

Western University

From the Selected Works of Robert J. Stainton

April, 2009

**An Essay on Names and Truth, by
Wolfram Hinzen**

Ileana Paul, *University of Western Ontario*

Robert J. Stainton, *University of Western Ontario*



is then broadened to 'wide reflective equilibrium': 'A moral conception passes tests of WRE if the conception passes tests of inter-cultural comparison, in particular if it passes tests that seriously consider credible alternative conceptions of the good' (pp. 126 f.). Flanagan proposes that 'It is a necessary condition of *objective flourishing* that the virtues an individual displays, and the norms she avows and abides pass test[s] for wide reflective equilibrium' (p. 126). This requires him to consider inputs concerning the 'good life' from a wide variety of sources, which he proceeds to do. He considers at length Aristotelian and Buddhist lists of virtues, recognizing the differences between them but not trying very hard to resolve those differences. He is fascinated with the 'neuroscience of happiness', in particular with neurological studies of the brains of those adept in Buddhist meditation. He surveys the field of 'happiness studies' with great interest but also with a degree of scepticism. One upshot is that, now as in Aristotle's day, there is broad agreement that the goal is 'happiness' but much disagreement as to what happiness amounts to. He points out the weaknesses of Happiness^{hedonic} and Happiness^{subjective-wellbeing}, and argues for the need to think in terms of Happiness^{eudaimonistic}, which requires a prior normative conception of happiness that does not rely merely on individual subjective assessment. This allows Flanagan to state that a 'greedy entrepreneur' who feels very good about himself and is successful by capitalist societal norms is probably not eudaimon, whereas a person who does not feel very happy or very good about herself but is loving and compassionate even when it does not seem to serve her self-interest is eudaimon. Neither this nor Flanagan's other conclusions are in any way morally shocking; this would hardly be possible, given the broadly consensual methodology that is employed. In fact, it is quite reminiscent of the Golden Rule, Catholicism's 'one good idea'.

Materialists who are optimists about life will love *The Really Hard Problem*; others of us may not love the book, but will nevertheless find much in it to learn from and to ponder.

Department of Philosophy
Huntington College
Huntington, IN 46750
USA

WILLIAM HASKER

doi:10.1093/mind/fzp055

An Essay on Names and Truth, by Wolfram Hinzen. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. Pp. viii + 244.

Wolfram Hinzen's third book addresses the 'sources' of nominal reference and truth, in the light of Chomskian 'biolinguistics' and methodological naturalism in general, and the Minimalist Program in particular. It has both a negative and a positive aim: first, to show that the sources of nominal reference and truth, our human 'sense' of these things, are not to be found by means of

metaphysical attempts to naturalize content; second, to urge instead that empirical investigation will locate said sources in idiosyncratic features of human syntax.

The negative target is relatively familiar. Philosophers have repeatedly addressed the metaphysical question of in-virtue-of-what names refer and sentences can be true/false. As will emerge below, Hinzen is suspicious of the entire enterprise. That aside, he specifically takes aim at recent externalist metasemantic stories, according to which: (i) the world contains non-intentionally specified entities; (ii) these external entities stand in non-intentionally specified relations to non-intentionally specified neural states; and (iii) the various 'naturalized' entities and relations suffice to explain the emergence of reference and truth. Reduced to essentials, Hinzen's objection is that the world to which we humans refer, and about which we make statements, is not that of mind-independent molecules, waves, etc. More than that, the world we think and talk about only exists because of our antecedently contentful mental states. 'It is because we are creatures with a species-specific range of concepts that we can refer to numbers, phrase structures, or moral qualities ... there are no independently specifiable external physical objects that correspond to the referential expressions we use' (p. 21). Or again: 'No creature that lacked concepts of persons and cities would acquire them by standing in relations to external objects characterized in non-intentional terms' (p. 61).

It is not a new idea that the 'life world' (to use our preferred term) is representation-dependent, and hence cannot give rise to representational content. Hinzen's unique twist is to suggest that it is *species-specific syntax* which enriches and structures that 'world', and permits human-style reference and truth. In short, Kant meets Chomsky. (A nice example of this role for syntax appears on p. 68: 'there is absolutely nothing in the external world that distinguishes between mere adjuncts to an event, on the one hand, and event participants, on the other. Any event that is described as a killing of Bill has Bill in it, but no external viewpoint could distinguish between him merely being there (and being killed), and him being a non-dissociable part of the event'.)

While the negative project will be familiar, the positive one is far less so, and merits more explanation. It is crucial to stress immediately that Hinzen criticizes the aforementioned externalist metasemantics not as a preliminary to presenting an alternative metaphysical account of content, but rather as a precursor to a different, broadly scientific undertaking. By his lights, uncovering the 'sources of reference and truth' should be understood as describing the means by which humans refer and make truth judgements. In particular, emphasizing the latter (as we mostly will throughout), it is to uncover the windows through which we 'see' truth(s), that is, 'the structures of human judgements in which truth occurs' (p. 12). For Hinzen, this task is intimately connected to the empirical study of natural language. His working assumption is that 'propositional thought and language are deeply entangled, to the extent even of being non-distinguishable' (p. 7). Hence, to learn about the linguistic

correlates of reference and truth, especially about their formal structure, is *ipso facto* to learn about their 'sources'.

Hinzen's position on this topic is informed by current Chomskian syntax. He urges that, cross-linguistically, there is exactly one hallmark of truth-bearers, namely the Complementizer Phrase (CP). (This is Minimalism's reconstruction of the sentence.) Simplifying for a philosophical readership, a CP consists in: i) something like an atomic bare predication, within a reconceived Verb Phrase; ii) markers of tense and agreement; iii) a (possibly unpronounced) complementizer, such as 'whether' or 'that'. That is:

- (1) [_{CP} Complementizer [_{TP} Tense/Agreement [_{VP} ...]]]

(This suggestion appears at pp. 155 and 175, among other places. It is modified later, at pp. 189–90 and 195, and in a way that is not clearly consistent with what is said earlier. However, because such details are not crucial for most readers of *Mind*, we set them aside.) This structure yields our human 'sense of truth'. Importantly, and echoing Kant, the fact that our judgements are wrought in this way need not lead to relativistic consequences, in so far as this structural lens on truth is universal across humankind (pp. 52–3).

Having described Hinzen's negative and positive projects, we turn now to evaluation.

The book is unclear in a number of ways. Little is done to spell out Minimalism for non-specialists. (Thus it is likely no accident that all three 'jacket blurbs' for the book are by generative linguists, rather than by mainstream philosophers of language.) Nor is the lack of clarity only due to unexplained technical apparatus: even jargon-free descriptions of examples can be opaque. On a related note, the first half of the book contains a wealth of detours and largely orthogonal empirical detail: 'sign posts' that highlighted how these actually contribute to the larger flow of argument would, therefore, have been very welcome. The lack of clarity manifests itself, too, with respect to the book's topic: it is easy and natural to read its critiques as directed at an externalist view about the *nature* of nominal and sentential content, that is, about semantics as opposed to metasemantics. The title suggests this, of course, as does much of the introductory discussion, for example: 'This book specifically aims to reconsider the contemporary debate on the nature of truth by ... internalist lights' (p. 3).

We turn now to matters of substance. The negative half of the book can be frustrating. We are sympathetic to the idea that items of the 'life world' are representation-dependent, and so cannot naturalistically ground reference and truth-conditions. Unfortunately, this does not seem to be Hinzen's only complaint: as noted immediately above, he appears to be rejecting externalism in semantics as well. (Another stylistic failing plays a part here: the paucity of quotations from the philosophers who Hinzen seemingly has in his sights leaves it open as to just what exactly his targets are.) The problem is, nothing about the nature of reference and truth follows from his transcendental idealist reflections: even if yarmulkes, say, only exist because of our mental powers,

including in particular our syntax, there are yarmulkes 'out there'; hence, they can serve as the referents of our word 'yarmulkes'. Similarly, for all Hinzen shows, the truth-maker for 'Sid always wears a yarmulke in his synagogue' can still be the external fact that Sid always wears a yarmulke in his synagogue. (Thus, for instance, Hinzen's suggestion notwithstanding, the correspondence theory of truth is not under threat even if human syntax plays a structuring role in states of affairs.) Hinzen complains that such externalism is not explanatory. But here is a patent fact: we refer seamlessly to yarmulkes with 'yarmulkes'; we have a terrible time referring to puppies thereby. This fact merits explanation. Here is part of it: 'yarmulkes' does not refer to puppies, but instead refers to yarmulkes. Similarly, *mutatis mutandis*, for sentences.

The positive half of *An Essay on Names and Truth* fares better. Simply introducing the topic of 'the sources of reference and truth', considered as an empirical inquiry into the human power to grasp them, is a real contribution. So is Hinzen's proposal that a particular syntactic structure, the Complementizer Phrase, plays a crucial role. In addition, the book contributes substantially to 'the New Philosophy of Language', which lies at the interface of philosophical reflection with cutting-edge empirical research on natural language. We would highlight, in particular, three such contributions: the arguments in chapter two, to the effect that genuinely unstructured concepts must be taken as (metasemantic) primitives; the spelling out, in section 3.3, of Hale and Keyser's idea that lexical analyticities arise out of unpronounced structure; and, most centrally, the very rich discussion, near the end of the book, of generative grammar's 'Small Clause'.

But there are problems of substance with the positive project too. Most importantly, though Hinzen regularly insists upon the empirical character of his investigation, he is cavalier about the facts in two senses: his evidential base is extremely narrow, and he can be sloppy even with respect to that.

Hinzen mostly ignores evidence outside generative linguistics; and, within that framework, he focuses far too heavily on English. He sidesteps the wealth of constructions that appear truth-evaluable without having the requisite syntactic hallmarks, for instance in Hebrew, Malagasy, Russian and Turkish—where there is typically no (overt) copula. Indeed, he does not discuss familiar constructions in English that seem to express truths without tense, agreement, or even a verb: 'Smart woman, your mother', 'The bigger, the better', 'No shirt, no shoes, no service', 'The winner by a nose: Chomsky's Joy', and so on. (Granted, these do not embed under propositional attitude verbs in English. But, unless the fundamental question is begged, that is merely evidence about their syntax, not about whether they encode judgement-worthy contents. Besides, consider constructions like 'Rajni remembered: no shirt, no shoes, no service' and 'Smart woman, your mother. Everyone agrees'.) Finally, Hinzen ignores the role of pragmatics in predicating: specifically, he fails to address arguments to the effect that syntax and linguistically encoded semantics massively underspecify both whether a predication is made at all (cf. subsentential

speech acts) and which particular predication is made (cf. pragmatic determinants of literal speech act content). This narrow purview is crucial because a wider range of data strongly suggests that, like threatening or lying, 'predicating truth' is something that people do. And, barring freely positing syntax on the basis of semantics—or, even worse, on the basis of the content of the speech act performed—it appears that people can do it linguistically in a wide variety of ways.

Turning to sloppiness, the evidence Hinzen does present from the syntax of English is not always portrayed correctly or carefully. Although space disallows detailed exegesis, some of the derivations he provides in chapter four, when scrutinized closely, simply do not work. Moreover, he provides judgements that we disagree with, treating without comment the following, for example, as straightforwardly grammatical:

'Me, serial killer'; 'I consider you as John', 'I consider John you' (p. 36–7)

'Portrait himself, Bill thinks Hill never would' (p. 115)

'A meat of four kilos'; '90 percent of humidity' (p. 185)

'This sister is John's' (p. 192)

In the end, although the positive project is highly original and fascinating, we remain unconvinced that there is any single formal hallmark of truth. A fortiori, the linguistic correlate of truth is not the Complementizer Phrase. Not in English, and not in general. Still less does Hinzen establish that we humans 'see' both truth itself and particular truths through a structure like (1).

Pulling back from the details, we would sum up our reaction to the book as follows. The 'New Philosophy of Language' is hard. On the empirical side, it is easy to oversimplify, to get the facts about natural language wrong, or to take what are in reality speculations and bold conjectures as well-established findings. On the philosophical side, it is equally easy to treat long-standing, carefully considered views as readily refuted, once the linguistic facts are in. Given how rare it is to be appropriately careful about both the linguistics and the philosophy, a book like Hinzen's is welcome. This is not to say that Hinzen succeeds entirely on both fronts: he does not. None the less, his newest book makes a stimulating start.

[Numerous friends and colleagues provided insightful comments on earlier drafts. We are especially indebted to Ray Elugardo, Sandy Goldberg, Wolfram Hinzen and Mitch Green.]

Faculty of Arts and Humanities
University of Western Ontario
 1151 Richmond Street
 London ON N6A 3K7
 Canada
 doi:10.1093/mind/fzp056

ILEANA PAUL AND ROBERT J. STANTON