
Pro Rege

Volume 26 | Number 4

Article 3

June 1998

Realist Conception of Truth (Book Review)

Calvin Jongsma

Dordt College, calvin.jongsma@dordt.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege

 Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Higher Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Jongsma, Calvin (1998) "Realist Conception of Truth (Book Review)," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 26: No. 4, 18 - 20.

Available at: http://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol26/iss4/3

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the College Publications at Digital Collections @ Dordt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Dordt. For more information, please contact ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu.



A quarterly faculty publication of
Dordt College, Sioux Center, Iowa

Book Review

Alston, William P. *A Realist Conception of Truth*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1996. xii + 274 pages.
Alston, William P. *A Realist Conception of Truth*." "Epistemic Conceptions of Truth." 16 + 19 pages.
Two lectures given at the Wheaton College Philosophy Conference. October, 1997. Reviewed by Calvin Jongsma, Professor of Mathematics.

You don't want to hear it again, but let me say it anyway: we live in a postmodern world that has lost interest in the truth. We have instead developed insatiable appetites for entertainment, the more salacious the better; we gladly welcome the merging of fact and fiction in the docudramas and tabloid exposés prepared for us by media moguls. News reporters and historians have built-in biases that color events for them: who can say for sure what the truth about a situation really is? There is only truth-for-you and truth-for-me, not truth in any transcendent sense. Truth is relativized by the subjective prejudices and personal agendas of knowing subjects.

Contemporary academics aren't as crass as all this. Their reflections on knowledge and truth are often intricate and deep, couched in fine distinctions and elaborate trains of reasoning. But philosophy has its counterpart to the popular view: truth is determined by the epistemic equipment of the human community, and this may lead to different outcomes for different people. A sort of human uncertainty principle has thus gained currency in our time: our epistemic interaction with events enters into or shapes what really happened.

William Alston, in *A Realist Conception of Truth* (ARCT), has rather a different take on the matter, however, one that remains close to the traditional naive sense of what it means for something to be true. In saying this, I do not mean to characterize his treatment of the topic as simplistic. Quite the opposite. As an outsider looking in, I thoroughly enjoyed watching Alston exercise his philosophical gifts—playing with ideas, analyzing concepts, making distinctions, presenting, modifying, and evaluating arguments, constructing counterarguments—all to help clarify what is really at stake and what one ought/ought not to hold about the nature of truth.

My keen interest in Alston's book is due in part to my philosophical bent but also to the various connections that have drawn mathematics, logic, and philosophy closer together over the past one hundred and fifty years. Twentieth century mathematical logicians such as Alfred Tarski have been very influential in analyzing and formalizing the notion of propositional truth for mathematical purposes. Recent debates in philosophy of mathematics between realists and anti-realists exhib-

it sharp differences over whether and in what sense mathematical truth exists and whether it is constructed or discovered. This being the case, I hope I may be excused for reviewing a book that goes beyond my expertise as a historian of mathematics and a mathematics educator.

Alston is a highly respected Christian philosopher with an ongoing professional interest in epistemology in general and religious knowledge in particular. The topic of ARCT, however, as Alston sees it, is preparatory to and somewhat independent of epistemology. Alston's sole purpose here is to provide a cogent explanation of what it means for something to be true. In fact, he acknowledges an even narrower focus, namely, what it means for *propositions* to be true. He recognizes that there are other important senses of being true: "It sometimes means something like 'genuine', as we speak of a *true friend*, sometimes 'faithful', as in *true to the cause*, sometimes 'legitimate', as *the true heir* (6). These notions of truth, however, fall outside the chosen scope of his book. Alston restricts his attention to investigating the notion of truth that applies to propositions, statements, and beliefs, a notion that is a central concern in contemporary philosophical circles, especially those that have been influenced by the tradition of analytic philosophy.

ARCT has four main parts. It opens with an exposition of Alston's main thesis about the nature of propositional truth, given in numerous equivalent forms (Chapter 1). It continues by addressing the issue of whether a realist conception of truth requires commitment as well to a realist epistemology or ontology (Chapter 2). The bulk of the book then deals with comparing his ideas with competing views of truth (Chapters 3-7). Finally, the book concludes by considering why a proper concept of truth matters (Chapter 8). We will look at each of these in turn, without getting into fussy technical detail.

Alston begins by accepting our everyday notion of truth as correct. He notes that when we say that a declarative statement is true, we ordinarily mean that what it asserts, its thought content, agrees or correlates in some way with the way things really are. A statement is true if and only if what it asserts actually holds. The

statement "rabbits are furry little mammals" is true just in case rabbits really are small furry mammals.

This common-sense view originates with Aristotle and seems to be "nothing but a miserable truism that no one in his right mind would deny"(6). This being the case, one would expect Alston's discussion of the topic to be much briefer than the 264 pages he devotes to it. The reason for the extended treatment, he says, is simple: while it may "be an obvious truism. . . nevertheless it has been frequently and enthusiastically denied"(7). For, "as Cicero wrote, there is nothing so obvious that it has not been denied in the books of the philosophers"(237). Alston wryly remarks on this that "if it weren't for the fact that [clever] philosophers . . . are given to espousing and defending what seem to be obviously false positions, the more sensible among us might be at a loss as to how to spend our time"(Lecture 1, 7).

Alston's task, then, is to explicate and defend a realist conception of truth. Propositional truth should depend wholly and solely on what is being asserted (propositional content) and on whether this matches (correlates to) reality (states of affairs). This is a *realist* concept of truth not in the historical sense of presupposing some Platonic view of reality (at several points Alston admits a preference for a more Aristotelian approach to matters), but in the sense that the truth of a statement is dependent on a reality that transcends human knowledge, symbolic formulation, and rational justification of the statement.

This version of truth Alston calls a *minimal-realist* account, a realist *conception* of truth. A more elaborate *theory* of truth, which would further analyze the nature of propositional content, what a state of affairs is, and how there can be any correlation between them, is set aside as something to be tackled once agreement is reached on those features of truth that allow us to recognize it when we meet it.

Alston argues that his realist concept of truth can be incorporated into many different realist or anti-realist theories of truth or views about epistemology and ontology. To avoid unnecessary acrimony on issues not directly tied to a concept of truth, Alston forces himself to remain as neutral as possible on matters of general epistemology and ontology. He admits that a realist *theory* of truth does seem to be indicated by his realist *concept* of truth, but even here he wants to leave some room for variation.

This still gives Alston plenty of controversial matters to discuss and people to debate them with, however, for his viewpoint on truth is no longer fashionable in contemporary North American philosophy. Alston counters criticisms of a realist view of truth using a dual strategy. He first of all replies to those who are critical

of a realist notion of truth, meeting their objections head on with arguments in defense of his outlook. But he also goes on the attack against his competitors. He points out that "the only serious alternatives are epistemic conceptions"(188), ones in which "the truth of a truth bearer consists not in its relation to some 'transcendent' state of affairs, but in the epistemic virtues the former displays *within* our thought, experience, and discourse"(189). Alston concentrates on the two main varieties, versions of a coherence view of truth and a justification view of truth.

The first of these, a coherence conception of truth, judges a statement to be true if it fits well into "a maximally coherent, maximally comprehensive system [of thought]"(195). Coherence can be taken to "involve consistency, plus a rich matrix of inferential, probability conferring, explanatory, and unifying relationships"(196). The problems with this view, Alston explains, are that in most instances no unique such system of thought will exist, and even if one did exist, another one would probably also exist for its logical opposite, which would force us to accept "the unpalatable consequence that for any proposition both it and its contradictory are true"(1961).

A second epistemic alternative equates truth with ideal epistemic justification: a statement is true just in case it would be rationally justified by someone in possession of all possible relevant information. On the face of it, Alston notes, identifying the truth of a statement with its justifiability would seem to make truth more accessible to human beings. But when one elaborates what is meant by ideal epistemic conditions and how one knows that they would justify a statement, the apparent advantage of simplicity evaporates. Moreover, the notion of justified belief is dependent upon a prior notion of truth: a belief is justified if the available evidence for it makes it likely to be true, not the other way around. Ideal cognition, therefore, cannot be the right criterion for truth. Truth depends on the way things are, not on our knowledge of those things.

Given Alston's critique of epistemic conceptions of truth, one might wonder why contemporary thinkers find these views of truth attractive. For one thing, going back at least to Kant, philosophers have been convinced that they had no real access to the-world-as-it-is, but only to how-it-is-to-us. This attitude, while it may seem born of philosophical humility, is actually an expression of humanistic hubris: human beings sit above their world, imposing structure on their experience, and by their epistemic faculties determine truth. Alston notes in opposition to this that humans are integral parts of their world: "the real, independently existing world . . . is one with which we are in contact already *through* our experience, thought, and discourse. . . . They are not wholly

external to us and our cognition and linguistic doings, though they don't depend (for the most part) on those doings for what they are"(148).

In the closing Epilogue, Alston admits that he doesn't know all the reasons that might motivate philosophers to reject a realist conception of truth and choose for an epistemic variety. But he also makes the following interesting observation:

If someone were to put a gun to my head and force me to formulate a single fundamental root of opposition to realism about truth, I suppose that I would say "intolerance of vulnerability." In supposing that what we believe and assert is rendered true or false by . . . what a belief or assertion is about . . . , we are acknowledging a liability to falsity that is, in a fundamental way, out of our control. . . . In the final analysis whether what we say is true is determined not by anything we do or think, but by the way things are. . . . This vulnerability to the outside world, this "subjection" to stubborn, unyielding facts beyond our thought, experience, and discourse, seems powerfully repugnant, even intolerable to many. As a Christian, I see in this reaction a special case of *the* original sin, insisting on human autonomy and control and refusing to be subservient to that on which our being and our fate depends, which for the Christian is God. (264)

Alston does not impugn the personal religious motives of those who accept an epistemic viewpoint on truth, but he is here testing the spirit of the position itself as it is manifested in contemporary philosophy. At the same time, he is placing his own viewpoint of truth within a broader religious context, noting that we are not the masters over what is true and false.

The broader context is, in fact, the *raison d'être* for ARCT. While Alston only spends one chapter out of eight (30 pages out of 264) on the importance of having a correct notion of truth, it is obvious that his discomfort with contemporary trends in other fields was a strong motive behind his writing. In his preface he alerts the reader to this concern:

I believe the question of how to think about truth is crucially important for intellectual issues generally. It is hard to overemphasize the amount of mischief, in this century especially, that has resulted from confusions, false assimilations, and

sloppy thinking about truth. In particular, the conflation of truth value and epistemic status of one sort or another . . . has muddied the waters in religious thought, the social sciences, and literary studies, as well as in philosophy itself. (xi)

A proper notion of truth is directly important to such theoretical areas as logic, semantics, and epistemology; but it is also important to all practical affairs in which one must determine what the truth of a matter is. If truth is intersubjective and does not transcend knowing subjects, we have lost our touchstone in reality, and any hope for genuine communication and determination of the truth vanishes. Then we will be left with folly of our own making. Alston means to call us back to a better way.

On the whole, I have real appreciation for Alston's book, particularly its critique of the alternative conceptions of truth offered by Blanshard, Dummett, and Putnam. ARCT is well reasoned and well written. It merits being one of *Choice* magazine's outstanding academic books for 1996.

However, I would now like to see Alston go further and place his ideas within a *theory* of truth and an *epistemology* following the various hints he has dropped along the way. And I would especially like to see him address the notion of truth in the broader context that he set aside in writing this book. The climate in philosophical circles that deal with these issues may not be very receptive to such a discussion, but this seems to me to be important for developing a Christian perspective on the matter. As Christians, we acknowledge Jesus Christ as the Truth. How does our being in the Truth affect our understanding of and our recognition of propositional truth? How is propositional truth related to other senses of being true? How do worldview dispositions and commitments affect our ability to know the truth? Is being true something that applies also or even first of all to higher order realities like a religious orientation or a conceptual scheme, prior to its applying to statements and propositions? Alston begins to tackle some of these matters in his Chapter 6 discussion of conceptual relativity. I, for one, would like to see this issue explored in more depth and breadth and would look forward to reading what else Alston might have to say about it.