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MONADIC TRUTH AND FALSITY

abstract

In Adelaster (2016), A. G. Conte proposes a distinction between de dicto and de re attributions of truth and falsity, which he illustrates mostly with documents of legal standing, but also with an artificial object (a false tooth). The present aim is to propose an analogous distinction between monadic (one-place) and polyadic uses of “true” and “false”, and to sketch some features of its logical functioning with closer attention to the monadic pole than is usual. One proposal is that, in these uses, “true” and “false” do not function as opposites under negation.

keywords

de re/de dicto; variable -adicity of “true” and “false”; negation; false teeth

In his last major book, *Adelaster* (Conte, 2016), Amedeo Giovanni Conte makes a distinction between truth *de dicto* and truth *de re*. Some of the remarks I wish to make on truth *de dicto* and truth *de re* run athwart the distinction that Conte makes, although I hope that they will also throw some light on phenomena to which Conte drew attention in his proposal.

Perhaps I should begin by admitting some of my disqualifications for discussing the *de re/de dicto* distinction that Conte drew in *Adelaster*. The most disqualifying of these is that the *de re/de dicto* distinctions with which I was previously familiar are those that have been drawn in modal logic since the time of Aristotle, though the terminology only became established in the thirteenth century. So I may have been distracted in reading Conte by the fact that his distinction is verbally identical to some distinctions already in circulation. Though the specification that Conte gives of his distinction is perspicuous and well integrated into the scheme he presents, a further shortcoming of mine is that I cannot see how deep it cuts, for it seems to me that the sort of truth that Conte calls *de dicto* is also applicable to the sorts of things he uses to illustrate what he calls *de re* truth. Furthermore, it seems to me that one case that Conte cites as a prime example of imperfect *de re* falsity is in good logical shape. I permit myself to expand on this case as a way of introducing a distinction among uses of the adjective “true” that is not quite aligned with Conte’s *de re/de dicto* distinction but that seems to have been as often and as improperly overlooked as Conte’s distinction has been.

The case that I wish to begin with appears at the outset of the seventh chapter of *Adelaster*, where Conte is considering what he calls the “ontology of the false” and offers five alleged instances of the falsity of an object (Conte, 2016, pp. 121ff.). The first instance he considers is that of a tooth. He puts the question of whether the *ontic* falsity (*Sachfalschheit*) of a tooth is a sufficient condition for its *semantic* falsity (*Sprachfalschheit*) (p. 125). And he says that the answer to this question is “obviously” (*loc. cit.*) negative: and the reason is that a tooth is not susceptible of semantic falsity. The reason Conte gives for saying that a tooth cannot be semantically false is that a tooth is not a “semiotic object” (p. 126). So far, so good. If I understand aright, granted that a tooth is not true or false of anything else, which would be a semiotic function, then it cannot be assessed semantically. Even if it is ontically false, it is not semantically false. But Conte seems at this point to leave the question of a tooth’s being ontically false rather up in the air, admitting in a footnote (n. 10 to p. 125) that “ontic” is something of a neologism dating to no earlier than the seventeenth century, and leaving it there.

The other four alleged instances of objects that are considered, in Conte’s distinction, as

potentially *de re* false are: a fiche used in gambling (2016, pp. 126-128); a will or testament (pp. 128-130); an attestation or certification (pp. 130-132); and a banknote (pp. 132-134). In Conte's view, with which it would be hard to disagree, each of these can be false. But it seems to me that the falsity in question is not so very different from the falsity that invests a sentence such as "Paris is the capital of Spain" or a statement of that sentence (an occasion of its utterance) or the proposition that that sentence expresses or a belief that might be expressed by it. In each of these cases, we have to do with a "semiotic object": something that is *about* something and, so, is true or false *of* it. Thus, when such objects are genuine, they are *de dicto* true and, when they are not, they are *de dicto* false: the fiche has stamped on it a certain monetary value; the will asserts who is to inherit what; the certification reports (in Conte's example, p. 131) the passing of a university examination; and an apparent \$20 bill is exchangeable for twenty dollars' worth of goods. In these cases, the stamping, the asserting, the reporting and the fungibility are semiotic functions and so associable with *dicta*. When the objects are not produced in good order – the fiche is not issued by the casino in which it is wagered, the will is not signed by the owner of what is to be inherited, the exam form does not reflect examiner's honest estimate of the student's preparation, or the apparent banknote was printed privately and not by a central bank – then they should be described as *de dicto* false. Let us return, then, to the tooth that Conte allows may be ontically false, without providing a specification of what sort of falsity this might be beyond the denial that it is semiotic, predicative or apophantic (2016, p. 124).

I think I know what a false tooth is. Where I had my left upper lateral incisor, there is now a piece of plastic that looks like a left upper lateral incisor but is not one. Because it is not the tooth that grew out of my upper jaw when I was about nine years old, it is a false tooth. There are various ways I could describe the plastic object in question. Some of these, such as "denture", are mildly formal; others, such as "prosthesis" or "prosthetic tooth" smack of the technical. The former was adopted by Ludwik Zamenhof for Esperanto under the guise of "*dentaro*"; the latter are the most directly translatable – or transliterable – into some of the other languages, such as the Polish ("*protesa*") and Russian (пpотeз) that Conte gives pride of place to. Perhaps this is because the technology of making things that fulfil almost all the functions of a left upper lateral incisor spread to Eastern Europe only fairly recently and has not had time to bed down into the sort of colloquialism that we find in English, French, Italian and German (other modern languages to which Conte appeals) where talk about teeth that did not grow in place of the primary teeth tends to describe them as false, using words that are directly translatable into English with the word "false". I do not know enough of ancient medicine to be sure whether the Greeks and Latins would have described an object – perhaps made of wood or ivory – put in to take the place of a left upper lateral incisor as "ψευδής" or "*falsus*", and, even if they would have, the linguistic matter is perhaps not quite so important as Conte seems sometimes to give it credit for.

Body parts other than teeth may be prosthetic. On the whole, those that are more or less open to view, such as limbs or parts thereof (feet, hands, fingers), breasts, eyelashes and lips, attract the adjective "false", while those that draw less attention to themselves, such as hips and inner organs such as kidneys and hearts or even bone marrow, may be described as "replacements"; when the source is a biological entity, we tend to talk about "transplants"; when it is overall artificial, we have "implants". In intermediate or superficial cases, especially when the recipient is also the donor, such as skin and hair, the preferred vocabulary is that of a "graft", a terminology deriving from plant husbandry; but a wig or a toupee may be described as simply false hair.

I agree with Conte in thinking that teeth and perhaps other body parts should be treated differently from the sorts of objects that are of the nature of documents – fiches, wills,

certificates and banknotes – and that are therefore, in Conte’s terminology, semiotic. But it seems to me that at least as good a way of approaching this difference, or these differences, is to look not so much at the objects in question as at the functioning of the adjectives “true” and “false” when applied to them.

We have already begun to suggest that, when we have to do with the truth or falsity of semiotic objects, such appraisals invoke at least two categories of thing. One, which we might call the “truth-bearer”, is appraised according to whether or not it stands in some appropriate relation to the other, which recent fashion has dubbed the “truth-maker”. Some of this terminology has been subject to close scrutiny in recent analytic philosophy and I hesitate to enter into the fiery debates that have been ignited. Moreover, I wish to steer clear of the question of appropriate relations between truth-bearers and truth-makers because it is as old and unresolved as philosophy itself. What I want to bring to the fore is how the adjectives “true” and “false” are being considered as at least two-place or dyadic predicates: when it is true, a truth-bearer is true *of* the truth-maker and, when it is false, it is false *of* it.

Because of the further relativisations that some theories of truth for linguistic or quasi-linguistic objects call for, there may be further circumstances that need to be specified, such as the language in which a sentence is uttered, or the time and place at which a statement is made in order to make the truth-(and falsity-)conditions exhaustive or determinate. When we have to do with a relation between a truth-bearer and a truth-maker, being true or being false is at least a dyadic predicate and may be an n -adic predicate for reasonable values of “ n ”. By contrast, the piece of plastic that occupies the place in my mouth once occupied by my left upper lateral incisor is a false tooth, but it is not false *of* anything. It would be pretty wild to think it a semiotic object that, in one way or another, says “I am a left upper lateral incisor” or similar. Even if someone were so wild as to think so, one might wonder whether it is wilder to think that what this piece of plastic is taken to be saying is true or false.

Degrees of wildness here are hard to judge with any precision, but it is surely not right to say either that such an assertion attributed to the bit of plastic would be true or that it would be false. So we do well to follow Conte and deny that a tooth is a semiotic object, and to remind ourselves that, while my upper left lateral incisor is a false tooth, its neighbours to left and right are not. Some ways of expressing this include saying that they are “natural” or “my own” rather than that they are “true”. Even someone – and I know of a case of this in a person over fifty years old – whose teeth in the places of the incisors are still primary teeth might say, pointing to the appropriate place in her mouth, “this is *my* tooth and I do not want a false one in its place”.

Broadly speaking, when “true” and “false” are used as (at least) dyadic adjectives, the items they are predicated of have the following fairly formal characteristic: if the item is true, then the negation of the item is false and *vice-versa*. Thus, in attributing truth and falsity to sentences, if “snow is white” is true, then “it is not the case that snow is white” is false and, if “snow is pink” is false, then “it is not the case that snow is pink” is true. In such cases, we might say that “true” and “false” are opposites under negation: a “not” switches from true to false and, when iterated, back again. But we have begun to see that the negation of “this is a false tooth” is not obviously “this is a true tooth”.

So the suggestion is that, when used of a tooth, “false” is not a dyadic adjective, but rather a one-place or monadic adjective. Likewise, there are uses of “true” as a monadic adjective. Granted that the English sentence “Paris is the capital of Spain” is false, the falsity in question is pretty clearly dyadic: the sentence, or a statement of it or the proposition or the belief that it expresses is false *of* Paris because Paris is not in Spain. But if we consider some strings that appear in books catalogued in libraries as being in English, we might wonder whether they are true sentences. Thus, my spell-checker, set to English, objects quite strongly both to “Whatif

she be in flags or flutters, reekierags or sundyechosie, with a mint of mines or beggar a pinnyweight” as well as to “the gloopy malchiks scatted razdrazily to the mesto”. Though both the books from which these strings are extracted (James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* and Anthony Burgess’ *A Clockwork Orange* respectively) have been translated into other languages, one might hesitate before saying that they have been translated from English. Something of the same holds of not a few ostensible sentences that we find in some academic writing, including the following from a book recently put on sale by a reputable London publisher: “Descartes’ subjective account is reliant on the mental state that can confer to the objective world, as the content of the mental states impregnates the certain beliefs of the objective world that may irrespectively be true or contingent”.¹ Again, when I encountered in an exam script the string “time, nowadays, people are against it”,² I thought briefly that I understood what was being said, and that perhaps what was being said was true, but I could not bring myself to think that it was a true sentence because of its offences against English usage.

In their various ways, the four strings of words just cited are not true sentences, and the truth that I want to deny of them involves their not being genuine sentences of English, even though at least some speakers of English can make out more or less what they are saying in a way that a monoglot speaker of, say, Swahili could not. We may generalise a little and say that one way that the phrase “true sentence” can be used is as a contrast with a sentence’s being (overly-) neologistic, muddled, ungrammatical or otherwise ill-formed. We may also formalise a little and make four brisk observations about such uses of “true”.

One is that “false” is not, in such cases, “true”’s opposite under negation. For this reason, we may say, apeing Wolfgang Pauli, that strings like those we have cited are not even false. But we may go a little further.

A homogeneous cube rolled at random will show each of its faces on average a sixth of the time. This makes it a true die and fit for gaming. In some languages, the order of noun and adjective can indicate a difference of emphasis, for instance, between a die’s being fair, even if it has the shape of a knucklebone, and something’s bearing some superficial resemblance to a standard die without genuinely being one, for instance because it is too large or fragile to be rolled. The correspondences of “true” with these terms (“fit”, “fair”, “genuine”) are clear signs that we have to do with evaluations; but it is not right to deny such attributions by saying that some supposed die is false.

Perhaps a corollary of the first observation is, as we have already hinted, that “true” and “false” can both function as monadic adjectives. Thus both “Paris is the capital of France” and “Paris is the capital of Spain” are true sentences because they are clear, grammatical and well-formed, even though, when we take “true” and “false” as dyadic adjectives that indicate a relation between a sentence, statement, proposition or belief on the one hand and a state of affairs or matter of fact on the other, the former is true because Paris is the capital of France and the latter false because Paris is not the capital of Spain.

A third point regards the sort of adjective we are dealing with when “true” and “false” are used in their monadic acceptation. A simple grammatical test indicates that we have to do with attributives. Perhaps this comes out less clearly with “true” than with “false”, but it does not generally hold that, from “*x* is a true *F*” we can infer that *x* is true and *x* is an *F*. For, when the predicate position is filled with, for instance, “hoax” or some other term indicating deception, it seems that we can have a true hoax (one that is successful or at least amusing), even though anyone taken in by it will acquire false beliefs. By contrast, “false” is an attributive that is close

1 With thanks to Stefano Caputo for the citation from a book he was condemned to review.

2 Citation anonymous to protect the guilty.

to being *alienans*: from “*x* is a false *F*” it is a good bet that *x* is not an *F* at all. But even this bet is not sure-fire, as we have already seen with “tooth”: my upper left lateral incisor is false, but it is also a tooth. Likewise, a false prophet is a prophet of sorts, perhaps of the only sort there is. And fourth, though the prevalent contrary of “true” as a dyadic adjective is “false”, this does not hold generally for monadic uses. Thus, a painting that is not a true Vermeer is rather a fake or a counterfeit, though it may be a true van Meegeren. A necklace may be a string of orthorhombic calcium carbonate spheres and hence of true pearls; but if they are made of plastic, they are at best artificial or imitation. And the twelve good men³ and true who make up a jury are hard to corrupt or otherwise mislead, but no less and no more human for that. Likewise, it is said that no true Scotsman wears anything under his kilt, but perhaps it would be improper to pursue this line of enquiry.

While “true” and “false” in their dyadic uses are focally applied to linguistic items of the kinds already referred to, they may also be applied to other sorts of representations in ways that may nevertheless be best construed as monadic. For instance, a painting can be a true likeness if it captures what the sitter looked like at the time the painting was made even if he was impersonating Bacchus for the purpose. But a photograph, for instance for a passport, can be certified “a true likeness” if it captures what the subject looks like unadorned. For instance, habitual wearers of hats and dark glasses – not to mention woad – are required by rules set out by the relevant authorities to *misrepresent* themselves for this purpose, though uses of facial cosmetics, such as lipstick, seem not raise eyebrows (whether plucked or not).

Again, there are various sorts of indicators that can give more or less true information according to how accurately they are prepared. For instance, if a thermometer is not well calibrated or not given time to adjust to the thing whose temperature it is taking, it will give a false reading. The occurrence of “reading” here is by no means accidental, but it would be a stretch to think of a thermometer’s scale as a linguistic item in any full sense.

As the lines on a thermometer track the mean kinetic energy of what it is in contact with, so the iron needle of a compass will align itself with the Earth’s magnetic field. Loosely speaking, the needle points north. But the north to which it points is only loosely associated with the axis (or imagined pole) around which the Earth turns, which coincides with the point, the North Pole, where the lines of longitude meet. For the orientation of the Earth’s magnetic field only occasionally coincides with the axis or the lines of longitude. This is because, for reasons that geologists are still puzzling over, the alignment from time to time of the magnetic field depends on flows of molten ferrous material in the Earth’s core. Because the needle in the compass is sensitive to magnetism, it tracks these variations. For this reason, and especially at high latitudes, the difference between magnetic north and true north can be significant. But what is more significant for our purposes is the contrast between magnetic north and true north. Here, “true” is clearly a monadic adjective: true north is not true of anything and magnetic north is not false north, though one may be misled by a compass that points to it. In connection with rotation around an axis, it may also be worth citing a usage that may be peculiar to English, but it would please me to learn of analogues in languages of which I am ignorant. Take a wheel that turns around an axle. If the wheel is not radially symmetrical or is weighted on one side, or the axle is not centred, then the wheel will not turn smoothly or regularly. In such a case, it is good English to say that it is “out of true”; but, again, it is not a false wheel. The same usage applies also, for instance, to a wall in which the bricks are either horizontally or vertically misaligned so that the wall bends or slopes. We may also say that the labourer who slung it together is not a true brickie.

3 Lately: persons.

To raise the tone by way of coda, but without entering into heavy-duty philology, we may recall Plato's perplexing uses of the idea of false pleasures in the *Philebus* (off and on between 35c2 and 42c4) and the association offered in the *Lysis* between the true friend and the notion of the "first friend" (219c-d). This latter is no doubt Aristotle's inspiration in the *Eudemian Ethics* (VII, ii) for distinguishing different types of friendship (also *EN*, VIII, i), regarding that between responsible free adult males as true and others as less so. In similar vein, Aristotle has few qualms about ordering the acceptations of notions such as courage (*EN*, III, vi *et seq.*) and pleasure (*EN*, X, v) in such a way that the primary sense is true (ἀληθής) and the others are declinations. Yet even the Dutch courage induced by drinking rum is courage of a sort and we can understand why someone who bites their nails does so for a certain kind of comfort (*EN*, VII, v, 1148b27-8).

In short, while the *de re/de dicto* distinction that Conte makes may be well suited to his jurisprudential purposes in considering varieties of falsehood, we may widen our horizons by considering the grammatical and logical functioning of the adjectives "true" and "false" in light of the number of places that they call to be filled (their "-adicity"). While philosophers have been much taken up with filling out notions of dyadic truth, the present suggestion is that monadic truth and falsity are also legitimate and, I hazard, more interesting than I have been able to give them credit for here.

REFERENCES

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