

ON THE VERY IDEA OF DEGREES OF TRUTH

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Degrees of belief and degrees of confidence in the truth of a belief are fairly unproblematic and well-understood notions. In so far as one believes something one believes it is true. Due to limitations on available evidence, however, many times one cannot be certain that one's belief is true. In some such cases, how much one is willing to bet on the belief's being true determines the degree of belief or confidence in its truth. One aspires to true beliefs but many times can only achieve a certain degree of belief. Is there anything here that suggests that truth comes in degrees or that illuminates the notion of a degree of truth? On the face of it, not. A weak belief is a belief which is held with little conviction. One is uncertain whether the belief is true. When one has a weak belief, it is not as though one is certain that the belief is only true to a degree. One's belief comes in degrees only insofar as one is uncertain that the belief is definitely, not partially, true. The very phrase 'degree of confidence in the truth of a belief' suggests a disanalogy between degrees of belief and truth. R.M. Sainsbury, however, in his book *Paradoxes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, 2nd edn., pp. 43-45), provides an ingenious argument for degrees of truth based on an analogy with degrees of belief. Interesting though the argument is, it fails to make a convincing case for degrees of truth.

Sainsbury's idea is to connect degrees of belief with degrees of truth by focusing on vagueness. When the content of one's belief is expressed with a vague predicate, this vagueness can affect the confidence of one's belief just as limitations on available evidence can. Unlike the problems created by limitations on available evidence, however, sometimes the problems of confidence in a belief engendered by vagueness cannot be eliminated without changing the content of the belief, without abandoning the original belief. But one aspires to true beliefs in cases where the contents are vague no less than when one believes under limitations on available evidence. Given this analogy, Sainsbury argues as follows that there must be degrees of truth: 'Truth is what we seek in belief: It is that than which we can do no better. So where partial confidence is the best that is even theoretically available, we need a corresponding concept of partial truth or degree of truth' (p. 44).

Of course, this argument leaves much mystery about the nature of degrees of truth, but even as an argument for their existence it is dubious. The argument in a subtle way seems to beg the question. Consider a parody of Sainsbury's argument. Take an activity with a clear-cut goal which does not come in degrees – winning is what we seek in playing basketball. (Now, truth may or may not be a goal which, like winning, doesn't come in degrees; that is the question at issue.) Suppose there is a basketball team composed of players five-feet tall. An unscrupulous, sadistic promoter is able to schedule a game between this team and say, the Chicago Bulls. There is no 'conceivable' way the team can defeat the Bulls in a fair game. (If this result seems conceivable, imagine that the team must outscore the Bulls by an infinite number of points, though they may not

understand what a spectacular feat this would be.) Would anyone, a player on the small team or anyone else, reason as follows? Winning is what we seek in playing: it is that than which we can do no better. So where a playing that falls short of winning is the best that is even theoretically available, we need a corresponding concept of partial winning or degree of winning. This conclusion would hardly be a consolation to the small team. This parody, I think, shows how Sainsbury's argument begs the question in favour of degrees of truth. How? Again, truth as a goal in belief need not be like winning as a goal in playing basketball. Truth may come in degrees, whereas winning does not. But, the important point is that Sainsbury's argument is supposed to establish that truth does come in degrees, ' . . . we need a corresponding concept of partial truth or degree of truth' (ibid., italics added). However, Sainsbury's argument is not like the parody only if one assumes at the beginning that truth, in coming in degrees, is disanalogous from winning, in not coming in degrees. And that is just the question at issue. Anyone unconvinced that truth comes in degrees or that truth is not a matter of degree will find the argument without force. So, the argument provides no good reasons for countenancing degrees of truth.

Someone may immediately suspect that my parody misses the crucial point. The factors which undermine confidence in the two cases differ. God in all His omniscience can know with certainty which team will win, but not even God can be certain concerning a genuine case of vagueness. But this contrast only shows something my parody presupposes – winning is not a vague notion. What playing the game and coming to believe are supposed to have in common is that they are both goal-directed activities, and my analogy trades on this likeness.

Thinking of truth in terms of the goal of belief, Sainsbury seems to make a mistake which may be common to many who favour countenancing degrees of truth. The mistake is to treat the degree to which one can fall short of attaining a goal as the degree of goal attained. That one can reasonably say that one fell short of attaining a goal to a certain degree does not make reasonable, or even make sense of, talk of attaining a certain degree of the goal. For example, a team which lost a game by only two points came closer to winning than a team which lost by forty, but neither team won to a certain degree; both lost – failed to win. Even if, in a similar fashion, one can make sense of beliefs coming within a certain degree of the truth (for example, by articulating Popper's idea of 'verisimilitude'), one should not confuse this achievement with making sense of degrees of truth or with justifying the idea that truth comes in degrees. Desperate to defend a relevant difference between winning and truth, one might insist that truth *be defined* as that which we seek in belief. Together with the effects of vagueness on belief this move might ensure degrees of truth by definition. But such a definition construes truth in unreasonably 'accidental' terms. Though truth is what people seek in belief one should nonetheless question whether it is reasonable or theoretically fruitful to characterize truth in such terms, much in the way that one should question whether it is reasonable or theoretically fruitful to characterize gold as that which prospectors seek in digging, though gold is the goal of their digging. The motivation for such a characterization of truth must be more than the desire to countenance degrees of truth.

Problems for Sainsbury's case are foreshadowed when he sets the stage for his argument with an analogy between the effects that limitations on available evidence have on

the reasonableness of a course of action and the effects that vagueness has on such considerations. In order to make the analogy convincing, Sainsbury has us consider the case of someone who wants to kill Jones. That is, consider someone who has as his goal the death of Jones. This person decides to poison Jones with mushrooms so that the death will appear accidental. Among the things he knows is the fact that all and only red mushrooms are poisonous. The problem which arises is that the only mushrooms the person has at his disposal are vaguely red, that is, mushrooms that are clear cases of objects falling in the penumbra of red things. In such a case, Sainsbury says, 'The more confident you are that this mushroom is really red, the more reasonable it is to use it; the less confident, the less reasonable' (p. 44). Moreover, this effect on confidence cannot be remedied by greater insight or evidence. 'Less than total confidence springing from incomplete evidence or fear of unreliability mirrors our deficiencies; less than complete confidence springing from our appreciation of vagueness does not' (p. 44). Even God in all His omniscience could not ascertain whether the mushroom is red. Vagueness is like limitations on available evidence in that it affects confidence, but unlike such limitations in that it is irremediable – even for God. Despite this difference, however, a course of action can yet be reasonable even though limited evidence or vagueness affects confidence or belief in its success.

This case supposedly supports the needed premise that where there is vagueness partial confidence may be reasonable though complete confidence never is, but it also suggests that at least some confidence or degree of belief is reasonable in such cases of rational action. A closer look at this case, however, threatens this conclusion in such a way that one should see that the effects of limitations on evidence are not at all like the effects of vagueness. Specifically, doesn't reflection on the case suggest that, unlike limitations imposed on evidence, genuine vagueness should not cause partial confidence but *no confidence at all*? If one has a mushroom that falls genuinely within the penumbra of red things in such a way that even God could not determine whether it was red or not, then the reasonable course, it seems, is to suspend any judgment *concerning the redness of the mushroom*! Where there is genuine vagueness there should be no confidence at all.¹ Recall again the small players in the parody, where the analogy was that playing is to winning as believing is to truth. If there is no conceivable way that they can win against the Bulls in a fair game, then will playing the game to win be reasonable? Perhaps. They may not understand what a spectacular feat winning would be, and considerations of *practical reason* may make *the act* of playing to win reasonable. Based on the red mushroom-poisoning case, Sainsbury reaches a different conclusion concerning believing and truth only because he confuses what is reasonable in the case. Suppose even God cannot tell if the only available mushrooms are red or not. It may still be reasonable to try to poison Jones with the mushrooms. There will be a definite outcome – Jones will die or he will not. If the situation is desperate enough, practical rationality may demand that one tries to poison Jones with the only available mushrooms and to hope he will die. Nothing about the reasonableness of the action should make one think that there are *any good reasons for believing* the mushrooms to be really red. Sainsbury's

¹ I owe this point to a conversation with Dick Ketchum. I would like to thank him for carefully reading and commenting on many earlier versions of this paper. Thanks also go to Paul Sagal and Mark Sainsbury for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

explanation confuses the practical rationality of a course of action with the theoretical rationality of a particular belief. *When it comes to the theoretical rationality of a belief* degrees of confidence in belief engendered by epistemic deficiency are disanalogous to the skepticism that comes with vagueness, but Sainsbury's reflections on the disanalogy do not establish degrees of truth. The skepticism that comes with vagueness is what is required when there is no fact of the matter; degrees of fact of the matter are unnecessary – either to appease this skepticism or to justify acting under the constraints vagueness imposes. Whatever a degree of truth is, if there be such things, it is not a function of the partial confidence engendered by the vagueness of the belief.

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Received May 1996