

# WHERE “WHEN TRUTH GIVES OUT” GIVES OUT

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Mark Richard. *When Truth Gives Out*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2008. 180 pages.

A natural view has it that truth plays a privileged role in the evaluation of judgements and assertions. The central theme of Mark Richard's *When Truth Gives Out* is that there is a realm of judgements and assertions which ought not be evaluated in terms of truth, in some cases because the categories of truth and falsity are inapt, and in other cases because their truth or falsity is relative and hence cannot aid us in deciding which position to adopt. Though Richard marshals his formal resources in defence of emotivism, he also claims that non-truth-apt and relatively-true judgements and assertions are subject to reason, evidence, and argument. *When Truth Gives Out* is an interesting book that rewards careful study. It is also difficult and at times obscure. Crucial concepts are left underexplained, and it is unclear that Richard's system can account for some of the phenomena he describes. Richard discusses an impressively diverse array of topics in 180 pages – racial slurs, vagueness, liar-like paradox, gradable adjectives, normative terms, predicates of taste – but these discussions are not well integrated; the book is a series of vignettes rather than a cohesive whole. In what follows, I will discuss Richard's two major themes – the non-truth-apt, and the relatively true – in turn. My goal here is to give some idea of the scope of Richard's work, and of the various views and arguments he advances; though I find much to criticise, this is an indication of how rich the book is in ideas that are worthy of discussion.

## 1 Truth and Paradox

The central development of *When Truth Gives Out* is a theory of speech acts. On Richard's view, assertions do not simply express propositions. Instead, they make *commitments*. We can represent basic commitments as ordered pairs of an attitude (such as assertion, denial (which Richard regards as a *sui generis* attitude, not reducible to assertion (p. 50)), and moral approval), and a proposition. These commitments can be appropriate or inappropriate. *First-order commitments* are sets of basic commitments; a first-order commitment is ap-

propriate just in case each of its constituent basic commitments is appropriate. *Second-order commitments* are sets of first-order commitments. A second-order commitment is appropriate just in case at least one of its constituent first-order commitments is (p. 54).

Richard claims that utterances of declarative sentences express second-order commitments (p. 55). For example, an utterance of “Dogs bark” commits the utterer to {{<assertion, *dogs bark*>}}, while an utterance of “Murdering is wrong” commits the utterer to (something like) {{<moral disapproval, *there is murdering*>}}. The advantage to this way of proceeding is that it allows one to introduce *force markers* that modify the speech act performed by an utterance. Richard claims that English words like “not” and “or” are ambiguous between truth-functional and force marker uses. Thus “Dogs don’t bark” might commit one to {{<assertion, *dogs don’t bark*>}}, or to {{<denial, *dogs bark*>}} depending on how the “not” is read. Similarly, “Dogs bark or cats meow” might commit one to {{<assertion, *dogs bark or cats meow*>}}, or to {{<assertion, *dogs bark*>}, {<assertion, *cats meow*>}}.

Richard claims an impressive range of attractions for this view:

1. It allows us to formulate a consistent semantics for vagueness. For example, suppose that Jo is a borderline case of baldness, and that “bald” is neither true nor false of borderline cases of baldness. Then we should deny both the claim that Jo is bald and its truth-functional negation. Nonetheless, Richard claims, we can consistently accept claims like: “*Jo is bald*” is true iff *Jo is bald*, reading the “iff” as a force marker. For this utterance commits us only either to accept both sides of the biconditional, or to deny both sides; that is, to the second-order commitment {{<assertion, “*Jo is bald*” is true>, <assertion, *Jo is bald*>}, {<denial, “*Jo is bald*” is true>, <denial, *Jo is bald*>}}. Since we should deny both sides of the biconditional, this commitment is appropriate.
2. Similarly, suppose that we have some method (e.g., Kripke’s) of assigning truth values to atomic sentence that assigns neither truth nor falsity to sentences like (L):

(L) (L) is not true.

Then we can accept “(L) is not true’ is true iff (L) is not true” (again reading “iff” as a force marker) while denying both (L) and its truth-functional negation (p. 56).

3. It provides an account of logic that can be adopted by emotivists and expressivists to solve the Frege-Geach problem (ch. 3). According to Richard, valid inferences preserve commitments. The basic idea is that an inference is valid if the appropriateness of the commitments made

by the premises ensures the appropriateness of the commitment made by the conclusion; Richard gives a precise account in model-theoretic terms.<sup>1</sup>

There is an apparent problem with Richard’s strategy here. The Frege-Geach observation is not merely that sentences involving ethical terminology enter into inferences; there is a problem for the emotivist only because exclamations like “Boo for murdering!” do *not* enter into inferences. It is not obvious that Richard can explain the contrast. Presumably “Boo for murdering” commits one to disapproval of murdering.<sup>2</sup> Richard’s force operators should be able to operate on this commitment; in other words, given an appropriate syntax, Richard’s system can make clear sense of “If boo for murdering, then John won’t murder,” and allows such ‘claims’ to enter into inferences. So Richard’s ‘solution’ overgenerates sensible claims and possible inferences.

There is another case where Richard’s system seems to overgenerate by his own lights. In his discussion of racial slurs, Richard argues that we should not regard the relevant slurring assertions as true or false, since any use of certain slurs involves misrepresentation. For example, if we let “\*” stand for an offensive slur, Richard points out that (at least in some cases) we cannot respond to an utterance of “John married a \*” with “No, John did not marry a \*”, for using the concept expressed by “\*” at all involves thinking of the slurred group “in an odious, inaccurate way” (p. 25).

Richard argues that the appropriate attitude toward claims that are neither true nor false is denial. But on Richard’s view, “not” can express such denial, so the reply “No, John did not marry a \*” should be perfectly in order. Even setting this aside, it is hard to see how denial could help, given that any use of the “\*” concept is odious. Even if denial is distinct from negation, it is hard to see how we could deny a thought without entertaining it. But entertaining it involves using the “\*”-concept. So it seems that no progress has been made.

These difficulties are symptomatic of a deeper problem. Suppose I want to know what commitments I should undertake: what should I assert, and what I should believe? Truth cannot be my guide, for truth gives out in many places where guidance is wanted. A natural place to look is appropriateness. But this will not do, for we can generate liar-like paradoxes with appropriateness. For example, we cannot hold that “This sentence is not appropriate” (with “not” read as a force-operator) is either appropriate or inappropriate. To capture this fact, Richard is forced to admit a new way of assessing sentences: say, appro-

1 For criticism of the style of account Richard endorses, see Schroeder 2008, 51-55.

2 Richard agrees: “[T]o utter ‘Hurrah for honesty!’ [...] is to express [...] enthusiasm [for honesty], and to commit to that enthusiasm being appropriate” (p. 76).

priateness<sub>2</sub>. But this, too, is liable to paradox; so we will need appropriateness<sub>3</sub>, and so on. So Richard’s system generates a Tarski-like hierarchy of appropriateness-predicates.

Richard is aware of the difficulty. He replies that his system allows us “to say as much as there is to say about the distribution of any finite collection of semantic properties to a language’s sentences” (p. 165), so there is no problematic semantic ineffability. This may be true but does not treat the fundamental worry. One main reason we are interested in such properties as truth and appropriateness is as a guide to what we ought to believe and to say. But given a language of the sort Richard formulates, we can formulate a paradoxical sentence, and Richard will have no resources to tell us what attitude to take towards it. What norms govern our attitudes and utterances? In the general case, Richard just cannot say.

## 2 Relativism

Richard’s second main development is relativism. Here, Richard argues that relativism infects any discourse that allows for Lewisian accommodation (p. 100); that is, any discourse in which the extensions of our words (as used in context) tend to shift to make utterances in which they are used true. For example, the extension of gradable adjectives like “rich” is context-sensitive; Richard claims an utterance of “Mary is rich” will tend to generate a context in which Mary counts as rich. But he argues further that in order to account for the possibility of sensible disagreement over whether Mary is rich in cases where such an utterance is not smoothly accommodated, we need to acknowledge that the truth of the matter may be relative, for only relativism can ensure that there is a common content about which two parties can disagree.

Richard extends his discussion of disagreement to an account of faultless disagreement about matters of taste.<sup>3</sup> Richard’s view is that disagreement can be regarded as faultless only by those who do not regard their own position as true, since if I regard my view as true and you as disagreeing with it, then I have to regard your view as false (and hence you as at fault). Richard thus proposes that those who (for example) like chili can stand in two sorts of attitudes towards the claim that chili is tasty: one can assert it while tolerating other views on the matter, or one can assert it while regarding any other view as mistaken. Only

3 Strangely, Richard ignores the recent literature on these issues; for example, such philosophers as John MacFarlane, Max Kölbel, and Paul Boghossian are conspicuously absent from the bibliography.

in the latter case, Richard claims, is one committed to the claim that it is true that chili is tasty. So whether a claim about tastiness is relatively true or not truth apt is itself a relative matter on Richard's view (p. 134).

A major theme of *When Truth Gives Out* is that disputes about matters of taste (as well as other matters in which Richard takes truth to give out) are substantive. They are issues about which we can sensibly argue, about which we can and do give reasons. They are not merely verbal. Richard persuasively argues that we do in fact treat matters of value and taste in this way. For example, Richard points out that it might really *matter* whether we judge that you are narcissistic (p. 119). But the challenge for relativists, emotivists, and their ilk is not to argue that we in fact argue about matters of taste; this is something that their opponents do not deny. The challenge is to make sense of this tendency. And it is not clear that Richard has the resources to do so in every case. Suppose that we would be within our linguistic rights to accommodate an utterance (referring to you) of "You are narcissistic", but also within our rights to reject it. Richard notes that in some cases, there may be "good reason to think that one way of shaping the concept makes more sense, given the interests and purposes the concept serves" (p. 119). But surely many cases are not like this. In many – probably most – such cases, either way of drawing the border would enable the concept to serve its purpose equally well; after all, you are *ex hypothesi* similar in some ways to the typical narcissist, and dissimilar in other ways. If Richard is correct, how can we argue rationally about what to do in these cases? Richard is correct that we *do* care deeply, and argue sensibly and substantively, about such matters. But given his view, how could we?

## References

Schroeder, M. (2008). *Being For: Evaluating the Semantic Program of Expressivism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.