

Theism and Epistemic Truth-Equivalences[†]

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In his 1982 Presidential Address to the APA, Alvin Plantinga attributes the following thesis to Hilary Putnam:

- (HP) Necessarily: p is true \equiv if there were an Ideally Rational Scientific Community (IRS) that had all of the relevant evidence, it would accept p .¹

HP is an epistemic truth-equivalence (or, ‘ETE’ for short). It holds that there is a necessary equivalence between what is true and what would be believed under specified circumstances by a certain kind of rational agent or community of agents.²

ETE’s are implied by a variety of well known views about truth. To take just a few examples apart from Putnam’s: C. S. Peirce equates truth with “what is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate”;³ William James claims that “[t]rue ideas are those that we can validate, corroborate, and verify”;⁴ Brand Blanshard holds that “truth *consists* in coherence [of our ideas]”;⁵ and Crispin Wright holds that truth is superassertibility, or “assertibility which would be durable under any possible improvement to one’s state of information”.⁶ Each of these views evidently entails that what is true is *materially* equivalent to what would be believed by rational beings satisfying certain conditions. (In these examples, the conditions involve having coherent beliefs, or having reached the end of inquiry, or having warrant for one’s beliefs that would survive any possible improvement of one’s information, etc.). And since each view purports to tell us what truth *is*, or what truth *consists* in, I take it that each furthermore entails that there is a *necessary* equivalence between what is true and what would be believed by rational beings satisfying these conditions.

Plantinga rejects Putnam’s equivalence thesis, arguing that HP entails the “dismal conclusion” that, necessarily, there exists an IRS. He goes on to argue that

the only plausible ETE is one according to which there is a necessary equivalence between what is true and what is believed by God. Thus Plantinga doesn't reject ETE's altogether; he simply rejects those that do not entail theism.

Not every ETE entails theism. In fact, most do not. However, there is a surprisingly close relationship between theism and ETE's. For one thing, traditional theism entails that some ETE is correct. Traditional theism holds that God is an omniscient being who exists necessarily; thus, necessarily, for any proposition p , p is true if and only if p is believed by God. More interestingly, every ETE entails what I call "near-theism".

Near-theism is the thesis that (i) there exists a necessarily existent rational community and (ii) necessarily, there exists an omniscient community. (For the sake of simplicity, I am pretending that the term 'community' may be applied both to single-membered and multi-membered groups.) Near-theism is entailed by theism, since theism holds that God constitutes a necessarily existent, necessarily omniscient community. But it does not entail theism. In particular, though it entails that there is a necessarily existent rational community, it does not entail that this community is omnipotent or omnibenevolent, nor does it entail that this community is necessarily omniscient (there might be worlds in which the necessarily existent community is not omniscient, but some other community is omniscient).

My main goal in this paper is to defend the claim that every ETE entails near-theism. Near-theism by itself is not at all plausible. Thus, the conclusion of this paper will be that if the arguments presented in sections 2 and 3 are sound, the sensible thing to do is either to reject ETE's altogether (along with the views about truth that entail them) or to embrace theism.

1. Preliminaries

I will begin by listing two definitions, two assumptions, and two theorems on which the arguments in the following sections will depend. I'll begin with the definitions.

I said earlier that an ETE is any claim that asserts that there is a necessary equivalence between what is true and what would be believed by a rational agent or community of agents under certain specified conditions. Let me now make this definition more precise. For our purposes here, an ETE will be any thesis that conforms to the following schema:

- (E) Necessarily: p is true \equiv if there were a rational community that satisfied condition C with respect to p , it would accept p .

'Condition C' refers to what we might call "the acceptance condition". It is a schematic term that takes as substitution instances conjunctions that specify the conditions that must be satisfied by a rational community in order for its acceptance of p to be necessary and sufficient for the truth of p . I add the "with

respect to p ” qualifier to take account of the fact that what counts as satisfying the acceptance condition might vary from proposition to proposition. Such would be the case if, for example, the acceptance condition is satisfied only if the community in question possesses all *and only* the evidence relevant to p . I have constructed the right hand side of the biconditional in E as a counterfactual conditional because that is the sort of conditional that stands on the right hand side of the biconditional in the most plausible ETE’s. However, with minor modifications the arguments in this paper do equally well in showing that E-style claims involving material or indicative conditionals also entail near-theism.

The second definition is this:

O is *omniscient* =_{DF} O accepts all and only true propositions.

There is some debate about whether this definition is suitable,⁷ but for present purposes, I will leave that debate aside. If it is impossible for any community to satisfy my definition of omniscience, then so much the worse for ETE’s, for (I will argue) they all entail that, necessarily, some community *does* satisfy that definition. Moreover, I will leave aside debate about what are the necessary and sufficient conditions for saying that a multi-membered community accepts a proposition. (For example, one might wonder whether a simple majority is required, or a two-thirds majority, or consensus, or simply consensus among the most informed members of the community.) If it turns out that there is no coherent way to spell out what it takes for a multi-membered community to accept a proposition, then (again) so much the worse for those ETE’s that presuppose that this sort of thing can be spelled out.

In addition to these definitions, my argument requires two assumptions. Here is the first:

- (SC) For any true ETE: Let C be its acceptance condition and let α be the proposition that there exists a community S such that, for every proposition p , S satisfies C for either p or the denial of p . Then: Necessarily, if there is a community that satisfies C with respect to either α or its denial, then α is true.

At first blush, SC may seem rather difficult to evaluate. We have, at best, a handful of suggestions as to possible acceptance conditions; and it is contentious which, if any, ETE’s are in fact true. Given such a state of information, it is initially hard to see how we could possibly make a reasonable judgment about what *must* be the case if the acceptance condition of a true ETE is satisfied with respect to α or its denial. But upon closer inspection, it turns out that there is good reason to think that SC is true.

Note first that, for any true ETE, either the acceptance condition for a proposition p requires ideal reasoning with respect to p on the part of the community in question, or it doesn’t. Suppose it doesn’t: the condition can be satisfied

by a community S with respect to p even if S reasons in a less than ideal manner with respect to p . In such a case, clearly the fact that S would or would not accept p is not going to be logically sufficient for the truth or falsehood of p . For to say that S reasons in a less than ideal manner with respect to p is just to say that S reasons in such a way that it might accept p even if p is false, or might fail to accept p even if p is true.⁸ So, any true ETE will be such that its acceptance condition for a proposition p does require ideal reasoning with respect to p on the part of the community whose acceptance of p is relevant to its truth. Furthermore, for the same reason, the acceptance condition for a true ETE will also require the community in question to have ideal evidence about p , if p is the sort of proposition that an ideally reasoning community would accept or reject only on the basis of evidence.

I take it that α and its denial are both propositions that an ideally reasoning community would accept or reject only on the basis of evidence. Hence, a community satisfies C with respect to α or its denial only if (a) it reasons ideally with respect to one or the other proposition, and (b) it has ideal evidence about both propositions. So SC is false only if either there are no true ETE's (a possibility which we can leave aside for purposes of this paper) or it is possible that α is false and yet there exists a community that satisfies (a) and (b). What I will now argue is that it is impossible for α to be false in a world where there is a community that satisfies (a) and (b).

Suppose a community has ideal evidence in *favor* of α . Since we are assuming that some ETE is true, we must also assume that ideal evidence is infallible evidence. An ideally reasoning community would presumably accept any proposition for which it had ideal evidence; hence, if ideal evidence were fallible, it would follow that a community's accepting a proposition for which it satisfied the relevant acceptance condition would not be logically sufficient for the truth of that proposition. Thus, it follows directly from the fact that a community has ideal evidence in favor of α that α is true.

The question, then, is whether it is possible for a community to have ideal evidence *against* α . As I see it, for this to occur, at least one of the following conditions must be satisfied: (i) α is incoherent, or (ii) the community has ideal evidence and engages in ideal reasoning about what other communities exist, about what evidence every community has for every proposition, about how every community reasons with respect to every proposition, and about what constitutes ideal evidence and ideal reasoning. I see no special reason for thinking that α is incoherent.⁹ Thus, ideal evidence against α is possible only if it is possible for some community to satisfy (ii). The trouble, however, is that a non-omniscient community could not possibly satisfy (ii).

In order to satisfy (ii), a community would have to have know, for every proposition that anyone believes, whether that proposition is true or false. It would also have to know how every true proposition that anyone believes bears evidentially on every other proposition. As an ideal reasoner with respect to its evidence, its beliefs would be closed under entailment; thus, if any mathematical or logical propositions are among those known, it would know every mathemat-

ical or logical truth. Moreover, it is hard to see how it could possibly have ideal evidence for philosophical claims (such as claims about what counts as ideal reasoning and ideal evidence) unless it were omniscient with respect to matters philosophical as well. Furthermore, in order to have ideal evidence about what other minds exist, it would have to have access to facts about the contents of every region of spacetime that could possibly contain a mind and it would also have to have ideal access to facts about what (if any) immaterial minds exist. In addition, in order to satisfy (ii) it would have to have ideal information (i.e., information that is at least as good as first-person information) about what every mind believes and about how every mind reasons with respect to what it believes. *Perhaps* it is possible for a non-omniscient reasoner to do all of this that I have just mentioned; but in order to satisfy (ii) in a way that would enable it to conclude that α is false, the community in question would have to be able to do all of this and more *at an instant*. For the physical universe is always changing; the contents of minds are always changing; hence, even if a community managed to inspect the universe and the minds of its own members well enough to have ideal evidence for the conclusion that α was false, it could never be sure—unless it somehow had direct access to all of the universe at once—that, in the time it took to complete its investigation, α did not become true as a result of some change in a far corner of the universe that was inspected early on but not afterward. In short, then, only a community that satisfies α could possibly satisfy the conditions required for it to acquire ideal evidence for the falsehood of α ; but in such a case, it could not acquire such evidence since α would be true. Hence, ideal evidence against α is impossible. And, as we have already seen, if ideal evidence against α is impossible, SC is true.

Here is the second assumption:

(NCB) Possibly: There are no contingently existing rational beings.

NCB is controversial among theists. Those who endorse a Leibnizian Principle of Plenitude, for example, will not be at all inclined to accept it. But such controversies will have no impact on the conclusion of this paper. If theism is false, NCB is eminently plausible: the probability of life evolving in a universe like ours, even if high, is still clearly less than one. Furthermore, the probability of *rational* organisms evolving is even lower. Thus, given the denial of theism, there seems to be no reason to reject the bare possibility of there being a universe that contains no contingently existing rational beings. And if theism is true, there is no need for NCB since the conclusion of this paper could then be established by a different route. Theism, if true, is necessarily true, and (as I have already explained) it entails near-theism; thus, it follows directly that every ETE entails near-theism.

So much for definitions and assumptions. Now for the theorems:¹⁰

(T1) $\diamond \Box P \Rightarrow \Box P$

(T2) $[\Box (P \equiv (Q \Box \rightarrow R)) \ \& \ (P \Leftrightarrow Q)] \Rightarrow \Box P$

T1 is a theorem of the S5 modal system. That system is controversial; however, since it is the system that seems to accord best with the modal intuitions of most contemporary philosophers, I expect that T1 will have fairly wide appeal despite the controversy. Moreover, rejecting T1 will have little effect on the main argument of this paper. Without T1, I will not be able to show that every ETE entails near-theism; but (as the reader can verify) I will be able to show that every ETE entails the thesis that necessarily, there exists an omniscient community.¹¹

T2 is derivable in the S4 modal system, but not in any weaker system. Here is the proof: Suppose the antecedent of T2 is true and suppose, for *reductio*, that there is a possible world W at which P is false. From the first conjunct of the antecedent, it follows that, at W , $Q \Box \rightarrow R$ is false. This, in turn, implies that there is a world W^* at which Q is true and R is false. (If there were no such world, $Q \Rightarrow R$ would be true in every world; hence, $Q \Box \rightarrow R$ would be true in W .) But from this it follows that, at W^* , P is true. This is because (a) according to the antecedent of T2, P is necessarily equivalent to Q , (b) Q is true at W^* , and (c) in S4, the accessibility relation among worlds is transitive. Thus, at W^* , P is true whereas $Q \Box \rightarrow R$ is false. But, given the antecedent of T2, this is impossible. QED.

Before closing this section, I would like to make note of one assumption that I will *not* be making in this paper. I will not make the assumption that the following equivalence holds:

- (1.1) Necessarily: p is true iff if there were an omniscient community, it would accept p . (Premise)

1.1 has a certain surface plausibility; however, if I were to help myself to this assumption, the conclusion of this paper would be dramatically easier to establish. Here is an argument for that conclusion that makes use of 1.1. Let O be the proposition that there exists an omniscient community. Then:

- (1.1) Necessarily: p is true \equiv if there were an omniscient community, it would accept p . (Premise)
 (1.2) Necessarily: O is true \equiv if O were the case, then the omniscient community would accept O . (From 1.1 by substitution)
 (1.3) Necessarily: O is true. (From 1.2, T2)

From here, it is a short step to near-theism. I assume that any omniscient community is a rational community. Given this, the argument runs as follows: According to NCB, it is possible that there are no contingently existing rational beings; thus, it follows from NCB and 1.3 that some possible world contains a rational community but no contingently existing rational beings. Clearly, then, that world must contain a necessarily existing rational community. But this claim conjoined with T1 yields the conclusion that there in fact exists a necessarily existing rational community.¹² And the conjunction of this claim with 1.3 is just

near-theism. Since near-theism is necessarily true if true at all, it follows directly that every ETE entails near-theism.

2. Putnam's Near-Theism

As a “trial run” of sorts, I will argue in this section that HP entails near theism. I will begin by showing that HP entails that, necessarily, there exists an IRS. Let α be the proposition that there exists an IRS that has all of the relevant evidence. Then:

- (2.1) Necessarily: p is true \equiv if there were an IRS that had all of the relevant evidence, it would accept p . (HP)
- (2.2) Necessarily: α is true \equiv if α were the case, then the IRS would accept α . (From 2.1, by substitution)
- (2.3) Necessarily: α is true. (From 2.2, T2)

As I said earlier, 2.3 is the conclusion Plantinga reaches in his 1982 address, though by a different route. What seems to have gone unnoticed, however, is that it is a short step from 2.3 to the conclusion that there exists a necessarily existent IRS. The argument is precisely the same as the argument (already given) for the conclusion that 1.3 entails the claim that there exists a necessarily existing rational community.

Thus we have the first component of near-theism—the claim that there exists a necessarily existent rational community. What of the second component—the claim that, necessarily, there exists an *omniscient* community? Here again the argument is simple. According to 2.3, it is necessarily true that there exists an IRS that has all of the relevant evidence. But then it follows from HP that, necessarily, there is an IRS that accepts all and only true propositions. Thus, it turns out that, necessarily, there exists an omniscient IRS.

Crispin Wright (1996) has suggested that one problem with HP is that it runs afoul of a version of the Conditional Fallacy. He considers the following schema:

- (i) Necessarily: P is true $\equiv [Q \square \rightarrow Z(P)]$

and argues as follows:

No subjunctive conditional can be strictly equivalent to a categorical proposition if the realization of its antecedent cannot be guaranteed not to impinge on the truth-value of that proposition. So an instance of (i) has a chance of being correct only if P and Q are independent. (Wright 1996, p. 939)

He then goes on to suggest that one way to improve on HP might be to replace it with something like

- (HP_w) Necessarily: if conditions were epistemically ideal, then the true propositions would be all and only those which were believed.

According to Wright, HP_w is, like HP, “inconsistent with the conception of truth and truth-conferrers beloved of Putnam’s (“metaphysical”) realist antagonist, for

whom it can be no necessity, even under the very best epistemic conditions, that the truth is available.” (940) Thus, he says, it is doubtful that there is any significant cost in replacing HP with HP_W .

I am inclined to agree that HP commits a version of the Conditional Fallacy. Of course, strictly speaking, Wright is wrong in saying that an instance of (i) has a chance of being correct only if P and Q are independent from one another. An instance of (i) *is* true if theism is true, and this despite the fact that P and Q are not guaranteed to be independent of one another. (Just let P = ‘God exists’, Q = ‘God exists’, and let Z(P) hold if and only if God believes that P.) Nevertheless, if committing the Conditional Fallacy involves (as Robert Shope (1978) suggests) a kind of *epistemic* failure—an *overlooking* of the fact that one’s analysis has certain *undesired* consequences—then perhaps HP really does commit a version of the Conditional Fallacy. After all, I take it that the theistic consequence of HP *is* both overlooked and undesired by the proponents of HP; and it arises from the fact that the relevant P and Q are not guaranteed to be independent of one another. If this is right, then we might say furthermore that one upshot of the present paper is that every ETE commits a version the Conditional Fallacy.

Has Wright provided an adequate strategy for circumventing the theistic consequence of HP? I think that he hasn’t. For one thing, he is mistaken in saying that HP_W is inconsistent with the metaphysical realist’s conception of truth. The reason is that HP_W is consistent with (and, indeed, entailed by) theism, and theism is not inconsistent with a realist conception of truth or with the claim that true propositions have truth makers. Thus, HP_W fails as badly as HP does in precluding such realist doctrines. More importantly, however, HP_W (unlike HP) is not a truth-equivalence. Indeed, HP_W tells us nothing at all about truth; at best, it simply tells us something about what it is for conditions to be epistemically ideal. But presumably the proponent of HP would want to be saying something about *truth*—i.e., something about what it is, or about what it takes for something to be true. At any rate, Putnam apparently did. Of course, if the upshot of Wright’s discussion is just that HP ought to be rejected, even at the price of giving up the project of defining or analyzing or accounting for truth in epistemic terms, then Wright’s recommendation for those who accept HP is wholly in line with the recommendation I will give to those (Wright included) who accept ETE’s or accounts of truth that entail ETE’s. But I take it that this is not a recommendation that proponents of ETE’s will heartily welcome.

One might also try to save HP by claiming that the argument presented at the beginning of this section illegitimately presupposes that what counts as having all of the relevant evidence does not vary from proposition to proposition. In that argument, having all of the relevant evidence is construed in such a way that a community that has all of the relevant evidence has all of the evidence relevant to *every* proposition. But why construe it this way?¹³ Why not instead take having all of the relevant evidence to be a state of affairs that varies from proposition to proposition? In writings subsequent to those under discussion in Plantinga’s address, Putnam has made it clear that having all of the relevant ev-

idence should be construed in this latter way.¹⁴ Thus, perhaps a more perspicuous formulation of the view expressed by HP would be something like HP*:

(HP*) Necessarily: p is true \equiv if there were an IRS that had all of the evidence relevant to p , it would accept p .

Still, even HP* entails near-theism. The route is a bit different, but the destination is the same. Let α be the proposition that there exists an IRS that has all of the evidence relevant to every proposition. Let β be the proposition that there exists an IRS that has all of the evidence relevant to α . And let γ be the proposition that the IRS mentioned in β accepts α .

- (2.1*) Necessarily: α is true \equiv if β were the case, then γ would be the case.
 (From HP* by substitution)
 (2.2*) $\alpha \Rightarrow \beta$ (Trivial)
 (2.3*) $\beta \Rightarrow \alpha$ (From SC)
 (2.4*) Necessarily: α (From 2.1*, 2.2*, 2.3*, T2)

Notice that, given that a necessary falsehood entails every proposition, premise 2.2* comes out true *whether or not it is possible for an IRS to have all of the evidence relevant to every proposition*. Thus, HP* entails 2.4*, and since 2.4* is equivalent to 2.3, it follows that HP* (like HP) entails near-theism.

3. Why Every ETE Entails Near-theism

We have seen how one ETE entails near-theism. Now, in this section, I will argue that every ETE entails near-theism.

In light of the previous section, it already should be clear how the argument will go. Let EC below be any *true* ETE (if such there be); let C be EC's acceptance condition; let α now be the proposition that there exists a rational community S such that, for every proposition p , S satisfies C with respect to either p or its denial; let β now be the proposition that there exists a rational community that satisfies C with respect to either α or its denial; and let γ now be the proposition that the rational community mentioned in β accepts α . We then have:

- (EC) Necessarily: p is true \equiv if there were a rational community that satisfied condition C with respect to p , it would accept p . (Premise)
 (3.1) Necessarily: α is true \equiv if β were the case then γ would be the case.
 (From EC, by substitution)
 (3.2) $\alpha \Rightarrow \beta$. (Trivial)
 (3.3) $\beta \Rightarrow \alpha$ (From SC)
 (3.4) Necessarily: α . (From 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, T2)

Again, notice that, given that a necessarily false proposition entails every proposition, premise 3.2 is true *whether or not it is possible for there to exist a ra-*

tional community that satisfies C_1 with respect to every proposition. Thus, it does not depend on the (in my opinion, illegitimate) assumption that it is possible for there to exist such a community. 3.4 tells us that it is necessarily true that there exists a rational community S such that, for every proposition p , S satisfies C with respect to either p or its denial. And from this claim, near-theism follows by precisely the same sort of argument that was given for the conclusion that 2.3 entails near-theism.

4. Concluding Remarks

If the argument of section 3 is sound, every ETE entails near-theism. Theists, of course, will not be bothered by this conclusion, for their view entails near-theism and (typically) is motivated by considerations independent of a commitment to an epistemic account of truth. Those hostile to both theism and near-theism, on the other hand, ought simply to reject epistemic accounts of truth outright. One might avoid the commitment to near-theism by rejecting one of the assumptions or rules laid out in section 1; but that will not do much to elevate the reasonability of accepting an epistemic account of truth. For no matter how one ultimately responds to the argument in this paper, the upshot is that epistemic accounts of truth carry substantial metaphysical baggage. If one refuses to concede that they entail near-theism, then (given my argument) one must concede that either they are incompatible with classical logic, they are incompatible with the $S5$ modal system, they are incompatible with the most prominent views about counterfactual conditionals, or they entail that necessarily there exist contingently existing rational beings. And given the bare choice between a theory of truth that carries such substantial metaphysical baggage and one that does not, it seems clear that the reasonable thing to do is to accept the one that does not.

Notes

[†]Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the 44th Annual Wheaton College Philosophy Conference and the third annual Mighty Midwestern Metaphysicians Conference at the University of Notre Dame. I would like to thank my commentators, Charles Taliaferro and Patricia Blanchette, as well as Michael Bergmann, Harrison Hall, Trenton Merricks, Alvin Plantinga, David Silver, Ted Warfield, an anonymous referee for *Noûs*, and especially Jeff Jordan and Ted Sider for their many valuable comments.

¹Initially, Plantinga attributes to Putnam the same account minus the necessity operator. But Plantinga then notes that if Putnam's account is to be anything like a definition or analysis of truth, the necessity operator must be implicit. And so when he sets out to refute Putnam's account, he makes the necessity operator explicit. (Plantinga 1982, 51, 65) I follow Plantinga in this, and furthermore I follow Plantinga in the assumption that for any account of truth, if it is true then it is necessarily true.

²Here and throughout, by 'rational' I mean 'capable of thought or reasoning'.

³Peirce 1878, p. 139.

⁴James 1907, p. 142.

⁵Blanshard 1940, p. 269, emphasis in original.

⁶Wright 1992, p. 75.

⁷See, for example, Kvanvig 1986 and Plantinga and Grim 1993.

⁸Note, then, that an ETE that incorporates a condition requiring less than ideal evidence will turn out to be necessarily false. So, given that a necessarily false proposition entails every proposition, it follows that every such ETE entails near-theism.

⁹One might think there are general Cantorian worries to be raised about any proposition that quantifies over every proposition. (See Plantinga and Grim 1993 for a discussion of such worries.) But this is no special problem for α . In fact, it will plague ETE's as well.

¹⁰Following standard conventions, I use ' \equiv ' as the symbol for material biconditional, ' $\square \rightarrow$ ' as the symbol for counterfactual implication, and ' \Rightarrow ' as the symbol for strict implication. ' \square ' is the necessity operator and ' \diamond ' is the possibility operator.

¹¹The same is true for NCB: Without it I can't establish the first component of near-theism, but I can establish the second.

¹²Here are the steps: Let W be a world with no contingently existing rational beings and let $E_1 - E_n$ be the members of the rational community that exists in W . We then have:

- (1) $\diamond \square (E_1 - E_n \text{ exist.})$
- (2) Therefore: $\square (E_1 - E_n \text{ exist.})$

¹³The interested reader will find an answer to this questions in Chapter 3 of Wright 1993.

¹⁴See, for example, Putnam 1989, p. 115.

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