implications. The early modern period is also reviewed, and you will find that the common view that there is little said about truth in the early modern period is not the full story. Some themes in the discussion of truth in the post-Kantian period are also explored, with an emphasis on their connection to idealism. These samplings will, I hope, give readers an overview of some of the fascinating issues in the history of the study of truth, and some insight into some of the important moments in that history.

The next section, ‘Truth in Early Analytic Philosophy’, delves more deeply into one historical period where truth was an extremely active subject: the beginnings of what is often called ‘analytic philosophy’. This period, around the dawn of the 20th century, sees important work of the founding figures of the analytic tradition, such as Russell, Moore, Frege, Wittgenstein, and Ramsey, and of course their opponents in the British idealist tradition such as Bradley. Truth is crucial to the disagreement between Bradley, espousing a form of idealist monism, and Russell and Moore, who espouse a sequence of distinct views of truth, facts, and related issues in rejecting this idealist tradition. One essay in this section explores the dispute between Bradley and Russell and Moore, while another explores the many ideas about

truth, facts, and propositions that especially animated the early work of Russell, followed by Wittgenstein and Ramsey. Frege's work is also central to the origins of the analytic tradition, though he worked somewhat outside the British tradition steeped in the distinctive form of idealism current there at the end of the 19th century. A mathematician by training, he was certainly familiar with the post-Kantian tradition that dominated German philosophy, but approached many philosophical issues in a novel way. Frege's views on truth have been both influential and controversial. They are discussed in the final essay of this section.

## **2 Classical Theories**

The emergence of analytic philosophy at the beginning of the 20th century, and Russell and Moore's turn away from British idealism, also lead to the development of a range of theories of truth that have been important in the ensuing years. Together with theories that emerged from work in the American pragmatist tradition, they offer what I have labeled the 'classical' theories of truth: the identity, correspondence, coherence, and pragmatist theories. These theories have historical roots in the turn of the 20th century, but they have taken on lives of their own, and have become topics in their own rights. Each of these is discussed by a separate essay in the section entitled 'Classical Theories of Truth'. The theories are classical, in that they are starting points for a number of subsequent investigations, and offer an interesting map of the landscape of theories of truth. Of course, such classical theories are often modified over time, and they can be formulated in many ways. The essays in this section review a number of options for formulating the classical theories. In spite of the many changes such theories have undergone, a great deal of thinking in recent years and before has been strongly influenced by them.

## **3 Themes in the Metaphysics and Applications of Truth**

The next sections move away from concerns with the history and the classical theories, to a range of ways to approach truth and the many issues connected closely to truth. One of the closest connections we find is between

truth and many issues in metaphysics. A number of these are reviewed in the next section, entitled ‘Truth in Metaphysics’. As with the historical sections, the range of issues and theories that have been discussed over the years connecting truth and metaphysics is huge, and impossible to survey comprehensively. Again, the essays in this section offer some samplings of important issues, theories, and techniques for exploring the metaphysics of truth. Several explore the apparatus we need to describe truth, or some of its main metaphysical consequences. The property of truth applies to something, and there is a rich tradition of thinking these truth bearers—often identified as propositions—are an important area of study in their own right. Likewise, in metaphysics, there has been a lively discussion of what are called ‘truthmakers’: usually (thick) particulars that can witness the truth of propositions. Truthmakers play a special role in certain metaphysical theories, though they obviously are of interest to the theory of truth itself. Both these topics are explored in essays in this section.

When we come to consequences of the theory of truth, one important set of issues surrounds objectivity, determinacy, and related matters. These have been of special importance to many discussions of truth since the 1950s, though of course, they were also of interest to Aristotle, and are perennial topics of philosophical concern. Two essays provide samplings of these issues. One explores the relation of truth to realism and objectivity, focusing on the discussion beginning in the 1950s following important work of Michael Dummett. The other takes up a range of questions about how we might understand determinism, and its relation to truth. All these issues relate closely to issues in logic, as was made clear by developments in intuitionistic logic. A logical approach to them is presented in one of the essays of this section.

One of the most striking more recent developments in the metaphysics of truth is a more ‘deflationary’ view of the property of truth itself. All the classical theories see truth as a substantial property of some kind, though they differ widely on just what kind, and how much it is a metaphysical, epistemological, or practical property. In contrast, many recent approaches doubt truth is so substantial. These doubts have taken many forms over the years. Two essays provide samplings of how such doubts may be formulated, and what kinds of theories may result from them. One takes up the much-discussed theme of deflationism about truth, that offers a view that truth is not the metaphysically or epistemologically substantial concept we might have expected. A parallel thought in recent years has been that many meta-

physically problematic areas are really more like fictions. How this might be applied to theories of truth is explored in another essay in this section.

Another important question, that has been of perennial interest but a focus of research recently, is that of whether we can make sense of truth as a relative property. Such a relativist property of truth might, for instance, make something true for you or true for me, rather than just true. Recent ideas about relative truth are explored in one of the essays in this section., is explored in a separate essay. Finally, a topic that has emerged in recent years pertains to whether there is a single notion of truth, or whether there are distinct properties that apply to different domains. Perhaps moral truth is a different property from logical truth, to illustrate. If so, what are those properties, and what makes them all really properties of truth? This last topic concludes the section on Truth in Metaphysics.

Truth connects to a very wide range of issues. Many of them relate to other areas of inquiry that have been of special concern to philosophy. Often these questions can be put succinctly in terms of truth. Is some area of inquiry, like say ethics, directed towards truth, or are the statement of such an area true or false? Such questions are not restricted to ethics, of course. Philosophers have raised them frequently about mathematics. Perhaps asking the questions in just that form about science could have the ring of skepticism. But there are many non-skeptical questions to ask about where and how science works towards truth, and what to make of well-confirmed statements of science which we know could be revised as our knowledge grows. Such statements would, in such a case, not be true, but would stand in an important relation to truth. The section entitled ‘Other Applications’ offers some samplings of the many issues that have been explored related to questions like this. One essay examines the much-discussed question of what truthlikeness might be, and how it relates to truth. The general questions of the nature of truth in science, along with ethics and mathematics, are taken up by individual essays.

## 4 Logical Themes

The final section of this Handbook is most closely tied to logic. A glance at the historical sections will show that matters of logic and of truth have gone together throughout their history, and were extremely important in the medieval and early analytic periods. They have also been central to an im-

portant strand of contemporary research on theories of truth (one that is near and dear to the heart of the editor of this Handbook). As has been known since ancient times, the Liar paradox makes trouble for what seem to be simple and obvious principles governing reasoning with truth—principles so simple and obvious they are candidates to be logical principles. In light of constructions like ‘This sentence is not true’, those simple and obvious principles threaten to be logically incoherent. The correct principles of reasoning about truth—perhaps the logic of truth—turns out to be a complicated matter because of this. In recent years, it has been a focus for a range of important questions about not just truth, but about logic, and has engaged an important collection of ideas and techniques of modern logic.

The section entitled ‘Formal Theories and Paradox’ offers a sampling of these issues. The nature of the Liar and related paradoxes, and what adequate responses to them might be like, is reviewed, with an eye towards the long rich history of this topic. In current times, much of the work on formal theories of truth and paradox has taken seminal work of Tarski as its starting place (though often to reject Tarski’s conclusions). Tarski’s ideas are explored in a separate essay. The major approaches to truth and paradox in the current literature can be broken down into two main groups. One concludes that the simple principles governing truth are corrected, and so in some ways logic must not be classical in order to retain logical coherence. (This is sometimes, but not always, put in terms of revising classical logic.) Note, a striking claim about the nature of logic is being offered here! The alternative is to retain classical logic, but modify something about the principles governing truth. Much recent work on this approach has been done by developing mathematically rich axiomatic theories of truth; while other work has sought to invoke ideas from the philosophy of language to explain how the principles of reasoning for truth work, and how they can avoid paradox. Again, each of these themes is explored by a separate essay.

## 5 Invitation

As I have mentioned several times, the history of the study of truth is long; the range and variety of issues it relates to, both within and outside of philosophy, is immense; and the problems it raises for metaphysics, logic, and many more areas within philosophy are among the most difficult and persistent ones we know. Truth is a big and hard topic. As I have also mentioned

several times, even a Handbook of the length of this one cannot hope to cover every topic related to truth. I have several times described what this volume offers as samplings. I believe they are good representatives of the range of issues and problems truth presents, and I hope that taken together they offer the reader a good indication of some of the important landmarks in the study of truth. It is easy to list things left out of this Handbook. Some were omitted simply because of the vicissitudes of putting a volume of this length together. Alas, not every entry arrived. But some are missing because editorial decisions had to be made to create a work that could be bound as one volume.

With those apologies, I offer the readers the 29 essays in this volume, the hard work of 36 authors. As a Handbook, I hope it serves as a useful reference for researchers working on truth, or those new to the topic. As an overview of a large and complex topic, I hope it serves as a useful map of difficult but fascinating terrain.