Stabilizing alethic pluralism[*]

Nikolaj Jang Pedersen

Abstract

Alethic pluralism is the view that the nature of truth is not uniform across domains. There are several ways of being true $(T_1 \ldots T_n)$. A simple argument – the 'Instability Challenge' – purports to show that this view is inherently unstable. Simply say that something is *uniformly true* just in case it is T_1 or ...or T_n. Being uniformly true is a single truth property that applies across the board, and so, the nature of truth *is* uniform across domains, contra pluralism. This paper defends pluralism against the Instability Challenge. It is shown that the challenge bifurcates into two – a challenge formulated in terms of predicates, and another formulated in terms of properties. It is argued that the pluralist has the resources to defuse both of them. The sparse/abundant property distinction and considerations on explanatory asymmetry play a crucial in the argument.

1 Alethic pluralism and the Instability Challenge

Traditional theories of truth – such as correspondence and coherence theories – are monist in character. They all incorporate the following assumption:

(UNIFORMITY)   The nature of truth is uniform across domains.

That is, all propositions, if true, are true in the same way regardless of their subject-matter. According to standard versions of the correspondence theory, truth is thus to be accounted for in terms of correspondence to reality whether we are talking about pebbles, the law, or about large cardinal numbers.[1] The coherence theorist buys into the same kind of story – i.e. alethic uniformity – but replaces talk of correspondence with talk of coherence.

Theories that incorporate the uniformity assumption have traditionally dominated the market. Recently, however, (UNIFORMITY) has been called into question by alethic

---

[1] Newman 2002 and Vision 2004 are exponents of standard correspondence theories. The qualification 'standard' is added because there are versions of the correspondence theory that allow for multiple correspondence relations. Cf. Sher 2004 and 2005. Sher's view incorporates (UNIFORMITY) to the extent that these relations are all *correspondence* relations and, as such, constitute a unified class of relations in terms of which truth is to be accounted for. It diverges from (UNIFORMITY) to the extent that these relations are *different* correspondence relations.

pluralists. Crispin Wright, a prominent proponent of the view, writes:

> ... what property serves as truth may vary from discourse to discourse ... This potential pluralism is itself in opposition to the more traditional positions, insofar as they claim to uncover *the* universal nature of truth, something common to all truth-apt discourse. But it can still allow that some regions of discourse may be subject to a truth property congenial to broadly realist thinking about them, while in other regions the character of the truth property may be more congenial to antirealism. (Wright 1992, p. 752)

The pluralist framework proposed by Wright allows for the possibility that the truth of propositions concerning respectively pebbles, the law, and large cardinal numbers is to be accounted for in different terms. In particular, it may be that truths about pebbles involve a realist truth property while legal truths possess a truth property that carries no commitment to realism. One reason why this idea might be found attractive is that the domains in question appear to be very different in character. Pebbles are concrete entities and of a mind-independent nature. Laws, on the other hand, are conventional constructs. They are passed by legislators and can, once in force, be modified or rejected on later occasions. In other words, laws, unlike pebbles, are of a mind-dependent nature.

The driving thought here seems to be that, although a truth property for some specific region, or domain, of discourse D exhibits realist or antirealist features, no such property can plausibly be taken to apply across the board, i.e. to any domain of discourse whatsoever. That is, there is no specific truth property – corresponding to reality, say – whose range of application is sufficiently general to cover all truth-apt discourse. The lesson to be learned from this story is, according to the pluralist, that (UNIFORMITY) cannot be sustained. Instead of one universal truth property there is a range of domain-specific truth properties. Truth is not one, but many.[2]

Between the monist and the pluralist camp, my sympathies lie with the latter. However, how much mileage is there in the above attempt to motivate pluralism? Not much, it might be tempting to think. For a very simple argument appears to show that alethic pluralism is an inherently unstable position. If this is the case – that is, if the pluralist project does not even get off the ground – there is hardly any reason to engage with attempts to motivate it.

Let me label the simple argument I have can mind the 'Instability Challenge'. It runs as follows: according to the pluralist, truth is non-uniform in nature. There are, as it were, several ways in which statements can be true, and, for a given statement p, which way p is true (if true) depends on its specific domain. For instance, if the statement concerns pebbles – or other ordinary concrete entities – it is, presumably, true in virtue of corresponding to reality.

---

[2] Wright has never explicitly labeled the kind of consideration just offered. However, others have. Sher refers to it as the 'problem of the common denominator' (1999, pp. 133–134), while Lynch calls it the 'scope problem' (2004, p. 20). Strictly speaking, for Wright, Sher, and Lynch, the most apt slogan for their respective views might be that truth is not just one, but also many. In different ways, each of them holds that there is something that is common between all truths – whatever their domain – and, yet, at the same time, each likewise commits to the idea that domains exhibit features that may be specific to them. For details on Wright's view, see 1992, 1996, and 2001. For Lynch, consult 2001b, 2004, 2005a, 2005b, and 2006. For Sher, see 1999, 2004, and 2005. Sher helpfully provides a brief comparison between her own view and those of Wright and Lynch on p. 20 of 2004.

Now, suppose with the pluralist that there are indeed several ways of being true and let these be $T_1 \ldots T_n$. Given $T_1 \ldots T_n$, one can introduce a new way of being true, T_U. When is a statement T_U? Well, a statement is T_U if, and only if, it is T_1 or $\ldots$ or T_n. Formally,

(TU) $\qquad (\forall p)(T_U(p) \leftrightarrow T_1(p) \vee \ldots \vee T_n(p))$

With the introduction of T_U comes trouble for the pluralist. To see this observe that, by the characterization of T_U, being true in one of the ways $T_1 \ldots T_n$ is a necessary and sufficient condition for being T_U. That is, the statements that are true in the T_U kind of way are *exactly* those statements that are true in one of the ways endorsed by the pluralist. This means that T_U is a universal way of being true: any statement whatsoever is true just in case it is T_U. The pluralist is thus committed to (UNIFORMITY). This commitment deals a fatal blow to the pluralist enterprise, because (UNIFORMITY) is precisely what the pluralist is meant to deny.

End of story.[3]

2 The agenda

If the Instability Challenge was the last word on pluralism, the pluralist story would be a short and sad one – at least from the perspective of the pluralist. For the challenge is an attack on the very coherence of pluralism. It purports to show that straightforward reasoning can be deployed to undermine the view as soon as it has been formulated

I do not think that the Instability Challenge ought to be the last word on pluralism. While I can see that it might be alluring at first, I maintain that the pluralist has the resources to defuse it. The main point on the agenda is to argue that this is so. I will proceed as follows: in Section 3, a distinction is introduced between predicates and properties. The distinction is used to sketch a framework that enables us to distinguish between different forms of monism and pluralism, and it is likewise applied to show that the Instability Challenge bifurcates into two challenges when spelled out properly – one concerning predicates, the other concerning properties. Section 4 offers a response to the former, while Section 5 deals with the latter.

3 The predicate/property distinction and the varieties of monism and pluralism

Not much explicit attention has been paid to the distinction between predicates and properties in the monism/pluralism literature. I do not mean to suggest that the underlying explanation is that the contributors to the debate are not aware of the distinction.

---

[3] Tappolet presents a version of the Instability Challenge where, for the sake of simplicity, it is assumed that $n = 2$. (See Tappolet 2000, p. 384.) The argument is embedded in a discussion of the so-called problem of mixed inferences, i.e. the problem of how pluralists are going to account for the validity of inferences involving different domains. Those impressed by the problem of mixed inferences include Dodd 2002, Sainsbury 1996, Tappolet 1997, and Williamson 1994. Beall 2000 offers a response on behalf of the pluralist, but Tappolet 2000 supplies a forceful rejoinder. I offer an alternative response to the problem of mixed inferences in Pedersen 2006.

However, what I would like to suggest is that it would help the discussion if such explicit attention was paid. At least occasionally the focus of the debate would be sharper as a result thereof.[4] I start this section by explicitly drawing the predicate/property distinction and saying a little bit about how to understand it. The distinction is brought to work immediately and its value is reflected by the use it finds in discerning different forms of monism and pluralism. Its value is further illustrated in Sections 4 and 5 where it is used to sharpen the focus of the discussion of the Instability Challenge.

3.1 The predicate/property distinction

The distinction between predicates and properties pertain to the fundamental distinction between language and reality, with predicates and properties falling on opposite sides of the divide. Predicates are linguistic items and part of language, while properties are extra-linguistic entities and part of reality. This sounds neat – indeed, too neat to hold in full generality. For some properties enjoy language-dependent existence. Just think of the property of being a word in Danish. However, many properties do seem to be extra-linguistic entities. For present purposes, the relevant thing to observe is that most pluralists would take truth properties to be among them.

To be clear on terminology, let me give a more full – but still somewhat swift – characterization of predicates and properties:

An *n-place, m-order predicate* is a linguistic item of the form $X\langle\ldots\rangle$ where '...' is to be replaced by n terms of order m. $\text{DOG}\langle\ldots\rangle$ is a one-place, first-order predicate. It takes a single individual term (i.e. a first-order variable or a constant) in its argument-place to form a well-formed sentence. Thus, e.g., $\text{DOG}\langle fido\rangle$ is a well-formed sentence. An *n-place, m-order property* is an extra-linguistic entity and, if possessed, is possessed by n entities of order m. The property of being a dog is a one-place, first-order property. If possessed, it is possessed by a single individual.

For both predicates and properties, context will usually allow us to omit an explicit specification of the arity as well as the order.

Predicates and properties are intimately related. The latter, the 'worldly' things, serve as semantic values of the former, the linguistic items. For instance, the semantic value of the predicate '_ is a cow' is the property of being a cow (on the intended interpretation). Applied to the truth case, truth predicates are linguistic items and apply to sentences, which are likewise linguistic items. Truth properties are extra-linguistic entities and thus fall on the worldly side of the language/reality divide. They serve as semantic values of truth predicates and hold of propositions, the worldly correlates of sentences.

It is should be emphasized that endorsing the connection between predicates and properties just highlighted does not commit one to saying that any n-place, m-order predicate holds of n things of order m. For it may be that a predicate is such that there can be no thing, or things, that satisfy it – i.e. that it has no worldly correlate. Consider, e.g., the complex predicate $\text{EVEN-AND-ODD}\langle\ldots\rangle$ that is composed of

---

[4] Some authors write as if alethic pluralism is primarily – or even exclusively – a view about truth predicates. For instance, Christine Tappolet takes the view to be given by the thesis that 'there is a plurality of truth predicates' and never talks about truth properties. In Pedersen 2006, I argue that the failure to appreciate the predicate/property distinction is relevant to the assessment of the arguments in Tappolet 1997 and 2000, and that it is so in a negative way.

the predicates EVEN⟨...⟩ and ODD⟨...⟩, where EVEN⟨...⟩ ↔ DIVISIBLE-BY-TWO⟨...⟩ and ODD⟨...⟩ ↔ ¬EVEN⟨...⟩. No interpretation of the two constituent predicates will render an entity and a pair of properties such that the two properties serve as the semantic values of the predicates EVEN⟨...⟩ and ODD⟨...⟩, and the entity is the semantic value of a term replaced for '...' in EVEN-AND-ODD⟨...⟩. In other words, the complex predicate in question will be assigned the empty set as its extension and therefore fails to hold of anything.

3.2   Linguistic monism and linguistic pluralism

Let us bring the predicate/property distinction to work. In this section, I will focus on the linguistic side of the distinction by spelling out various monist and pluralist theses about truth predicates, leaving theses about truth properties aside until next section.

Distinguish between two forms of linguistic pluralism:

(L-PLURALISM)   There is more than one truth predicate.

(STRONG L-PLURALISM)   There is more than one truth predicate, and no truth predicate applies to all true sentences.

Both (L-PLURALISM) and (STRONG L-PLURALISM) are incompatible with the following view:

(STRONG L-MONISM)   There is exactly one truth predicate, and it applies to all true sentences.

because, while (STRONG L-MONISM) says there is exactly one truth predicate, (L-PLURALISM) and (STRONG L-PLURALISM) say that there is more than one.

However, matters stand differently with respect to the following thesis:

(L-MONISM)   There is a truth predicate that applies to all true sentences.

(L-MONISM) and (L-PLURALISM) are not mutually exclusive. For it may just be that, among the multitude of truth predicates embraced by the linguistic pluralist, there is a truth predicate that applies to all true sentences – that is, the kind of truth predicate that the linguistic monist is committed to. (STRONG L-PLURALISM), on the other hand, is incompatible with (L-MONISM) as it rejects the idea that there is a universal truth predicate.

Let me note that the notion of a truth predicate in play here is not intended to be merely that of a truth predicate in a specific, natural language. If this was the notion intended, (STRONG L-MONISM) would be dead in the water from the very outset. For in that case the simple observation that English has a truth predicate ('_ is true') and that Danish does so too ('_ er sand') would suffice to undermine the view. I do not intend the target notion of a truth predicate to be such that (STRONG L-MONISM) can be refuted that easily. The relevant notion of a truth predicate is that of a philosophical truth predicate, if I may help myself to this manner of speaking. That is, the kind of

truth predicate that philosophers are interested in, whatever natural language they may use for their theorizing.

3.3 Metaphysical monism and metaphysical pluralism

Distinctions analogous to those offered in the previous section can be given at the metaphysical level.[5] Start with pluralism:

> (M-PLURALISM)   There is more than one truth property.

> (STRONG M-PLURALISM)   There is more than one truth property, and no truth property is had by all true propositions.

(M-PLURALISM) and (STRONG M-PLURALISM) differ in that the former, but not the latter, is compatible with the following thesis:

> (M-MONISM)   There is a truth property which is had by every true proposition.

(M-PLURALISM) and (M-MONISM) are compatible, because the universal truth property might just be one among the multitude of truth properties endorsed by the metaphysical pluralist. (STRONG M-PLURALISM), on the other hand, explicitly denies the existence of such a universal truth property, and hence, is incompatible with (M-MONISM).

Metaphysical pluralism, in whichever incarnation, conflicts with the view that

> (STRONG M-MONISM)   There is exactly one truth property, and this property is possessed by all true propositions.

Both forms of pluralism say that there is more than one truth property. (STRONG M-MONISM) says that there is *exactly* one.

4   The Instability Challenges

The formulation of the Instability Challenge given at the outset of the paper involved the locution 'ways of being true'. Having taken on board the predicate/property distinction the first thing to note is that this locution might be subject to two different readings. On the first reading, saying that there are several ways of being true amounts to saying that there are several truth predicates, whereas, on the second reading, what is being said is that there are several truth properties.

Since any fully developed pluralist position has a linguistic as well as a metaphysical aspect, this suggests that rather than dealing with one challenge, the pluralist is, in effect, facing two instability challenges – one operating at the level of predicates, the

---

[5] By 'analogous' I do not mean to suggest that analogous theses stand or fall together. This will become clear later. By 'analogous' I merely mean that the linguistic thesis of an analogous pair can be obtained from the metaphysical thesis by substituting occurrences of 'property' by 'predicate' and occurrences of 'propositions' by 'sentences', and vice versa.

other at the level of properties. I will state the challenges and then argue that, despite first appearances, neither version poses a serious threat to the pluralist enterprise.[6]

4.1 The Linguistic Instability Challenge

Suppose, with the pluralist, that there are several truth predicates $T_1\langle\ldots\rangle\ldots T_n\langle\ldots\rangle$. Given this plurality of truth predicates, we can introduce a new truth predicate $T_U\langle\ldots\rangle$ as follows:

$$(\text{L-TU}) \qquad (\forall p)(T_U\langle p\rangle \leftrightarrow T_1\langle p\rangle \vee \ldots \vee T_n\langle p\rangle)$$

Nothing prevents us from introducing $T_U\langle\ldots\rangle$. It is syntactically well-formed and disciplined – as any legitimate predicate should be – and (L-TU) gives us a necessary and sufficient condition for its application to sentences. This is very unfortunate for the pluralist. $T_U\langle\ldots\rangle$ is a universal truth predicate because it applies to *exactly* those sentences to which one of $T_1\langle\ldots\rangle\ldots T_n\langle\ldots\rangle$ applies. This means that truth is linguistically uniform. For any sentence whatsoever to be true is simply for $T_U\langle\ldots\rangle$ to apply to it. However, the linguistic uniformity of truth is precisely something that the pluralist wants to reject.

It should be emphasized that in order to get the pluralist in trouble it is not enough that there is *some* predicate that applies to every sentence to which one of $T_1\langle\ldots\rangle\ldots T_n\langle\ldots\rangle$ applies. SENTENCE$\langle\ldots\rangle$ is such a predicate, but it poses no problem for the pluralist. What is needed is a predicate that applies to every sentence to which one of $T_1\langle\ldots\rangle\ldots T_n\langle\ldots\rangle$ applies and *only* to those sentences. Otherwise there would be no reason to think that the predicate is a universal *truth* predicate. As should be clear, $T_U\langle\ldots\rangle$ satisfies this requirement.

According to pluralists like Wright and Lynch, what makes a given predicate a truth predicate is that it satisfies a series of platitudes, or truisms, that delineate the truth concept. A non-exhaustive list would include as platitudes that 'P' is true if, and only if, P (Disquotational Schema); that truth-aptitude is preserved under the operations of negation, conjunction, disjunction, and embedding in conditionals (Embedding); that P is true if, and only if, it corresponds to reality (Correspondence Platitude); and that a proposition can be justified, but not true, and vice versa (Contrast).[7]

If the platitude-based approach were to be adopted, a pluralist response to the Linguistic Instability Challenge could take as its starting point the requirement that $T_U\langle\ldots\rangle$ must satisfy the platitudes in order to qualify as a truth predicate. I will not take this path. One reason for not doing so is that substantial issues regarding platitudes have been raised.[8] However, another reason – specific to this paper – is that the challenge at hand can be defused without any appeal being made to platitudes. This will become clear in due course.

---

[6] Some of the ideas to be explored in this section and the next were first presented in Pedersen 2006, although in a less developed and less focused form.

[7] Wright 1992, p. 734 and 2001, p. 760; Lynch 2001b, p. 730.

[8] See, e.g., the exchange between Cory Wright and Michael Lynch in Wright 2005 and Lynch 2005a.

4.2 Linguistic liberalism

In this section, I will make a concession to the monist by suggesting that the Linguistic Instability Challenge provides a compelling reason to think that there is a universal truth predicate. However, I also argue that this should not detract from the interest in pluralism, because it only suffices to show that certain versions of pluralism can never be real contenders.

The definition of $T_U\langle\ldots\rangle$ offers the pluralist a *new* linguistic item – a predicate – to be added to a language that already contains the pluralist truth predicates $T_1\langle\ldots\rangle\ldots T_n\langle\ldots\rangle$. Is this expansion of language legitimate? I think it is, the explanation being that a certain thesis about language expansion is independently plausible. I will call this thesis *linguistic liberalism.* According to the linguistic liberalist, language-extension is subject only to minimal restrictions such as syntactic well-formedness and discipline. For predicates – i.e. specific linguistic items – conditions of application to terms (of the appropriate type) also need to be supplied.

Given the pluralist truth predicates $T_1\langle\ldots\rangle\ldots T_n\langle\ldots\rangle$, linguistic liberalism licenses the introduction of the universal truth predicate $T_U\langle\ldots\rangle$. $T_U\langle\ldots\rangle$ is syntactically well-formed and comes with a condition of application. In light of this, there is simply no further question whether $T_U\langle\ldots\rangle$ is a legitimate addition. Indeed, in general, for a given range of m-place predicates of order o $P_1\langle\ldots\rangle\ldots P_n\langle\ldots\rangle$ in a language $\mathcal{L}$, linguistic liberalism allows the introduction of a new predicate $P_\vee\langle\ldots\rangle$ that takes in its argument-place m terms of order o and applies just in case one of $P_1\langle\ldots\rangle\ldots P_n\langle\ldots\rangle$ applies to those terms.

I endorse linguistic liberalism and, hence, I see no way to resist the introduction of $T_U\langle\ldots\rangle$. Paired with the pluralist truth predicates $T_1\langle\ldots\rangle\ldots T_n\langle\ldots\rangle$, this yields a commitment to (L-MONISM). That being said, I do not see this as a terrible blow to the pluralist enterprise. Instead it strikes me as something that helps to define it more sharply. Let me say why this is so and offer a number of additional remarks on linguistic liberalism. Hopefully, these remarks will shed some further light on the view and prevent certain misunderstandings.

The Linguistic Instability Challenge only carries any weight against certain forms of pluralism, *viz.* those that incorporate (STRONG L-PLURALISM). This should not, however, detract from the interest taken in pluralism more generally – just like the wild implausibility of solipsism should not detract from the interest taken in antirealism more generally. Now, the sense in which $T_U\langle\ldots\rangle$ helps define the pluralist enterprise more sharply is this: it shows that positions that are committed to (STRONG L-PLURALISM) can never be real contenders. Thus, if the pluralist enterprise is to get off the ground, the pluralist must turn her attention to other positions. The lesson to be learned from the Linguistic Instability Challenge is, therefore, that these positions will have to incorporate (L-PLURALISM) *and* (L-MONISM) – which, as noted, are not mutually exclusive.

While I am happy to grant that linguistic liberalism carries the kind of significance just signaled, it also needs to be made explicit that there are certain other kinds of significance that it does not carry. In particular, it should be made clear that it cannot be metaphysically significant in the sense of being a guarantor of reference. It would be a mistake to think that the introduction of a linguistic item which, by the lights of linguistic liberalism, counts as successful also thereby counts as a case of successful

reference. If this were the case, we would be committed to not only linguistic liberalism, but also a matching *metaphysical* liberalism.

The reason why linguistic liberalism cannot be metaphysically significant in this way is that it is purely a thesis about language. It pertains only to the conditions under which items can be legitimately added to a language. To be metaphysically significant the thesis would have to incorporate a bridge principle linking language and reality. However, it incorporates no such principle, and, thus, the question of reference is a further, separate issue.

4.3 Explanatory asymmetry

I claim that, from a pluralist perspective, the definition of $T_U\langle\ldots\rangle$ involves an explanatory asymmetry that makes $T_1\langle\ldots\rangle\ldots T_n\langle\ldots\rangle$ explanatorily more basic than $T_U\langle\ldots\rangle$ and, so, more important.

Recall that the universal truth predicate $T_U\langle\ldots\rangle$ is defined disjunctively as follows: $(\forall p)(T_U\langle p\rangle \leftrightarrow T_1\langle p\rangle \vee \ldots \vee T_n\langle p\rangle)$. This means that $T_U\langle\ldots\rangle$ is defined *in terms of* $T_1\langle\ldots\rangle \vee \ldots \vee T_n\langle\ldots\rangle$. Hence, according to the pluralist, in order to explain why $T_U\langle\ldots\rangle$ applies to a given sentence one needs to make reference to $T_1\langle\ldots\rangle \vee \ldots \vee T_n\langle\ldots\rangle$: $T_U\langle\ldots\rangle$ applies to p because $T_1\langle p\rangle \vee \ldots \vee T_n\langle p\rangle$. In turn $T_1\langle p\rangle \vee \ldots \vee T_n\langle p\rangle$ is explained by some $T_i\langle\ldots\rangle$'s applying to p (where $1 \leq i \leq n$). Ultimately, then, the explanation of $T_U\langle p\rangle$ is grounded in the application of one of $T_1\langle\ldots\rangle\ldots T_n\langle\ldots\rangle$ to p. On the other hand, the pluralist truth predicates $T_1\langle\ldots\rangle\ldots T_n\langle\ldots\rangle$ are *not* defined in terms of $T_U\langle\ldots\rangle$, and the explanation of $T_i\langle p\rangle$ $(1 \leq i \leq n)$ does not feature $T_U\langle\ldots\rangle$.

The explanatory asymmetry between $T_U\langle\ldots\rangle$ and $T_1\langle\ldots\rangle\ldots T_n\langle\ldots\rangle$ should bring the pluralist considerable comfort. For one, it invites the welcome conclusion that between (L-MONISM) and (L-PLURALISM) – both of which the pluralist is now committed to – the latter thesis is the more significant one. Consequently, her view is still distinctively more pluralist than it is monist, at least at the level of predicates. Furthermore, the explanatory asymmetry between $T_U\langle\ldots\rangle$ and $T_1\langle\ldots\rangle\ldots T_n\langle\ldots\rangle$ supplies the pluralist with an internal guarantee against (STRONG L-MONISM). The reason is that the nature of the universal truth predicate $T_U\langle\ldots\rangle$ is such that $T_1\langle\ldots\rangle\ldots T_n\langle\ldots\rangle$ can never be eliminated. Hence, although the pluralist's commitment to $T_U\langle\ldots\rangle$ can in some sense be considered a small victory for the monist, $T_U\langle\ldots\rangle$ is, at the same time, the very reason why the monist victory can never be complete. $T_U\langle\ldots\rangle$ can never be the only truth predicate.

Let me comment briefly on the scope of the above argument. It does not amount to an argument to the effect that there is no conceivable way for the monist to attempt a definition of $T_1\langle\ldots\rangle\ldots T_n\langle\ldots\rangle$ in terms of $T_U\langle\ldots\rangle$. Here is one such way: for any $1 \leq i \leq n$, $(\forall p)(T_i\langle p\rangle \leftrightarrow (T_U\langle p\rangle \wedge \text{DOMAIN-}i\langle p\rangle))$, where 'DOMAIN-$i\langle p\rangle$' reads '$p$ belongs to the i-domain'. However, the point is that the pluralist can legitimately ignore this in the discussion of the Linguistic Instability Challenge – which, it is recalled, is a challenge that purports to undermine pluralism on its own terms. Hence, the pluralist can legitimately assume that $T_1\langle\ldots\rangle\ldots T_n\langle\ldots\rangle$ enjoy a standing prior to $T_U\langle\ldots\rangle$ – as she would indeed have it – and it is in light of this that the Linguistic Instability Challenge turns out not to pose a serious challenge after all.[9]

---

[9] Here I am indebted to Jason Turner for some very helpful feedback. Note that the proposed monist

5 The Metaphysical Instability Challenge

Having discussed the Linguistic Instability Challenge and argued that it should not be a source of concern for the pluralist, let me now proceed to discuss the Metaphysical Instability Challenge. Let me start by stating the challenge:

According to the pluralist there are several truth properties $T_1^* \ldots T_n^*$.[10] However, given $T_1^* \ldots T_n^*$, there is another truth property of the following nature:

$$(\textsc{m-tu}) \qquad (\forall p^*)(T_U^*(p^*) \leftrightarrow T_1^*(p^*) \vee \ldots \vee T_n^*(p^*))$$

T_U^* is a metaphysically kosher property. Nothing is required for its existence other than the truth properties already granted by the pluralist, and (M-TU) gives a necessary and sufficient condition for T_U^* to be had by a proposition. The existence of T_U^* is bad news for the pluralist, because it is possessed *precisely* by those propositions that have one of $T_1^* \ldots T_n^*$. Thus, contrary to pluralism, truth is found to be metaphysically uniform after all. Any proposition whatsoever is true just in case it is T_U^*.

Observe that, for the purposes of the Metaphysical Instability Challenge, it will not suffice that there is *some* property possessed by every proposition which has one of $T_1^* \ldots T_n^*$. The property of being a proposition is an example of such a property, but it does not land the pluralist in trouble. The kind of property needed must be possessed by every proposition that is true in one of the $T_1^* \ldots T_n^*$ ways and *only* by those propositions. T_U^* satisfies this requirement, and this is what puts pressure on the pluralist to take it seriously as a candidate *truth* property.

Strategies for defusing the Metaphysical Instability Challenge. I will explore two strategies for defusing the Metaphysical Instability Challenge – the first in only a suggestive, tentative manner, the second more confidently. The first strategy attempts to block the challenge by appealing to metaphysical conservatism, as embodied in the sparse conception of properties. As shall transpire, it may be easier said than done to show that this conception should *not* license the existence of T_U^*, which is what the pluralist needs. However, thankfully, the second strategy to be explored makes no appeal to metaphysical conservatism. It grants the existence of a universal truth property, but maintains that its nature renders it explanatorily and metaphysically dependent on the non-universal truth properties and, hence, involves a non-eliminable element of pluralism. The two strategies will be spelled out in Sections 5.1 and 5.2 respectively.

5.1 Strategy 1: the sparse conception of properties

The Metaphysical Instability Challenge purports to show that, in addition to the non-universal truth properties $T_1^* \ldots T_n^*$, the pluralist is committed to the existence of a universal truth property, T_U^*. This commitment would force the pluralist to embrace a

---

characterization of $T_1\langle \ldots \rangle \ldots T_n\langle \ldots \rangle$ in terms of $T_U\langle \ldots \rangle$ makes explicit appeal to domains. The idea of a domain is integral to pluralism. It may be easier said than done to spell this idea out properly, but, for the purposes of this paper, it will be assumed that the task can be executed satisfactorily. For discussion, cf. Lynch 2005b, Sher 2005 and Pedersen and Wright forthcoming.

[10] The superscript '*' is used to distinguish properties from predicates. It will also be used to distinguish propositions from sentences.

form of monism – namely (M-MONISM) – and, as a result, to settle for (M-PLURALISM) rather than (STRONG M-PLURALISM).

It may seem that the reasoning in the Metaphysical Instability Challenge relies on a thesis of *metaphysical liberalism*. According to this thesis, given the existence of the pluralist truth properties $T_1^* \ldots T_n^*$, there simply is no further question whether there is another truth property T_U^* that is possessed by a given proposition if, and only if, it possesses one of the properties $T_1^* \ldots T_n^*$. Of course, there is! Indeed, in general, the metaphysical liberalist adheres to the following principle of property existence:

(ABUNDANCE)   If there is a range of m-place, o-order properties $F_1^* \ldots F_n^*$, then there is also an m-place property $F_\vee^*$ such that $F_\vee^*$ holds of $\langle a_1^* \ldots a_m^* \rangle$ (i.e. m entities of order o) just in case $F_1^*(a_1^* \ldots a_m^*) \vee \ldots \vee F_n^*(a_1^* \ldots a_m^*)$.

The so-called abundant conception of properties is an embodiment of the metaphysical liberalism that goes with (ABUNDANCE). According to this conception, properties can be as disjunctive as you like. Indeed, for any set, there is a property possessed by exactly the members of that set – namely, being a member of that set.

The abundant conception stands in contrast to the sparse conception of properties. As suggested by its name, the sparse conception of properties embodies a metaphysically conservative stance. It dictates sparseness when it comes to property ontology. Properties are not (that) easy to come by. In order for a given range of entities to share a property the entities must enjoy a qualitative similarity – in the jargon, they must carve the world at its joints. To illustrate, consider the property of being a tiger. Animals that have this property share a whole range of characteristics. They are all feline creatures of the Panthera genus, have stripes, and are obligate carnivores – just to mention a few. These shared characteristics indicate a qualitative similarity, and hence, according to the sparse property theorist, there is a property – being a tiger – that all such animals share. The same kind of story can be told for the natural numbers. They all have a successor and equal themselves when added to zero. Again, the shared features indicate a qualitative similarity which, in turn, means that there is a property that they share.

However, is there such a thing as the property of being a tiger or a natural number? Here the verdict is less clear. For it is by no means clear that there is any qualitative similarity between tigers and natural numbers. Or, if there is, consider the question whether there is a monadic property that applies to a given thing just in case it has *some* monadic property. Presumably, there is no qualitative denominator common to all things that have a monadic property. An abundant theorist will, of course, maintain that this does not matter at all and, displaying her metaphysically liberal ways, insist that there is a property shared by all objects that possess some monadic property. The sparse theorist, on the other hand, will take the opposing view – embracing the non-existence of the 'property' due to a lack of qualitative likeliness.

If it was clear that the existence of T_U^* could only be granted against the background of (ABUNDANCE), an obvious line of defence against the Metaphysical Instability Challenge would be for the pluralist to endorse the sparse conception of properties and show that T_U^* does not qualify as a property by the lights of this conception. In appealing to the sparse conception, the pluralist would not be illegitimately helping herself to too

much. She may invoke any conception of properties whatsoever. After all, the contention was that pluralism is *inherently* unstable.

Even with the freedom to choose any conception of properties, the crucial task for the pluralist will be to establish that the existence of T_U^* is not licensed by the relevant conception. Case in hand: show that the existence of T_U^* is ruled out by the sparse conception. One attempt at this runs as follows: recall that the initial thought motivating pluralism was that what counts as truth varies according to what subject-matter we are dealing with. Truth, as it applies to medium-sized dry goods, brings on a commitment to realism about the relevant range of entities. When it comes to humour, however, truth appears to carry no such commitment. What it is for something to be funny, say, amounts to nothing more than being judged to be so (perhaps in circumstances that involve some degree of idealization). Reflection on the nature of truth across domains thus gives us reason not to expect uniformity – which might naturally be interpreted as a rejection of the idea that there is any qualitative similarity between the pluralist truth properties $T_1^* \ldots T_n^*$. Against the background of the sparse conception, this means that the universal truth property T_U^* does not exist.

For the moment let us just suppose that this line of reasoning drives home the desired conclusion for the pluralist and briefly consider what consequences this would have. It should first be noted that the combination of the endorsement of $T_1^* \ldots T_n^*$ and the rejection of T_U^* amounts to an endorsement of (STRONG M-PLURALISM). That is, there is a range of truth properties, none of which is a universal one.[11] As a result, the pluralist would be committed to the following trio of theses: (L-MONISM), (L-PLURALISM), and (STRONG M-PLURALISM). Looking at this trio, one immediate observation would thus be that linguistic theses and their metaphysical counterparts cannot be presumed to always go hand in hand – in particular, that one may be linguistically liberal, while being metaphysically conservative.

It the argument against T_U^* compelling? Presumably not as it stands – which is why I said earlier that it would only be explored in a suggestive, tentative manner. This, of course, is compatible with its proving to be a strong argument in an appropriately developed form.

The crucial point left in need of further discussion by what was said above is whether T_U^* might qualify as a legitimate property *even by the lights of the sparse conception.* To settle this issue and, hence, the issue whether the sparse conception of properties can effectively block the Metaphysical Instability Challenge would require additional discussion of qualitative similarity and its relation to sparseness. The task of addressing this issue in greater detail will be left for another occasion. Here I will rest content with having set the stage for further work – indicating what line the pluralist will push, but

---

[11] The commitment to (STRONG M-PLURALISM) is consonant with the kind of pluralism that appears to be attributable to Wright, at least after a bit of footwork. *Truth and Objectivity* is quite predicate-heavy, and it seems to me that no definite conclusions can be drawn about his alethic commitments at the metaphysical level purely on the basis of that work. In later work, Wright himself grants that *Truth and Objectivity* was not clear when it comes to the nature of pluralism (cf. 1996, p. 925), but also sheds further light on the view. The key suggestion is to understand pluralism as the thesis that truth allows for variable, or multiple, realization across domains. Thus, truth might be realized by one property in the physical world, say, while other properties serve as realizers in other domains. There is no property that applies across the board. See Wright 1996, p. 924, and Wright 2001, p. 752, p. 761. Philip Pettit 1996, pp. 985–987) also proposes to look at Wright's view in this way – although, unlike Wright, he suggests that the approach is best characterized as a form of monism.

likewise highlighting what an immediate reaction from the monist will be.[12] Thankfully, leaving matters open in the respect just indicated does not undermine the prospects of a pluralist response to the Metaphysical Instability Challenge. This is because the challenge can be addressed in a manner very similar to the manner in which the Linguistic Instability Challenge was addressed. Doing so is the next task on the agenda.

5.2   Strategy 2: metaphysical asymmetry

Suppose, for the sake of the argument, that the pluralist grants the existence of T_U^* (perhaps because it qualifies as a sparse property, after all). In that case she would be forced to downgrade her metaphysical pluralism from (STRONG M-PLURALISM) to (M-PLURALISM) and, at the same time, get a free – but perhaps unwelcome – upgrade from zero monism to (M-MONISM). Let me support the claim that this situation is not as bad as it may seem at first. The support I will provide is an asymmetry argument very similar in spirit to the one given in Section 4.3.

Consider the universal truth property T_U^*. From a pluralist point of view, its nature is specified in terms of the truth properties $T_1^* \ldots T_n^*$. This reflects metaphysical or explanatory dependence. The relationship is asymmetrical and, as shall transpire shortly, the asymmetry favours $T_1^* \ldots T_n^*$ as being more fundamental or basic than T_U^*.

If the pluralist is to explain why a proposition p^* is T_U^*, she will say *because* p^* is T_1^* or $\ldots$ or T_n^*. If, in turn, the pluralist is to explain why p^* is T_1^* or $\ldots$ or T_n^*, she will say *because* p^* is T_i^* (where $1 \leq i \leq n$). This shows that, ultimately, what grounds a proposition's possession of the universal truth property T_U^* is its possession of one of the truth properties $T_1^* \ldots T_n^*$. The explanatory relationship is asymmetrical. The chain of explanation cannot be reversed. That is, we cannot say that p^* is T_i^* because it is T_1^* or $\ldots$ or T_n^* (again, where $1 \leq i \leq n$), and then proceed to say that p^* is T_1^* or $\ldots$ or T_n^* because it is T_U^* – thus ultimately grounding the proposition's possession of one of $T_1^* \ldots T_n^*$ in its possession of the universal truth property T_U^*. In this particular case, one reason why the reversal is clearly misguided is that the first step gets the explanatory relationship between a disjunction and its disjuncts the wrong way around. The fact that a disjunct obtains can explain why a disjunction (in which it figures) does, but the converse does not hold.

Just to give an illustration of how bad things can go if one does not respect the asymmetry of explanation, consider the (good) explanatory chain: the street is wet because it has been raining. It has been raining because atmospheric water vapour condensed. Now, suppose that we try to reverse this explanatory chain. The result is this: atmospheric water vapour condensed, because it has been raining. It has been raining because the street is wet. This reversal is rather unfortunate. If it got things right, it would seem safe to say that current-day meteorology highly underestimates the significance of wet streets.

The explanatory relations just highlighted track metaphysical dependencies. A proposition p^* is T_U^* *in virtue of* its being T_1^* or $\ldots$ or T_n^*. In turn a proposition is

---

[12] It should be noted that I was less tentative in my assessment of the pluralist line in Pedersen 2006. As Jason Turner has suggested to me, the literature on naturalness, sparseness, and qualitative similarity is likely to be a good place to look when taking the discussion further. Key sources include work by David Lewis (e.g. 1983 and 1986) and work by Ted Sider that builds on that of Lewis (e.g. 1995 and 1996).

T_1^* or . . . or T_n^* *in virtue of* its being T_i^* $(1 \leq i \leq n)$. That is, facts about specific truth properties metaphysically ground facts about the disjunction of $T_1^* \ldots T_n^*$, which then metaphysically ground facts about T_U^*. The metaphysical dependence signaled by the in-virtue-of relation is asymmetrical, so the chain of metaphysical dependence just specified is not reversible.[13]

As with the response to the Linguistic Instability Challenge, let me comment briefly on the scope of the argument just given. It does not suffice to show that there is no conceivable way for the monist to characterize $T_1^* \ldots T_n^*$ in terms of T_U^*. Here is one such way: for any $1 \leq i \leq n$, $(\forall p^*)(T_i^*(p^*) \leftrightarrow (T_U^*(p^*) \wedge \text{DOMAIN-}i(p^*)))$, where 'DOMAIN-$i(p^*)$' reads 'proposition p^* belongs to the i-domain'. But, again, the point is that the pluralist can legitimately ignore this when taking on the task of responding to the relevant challenge. For the Metaphysical Instability Challenge was supposed to render pluralism inherently unstable. To provide an effective counter to the challenge it suffices for the pluralist to point to the explanatory asymmetry and metaphysical dependence that characterize the relationship between $T_1^* \ldots T_n^*$ and T_U^*. As seen, the former range of properties are explanatorily and metaphysically prior to – and more fundamental than – T_U^*. While facts about $T_1^* \ldots T_n^*$ metaphysically ground and explain facts about T_U^*, the opposite is not the case. This also suffices to show that, although T_U^* forces a commitment to (M-MONISM), its pluralist counterpart (M-PLURALISM) is the more significant thesis of the two from a pluralist point of view.

Now, the pluralist commitment to T_U^* might be considered a small victory for the monist. However, this monist commitment should also bring some comfort to the pluralist. For, as argued, T_U^* is metaphysically and explanatorily dependent on the pluralist truth properties $T_1^* \ldots T_n^*$. This means that, in effect, the commitment to T_U^* serves as a guarantee that (M-MONISM) will never collapse into (STRONG M-MONISM).

6   Conclusion

Is alethic pluralism a stable view? Not so according to the Instability Challenge: straightforward reasoning can be deployed to undermine it. In this paper, I have defended alethic pluralism against the Instability Challenge. A distinction was drawn between two versions of the challenge – one formulated in terms of predicates, the other in terms of properties. It was argued that the pluralist has the resources to defuse both, the main point being that there is an explanatory asymmetry between the pluralist truth predicates (properties) and the monist truth predicate (property). This asymmetry renders the pluralist truth predicates (properties) more basic, or fundamental, than the monist truth predicate (property) – which suffices for an effective response to the challenges. In the discussion of the Metaphysical Instability Challenge, it was likewise – but somewhat tentatively – suggested that the pluralist may be able to formulate a response to the challenge by appealing to the sparse conception of properties.

On the basis of the considerations and arguments offered, I conclude that pluralism has been stabilized. The Instability Challenge – in whichever form – can be adequately addressed.

---

[13] For an illuminating study of metaphysical dependence, see Rosen ms. Edwards 2008 endorses something like the kind of explanatory asymmetry appealed to in this section, but in a different context.

References

Beall, J. C. (2000), 'On Mixed Inferences and Pluralism about Truth Predicates', *The Philosophical Quarterly* Vol. 50, pp. 380–382.

Dodd, J. (2002), 'Recent work on truth', *Philosophical Books* Vol. 43(4), pp. 279–291.

Edwards, D. (2008), 'How to solve the problem of mixed conjunctions', *Analysis* Vol. 68(2), pp. 143–149.

Lewis, D. (1983), 'New Work for a Theory of Universals', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* Vol. 61, pp. 8–55.

Lewis, D. (1986), *On the Plurality of Worlds* (Oxford, Blackwell).

Lynch, M. P. (ed.) (2001a), *The Nature of Truth* (Cambridge, MIT Press).

Lynch, M. P. (2001b), 'A Functionalist Theory of Truth', in Lynch 2001a, pp. 723–750.

Lynch, M. P. (2004), 'Truth and Multiple Realizability', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* Vol. 82(3), pp. 384–408.

Lynch, M. P. (2005a), 'Alethic Functionalism and our Folk Theory of Truth', *Synthese* Vol. 145(1), pp. 29–43.

Lynch, M. P. (2005b), 'Replies to Critics', in *Philosophical Books* Vol. 46, pp. 331–342.

Lynch, M. P. (2006), 'ReWrighting Pluralism', *The Monist* Vol. 89(1), pp. 63–84.

Newman, A. (2002), *The Correspondence Theory of Truth: An Essay on the Metaphysics of Predication* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

Pedersen, N. J. (2006), 'What can the problem of mixed inferences teach us about alethic pluralism?', *Monist* Vol. 89(1), pp. 103–117.

Pedersen, N. J. and C. D. Wright (eds.): *Truth and Pluralism* (Oxford, Oxford University Press), in progress.

Pedersen, N. J. and C. D. Wright (forthcoming): 'A framework for alethic pluralism', to appear in Pedersen and Wright (eds.).

Pettit, P. (1996), 'Realism and Truth: A Comment on Crispin Wright's Truth and Objectivity', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* Vol. 56(4), pp. 883–890.

Rosen, G. (ms), 'Metaphysical Dependence', manuscript.

Sainsbury, M (1996), 'Crispin Wright: *Truth and Objectivity*', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* Vol. 56(4), pp. 899–904.

Sher, G. (1999), 'On the Possibility of a Substantive Theory of Truth', *Synthese* Vol. 117, pp. 133–172.

Sher, G. (2004), 'In Search of a Substantive Theory of Truth', *Journal of Philosophy* Vol. 101, pp. 5–36.

Sher, G. (2005), 'Functionalist Pluralism', *Philosophical Books* Vol. 46, pp. 311–330.

Sider, T. (1995), 'Sparseness, Immanence, and Naturalness', *Noûs* Vol. 29, pp. 360–377.

Sider, T. (1996), 'Naturalness and Arbitrariness', *Philosophical Studies* Vol. 81, pp. 283–301.

Tappolet, C. (1997), 'Mixed inferences: a problem for pluralism about truth predicates', *Analysis* Vol. 57, pp. 209–210.

Tappolet, C. (2000), 'Truth Pluralism and Many-Valued Logics: A Reply to Beall', *The Philosophical Quarterly* Vol. 50, pp. 382–385.

Vision, G. (2004), *Veritas: the Correspondence Theory and its Critics* (Cambridge, MIT Press).

Williamson, T. (1994), 'A Critical Study of Truth and Objectivity', *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* Vol. 30, pp. 130–144.

Wright, C. D. (2005), 'On the Functionalization of Pluralist Approaches to Truth', *Synthese* Vol. 145(1), pp. 1–28.

Wright, C. (1992), *Truth and Objectivity* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press).

Wright, C. (1996), 'Response to Commentators', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* Vol. 56(4), pp. 911–941.

Wright, C. (2001), 'Minimalism, Deflationism, Pragmatism, Pluralism', in Lynch (2001a), pp. 751–789.