George Englebretsen
Bare Facts and Naked Truths: A New Correspondence Theory of Truth
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REVIEW

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Aristotle famously characterized truth-telling as saying of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not. From this stem grow many branches of the so-called the "correspondence theory of truth." Aristotle also was the first to propose a logic of terms, though he never explicitly married his insight about correspondence with his logic to give what we would today recognize as a semantic account of truth for that logic.

That is what George Englebretsen provides in the book here under review. He defends a version of the correspondence theory of truth which brings the Aristotelian insight about truth into alignment with a powerful and elegant version of terminist logic, one that Englebretsen and the fellow-logician Fred Sommers have been developing over the last forty years.

The third chapter of this book presents briefly the formalities of the new terminist logic. Englebretsen provides sufficient detail about the functioning of the logic of terms to give readers a glimpse of how it models the inference patterns of ordinary language on the one hand, and is conformable to the theory of truth here developed on the other. Only just sufficient. But his minimalism is probably a virtue, since a longer presentation would have distracted him from the main project of presenting his spirited defence of the correspondence theory of truth. In any case detailed developments of the logic are readily available elsewhere.[1]

The main thrust of this book is philosophical. Its goal is "to provide a sound version of the correspondence theory of truth" (p. 5). As the

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[1]*E.g.*, George Englebretsen, *Something to Reckon With*, University of Ottawa Press: Ottawa, 1996; Fred Sommers and George Englebretsen, *An Invitation to Formal Reasoning: The Logic of Terms*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000.

name "correspondence theory" implies, one of its prerequisites is that there be something to which true propositions correspond. In other words, truths need something that makes them true.

Traditionally, most philosophers have followed Aristotle and ordinary language in considering the truth-makers to be "facts." True propositions, we say, "fit the facts.". While there may be no objection to speaking that way about facts in non-technical contexts, a considerable number of recent philosophers take a dim view of any theory of truth that commits itself to the existence of facts. Such philosophers argue either that "truth-makers" are unnecessary in a rigorous theory of truth or that something other than facts can do the job. Englebretsen not only defends facts in general and their use as truth-makers in logic, but also defends the advantages of his own account of them over the versions of other logicians who accept them.

To take one example, Englebretsen recalls the well-known reply of Peter Strawson by which he is usually thought to have devastated J. L. Austin's attempt to prop up the idea of facts as truth- makers. Strawson, accused Austin of talking "as if 'fact' were just a very general word (with some misleading features) for 'event,' 'thing,' *etc.*, instead of being (as it is) both wholly different from these, and yet the only possible candidate for the desired nonlinguistic correlate of 'statement'."[2] Englebretsen concedes Strawson's point th

Englebretsen concedes Strawson's point tha t facts cannot simultaneously be both truth-makers and things in the world. But he disputes Strawson's view that a correspondence theory requires facts to be both. According to Englebretsen facts can be understood as truth-makers, without being constituents of the world. Instead they are what he will call "constitutive properties" of the world.

> "Facts are not constituents of the world," Englebretsen writes. "[T]hey are not *in* the world. The fact that makes it true that Socrates is wise is not to be found in the world; what is in the world is a wise Socrates. It is his presence in the world that is a fact, and his presence is a constitutive property of the world (in the way that the presence in my soup of salt is a property of the soup – not of the salt)."[3]

In addition to his discussion of the old Strawson-Austin debate, Englebretsen devotes considerable attention in chapters 1, 2, 4, and 5 to

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[2] P.F. Strawson, "Truth" in *Truth*, ed. George Pitcher, Englewood Cliffs N.J., Prentice Hall, 1964, p. 37; quoted in Englebretsen, *Bare Facts*, p. 40.

[3] *Bare Facts*, p. 105.

Frege, Tarski, Davidson, Dummett, Putnam, and Sommers, and makes illuminating observations about the views of a number of other prominent theorists of truth. His characterizations of antecedent and often opposing theories are concise but fair. Sometimes one might wish for a little more detail but enough is normally said to make the alternative theory under consideration intelligible in itself, while also weaving it into what becomes the context of Englebretsen's own account.

As already mentioned, a secondary motivation of this study is to generate a semantics for a terminist logic. The terminist theory of logical syntax takes every expression to be either a simple term or a compound term. A 'phrase' is a pair of terms (subject and predicate) joined by a logical copula to form a compound term. Thus every statement is both a phrase and a term. The fact that statements may also be treated as terms allows the semantic theory to be stated very elegantly.

A term can have meaning in three different ways. It can *express* a concept (in the case of statements this concept is a proposition); it can *signify* a property; and it can *denote* one or more individuals.

With this understanding of syntax and meaning, the bare bones of Englebretsen's notion of correspondence can be summarized as follows:

> Any sentence is a term (a dyad, a complex term, a sentential term).
> Any term is used relative to a specifiable domain of discourse.
> Any domain is a totality of individuals.
> Any sentence used to express a proposition and to claim truth for it is a statement.
> Any sentence expressing a true proposition is itself true.
> Any sentence expressing a false proposition is itself false.
> Any true proposition corresponds to a fact.
> Any false proposition corresponds to no fact.
> Any true proposition is expressed by a sentence denoting the domain relative to which it is expressed.
> Any false proposition is expressed by a sentence denoting no domain.
> Any fact is a constitutive property of the domain denoted by the sentence expressing it.
> Any property is had by some individual.
> Any individual has some property.
> Any totality has some constituent.
> Any senseless sentence expresses nothing.[4]

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[4]*Bare Facts*, p. 129.

Englebretsen sets out six desiderata for a good theory of truth. It must say 1) what truth is, 2) what the bearers of truth are, 3) what the relation of correspondence is, 4) what the nature of truth makers (facts) is, 5) how to deal with the Liar Paradox. A sixth desideratum for a theory of truth, according to Englebretsen, is that it ought to explain how knowledge of truth is possible given that facts are wholly independent of us.[5]

It is easy to summarize his answer to most of these questions. Truth is correspondence of propositions with facts. Propositions are in the first instance the bearers of truth (and Englebretsen addresses all the standard arguments against them), while statements and sentences are secondary bearers of truth. Facts are *signified* by true statements. True statements do not denote, or refer to facts, much less do they pictorially represent them. They signify facts in the way an address on an envelope may signify a certain house on a certain street. Conventions of language are necessary both for addresses and statements to signify, but they are not sufficient.

The concluding chapter of this book addresses the fifth desideratum and is a *tour de force.* It outlines the Liar Paradox and offers an elegant way of dealing with it based on a distinction (first drawn by J. Srzednicki[6] and elaborated by Fred Sommers[7]) between meta-statements and "comments". A meta-statement is a statement expressing a proposition about a sentence. Examples would be "What he said was in French," or "The first sentence found on p. 42 was ungrammatical." These must be distinguished from "comments" in which a statement expresses a proposition about another proposition. For example, the statements "What he said was true" and "It has long been believed that there is no life on Mars" are comments.

Now every proposition may be considered to have a certain "depth". A proposition that is not a comment let us say has depth 0. A comment then has depth 1. A comment on a comment would have depth 2 and so on.

There are some propositions, however, whose depth cannot be determined. Such, for example, is

   1) This proposition is doubtful.

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[5]*Bare Facts*, p. 5.

[6]J. Srzednicki, "It Is True," *Mind*, **75**, 385-395.

[7]Fred Sommers, "Commenting," Unpublished paper. Presented at University of Ottawa, 28 October, 1994.

At first glance 1) may seem to be saying something strange, but perhaps intelligible or even true. But consider that if we are to understand 1) we must take it as simultaneously making a comment and yet as itself the subject of the comment. That means that, in order to signify anything, 1) must simultaneously have the propositional depth of 0 and 1, which no single proposition can do. The tool of measuring propositional depth thus gives us a way of explaining why self-referential propositions are always confusing. It is because they are *depth-confused*. Self-referential propositions are of indeterminable propositional depth and therefore not capable of having a meaning.

Englebretsen therefore proposes a general "Propositional Depth Requirement" to the effect that "*every meaningful statement must be assumed to have a determinate propositional depth.*"[8] This requirement which is a perfectly general stricture on meaning has a welcome application to propositions that generate liar paradoxes. For example,

> 2) This proposition is false

will come out by the Propositional Depth Requirement as expressively vacuous and therefore as having no assignable truth-value. More generally, liar paradoxes will be or involve sentences that express no proposition and therefore generate no paradox.

Concerning the last desideratum listed above, the question of how knowledge of truth is possible at all given the independence of the facts, Englebretsen says little. But I, at least, do not fault him for this. The mistake was to include this question among those for which a theorist of truth can reasonably be held accountable. What it really asks is why the universe is intelligible to us at all, and that is not so much a philosophical as a theological question, as philosophers like Duns Scotus, William Ockham and Ren'e Descartes recognized.

In response to the five questions which really are germane to his topic Englebretsen provides a vigorously stated and rigorously argued philosophical account of truth. In so doing he performs a laudable service. He pushes back the shadows of postmodernism that for a generation now have encroached on the luminous and simple idea of truths that fit facts.

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[8]*Bare Facts*, p. 158.