

A Review of William Alston's *A Realist Conception of Truth*

Olusegun Steven Samuel¹ Akinola Mohammed Akomolafe²

1. Department of Philosophy, University of Lagos, Akoka, Lagos, Nigeria

2. Department of Philosophy, Lagos State University, Ojo, Lagos, Nigeria

*Email of corresponding author: meetseggsus@yahoo.com

A Realist Conception of Truth has been generally praised as a serious and insightful work on epistemology. This William P. Alston's text is directed at those who are concerned with epistemological studies, those interested in how to contemplate on truth, and those epistemologists seeking for justification of beliefs, statements, sentences and propositions. In this text, the problem of truth receives a critical exploration in Alston's polemic of realism. Alston's goal is to defend a version of realism. Ultimately, he argues that the most defensible version of realist theories is alethic realism, which suggests simply that, "A statement is true if and only if what the statement is about is as the statement says it is. Alternatively in terms of propositions, the conception is such that the schema 'it is true that p if and only if p yields a (necessary, conceptually, analytically) true statement for any substitution instance'" (Alston, 1997: 1). As a matter of fact, the author's view is a cross reference to the issue of truth discussed from the days of Socrates to Edmund Gettier; then to our time.

From Ancient to Contemporary epoch, philosophers are continually raising questions concerning the nature of truth and how it can be cogitated. While it is a truism that there is no monolithic idea on how truth can be derived, there is nonetheless a consensus that truth is invaluable. Alston's book argues that the traditional epistemic accounts of truth (correspondence, pragmatic and coherence theories) are misguided approaches to truth. What is truth? And, how is truth to be discovered? These questions though appear simple, have generated controversies in different philosophical quarters. Thus, Alston thinks that it is appropriate that one considers them anew. Questions that should be pounding on a critic's mind include: What does this book seek to explain? What is truth to Alston? How is Alston's theory of truth different from other theories of truth? Is Alston affirming or denying the idea of truth? In short, what is the book all about?

According to Alston, the discourse on truth is a crucial aspect of knowledge. However, he thinks that privilege theories on truth that we have today have not adequately (or perhaps, have not correctly) explored the nature and meaning of truth. In a sense, Alston is suggesting that traditional accounts of truth, which he calls—epistemic conceptions of truth, are theoretically misguided. Examples of epistemic theories of truth that Alston identifies include coherence and pragmatic theories of truth. These theories, according to him, consider the issue of truth from epistemic angles, wherein notion such as justification, verification, certainty, rationality, knowledge or general consensus is considered as the criterion of truth. However, Alston rejects these epistemic notions as bases for truth. Alston (1997: 7) notes thus: "As for epistemic accounts, they take the truth of a statement or belief to consist of some positive epistemic status of the statement or belief—its being justified (in conditions of some idealised sort), or being adequately supported by evidence, or by being 'warrantably assertable', or cohering with some system of beliefs. Traditional coherence and pragmatist theories of truth fall under this rubric, as well as some recent views."

Apparently, the author maintains that, "In particular, and looking forward to the main alternative to this account of truth, there are no epistemic requirements for the truth of any statement" (Alston, 1997: 5). He presents alethic realism as an alternative to epistemic theories of truth. Having noted that there is no need for epistemic standards for a belief, statement or proposition to be adjudged true, Alston goes on to explore how truth is to be considered. Let us sketch what Alston is refuting and what he is affirming in his book before we consider his major arguments and conclusions.

A Realist Conception of Truth focuses on refuting the following: (1) deflationary accounts of truth (which deny that truth has a property); (2) Michael Dummett and Hilary Putnam's anti-realist epistemic theories (which suggest that the mind must add structure and content to the world, leading to the thesis that objectivity of the external world is impossible), (3) epistemic accounts of truth (verificationist, relativist, coherentist, and pragmatist theories) and epistemic standards for truth-value, and (4) the use of sentences, beliefs and statements as bearers of truth.

What is it that the book is affirming? According to Alston's theory, there are at least five dimensions of alethic realism. Hence, the book is aimed at arguing that: (a) epistemic notions such as verification, rationality and certainty are crucial as regards to knowledge and its validation, but these do not form part of the conception of

truth. To Alston (1997: 6), “It is by virtue of the meaning of ‘true’ that a statement is true if and only if what the statement says is the case actually is the case”, (b) the discussions of epistemic justification should be discontinued since many people would be removed from discourse on truth if no corroboration can be made concerning their beliefs (rather, he notes that when our beliefs are formed in a ‘reliable way’ and we have ‘adequate grounds’ for them, these are enough or desirable for our purpose of cognition than relying on justification), (c) truth has a property (that is, Alston believes that propositions are the primary bearers of truth-value in the sense that it is propositions that one has in mind when one says that a statement, belief or sentence is true. In other words, “For what is asserted or what is believed, the content of an assertion or a belief, is a proposition” (Alston, 1997: 15), (d) we cannot have justification without truth in the same way that we cannot have knowledge without truth (hence truth is the most fundamental property in epistemology), (e) there is a need to demarcate the concept of truth from its property. (Alston (1997: 37) notes that, “...the property of truth may have various features that are not reflected in our concept of truth”), and (f) the truth maker is to be made known by the truth bearer. Thus, Alston posits that, “...the truth maker is something that is objective vis-a-vis the truth bearer. It has to do with what the truth bearer is about, rather than with some ‘internal’ or ‘intrinsic’ feature of the truth bearer, such as its epistemic status, its place in a system of propositions, or the confidence with which it is held” (Alston, 1997: 7-8). In this last stance, Alston seems to argue that truth has to do with a potential truth bearer to a reality or state of affair beyond it (this is ‘fact’ that is external to the knower).

As a realist, Alston ventures into a discourse on alethic realism and truth by identifying that there are different shades of realism. These include naïve (direct) realism, critical realism, scientific realism, moral realism, among others. Naïve realism holds that our senses provide us with immediate awareness of the external world. This position suggests that objects have size, shape, texture, colour and weight, and that we can objectively perceive them as they are. That is, objects retain their content (properties) independent of whether we perceive them or not. Critical realism posits that properties of objects such as primary sense data (weight, shape, size, etc) are inherent in objects, whereas secondary qualities such as odour, colour, etc. are not part of the object (that is, secondary sense data do not actually represent any external objects). Scientific realism notes that certain objects are real. Alston takes realism to be a better exploration of the state of affair, although he differentiates his stance (alethic realism) from the aforementioned realist postures. His realism focuses more on truth, than justifying the external world. That the external world and objects exist independent of the knowing mind, to Alston, are not something that a reasonable theory will deny since truth deals with the existence of what is asserted. Thus Alston (1997: 8) says that, “...if our concept of truth is a realist one, then all our beliefs owe their truth value to the fact that they are related in a certain way to a reality beyond themselves.” Later on, Alston shows the affinities among different segments of realism, and affirms that it is the distinguishing features of alethic realism that “...everything we believe can be assessed for truth value” and that, “... realism is more widely and more naturally used for a variety of positions that take something or other to really exist” (Alston, 1997: 8).

One of the book’s strengths is the opportunity it affords us to examine the issue of the bearer of truth-value, thereby nullifying the use of sentences and statements as the bearers of truth. Alston argues that the reasons why sentences cannot be employed as truth bearers include: (a) a single sentence may have different truth-values or diverse meanings, and (b) even a given sentence with one and the same meaning may be used to make different statements. For instance, the author opines that when a sentence such as “Harold Stassen is still running” is uttered, there is an ambiguity on whether ‘running’ should be interpreted as Stassen is moving or he is contesting for an office in an election. Alston (1997: 10) puts this thus, “That sentence can be used to state that Stassen is still locomoting by moving his legs rapidly, and also to state that Stassen is still offering himself as a candidate for an election. It may well be that at a certain moment; one of these statements is true and the other false.” To him, it is essential that a bearer of truth should have only one definite truth value. While he argues that sentence cannot be a truth bearer, he nurses the opinion that, “The attribution of truth values to statement-making sentence token escapes” (Alston, 1997: 11) all the objections accruable to sentence or sentence type. The author (1997: 11) says that, “A sentence type is what is ordinarily called a ‘sentence’, a unit of language that can be uttered, used, inscribed on many different occasions. A sentence token can be thought of as one of those utterances or inscriptions of the sentence type.” Even at that, he argues that only indicative sentence type or sentence token can be used as a bearer of truth. Against this backdrop, performative and evaluative sentences are excluded as truth bearers. Alston (1997: 24) avers that, “The basic reason has to do with the fact that we speak of statements (assertions) as true or false but that we do not ascribe truth values to requests, promises, appointing, expressions of gratitude, hopes, doubts, or wonderings. Nor is this selectivity arbitrary. The reason for it is that in making statements and holding beliefs, we commit ourselves to the propositional contents being true.”

Moreover, he rejects the use of beliefs and statements as the bearers of truth-value. Alston believes that when the notions of ‘true’ and ‘false’ are applicable to the contents of beliefs and statements, then their truth-values can be

deduced from beliefs and statements as bearers of truth. But Alston thinks that there is ambiguity also in what beliefs and statements connote. He says that statements (assertions) and beliefs (judgments) exhibit what can be depicted as act-object ambiguity. He writes that, “An ‘assertion’ can either be an act of asserting or what is asserted. A belief can also be a certain psychological state one is in—perhaps a certain neural disposition or pattern of activity—or what the statement is ‘directed onto’, what is believed” (Alston, 1997: 14). Since there is an uncertainty of meaning of belief/statement as acts or objects (that is, the act of asserting or psychological state on the one hand, and the object that is asserted or believed on the other hand), Alston thinks that the notion of proposition can better resolve this ambiguity. Alston (1997: 14) reiterates that, “It is clear to me that truth values attach primarily to what is believed (asserted), and secondarily, if at all, to the state of belief or the act of asserting.” In this respect, therefore, he maintains that it is on the content of a belief that truth is based. “For what is asserted or what is believed, the content of an assertion or a belief, is a proposition” (Alston, 1997: 15). Apparently, he holds that nothing can be a proposition unless it has a single or determinate truth-value (Alston, 1997: 17).

He describes propositions as states of affairs that may or may not obtain. In other words, a proposition may be used to claim that something is the case. That is, it may be used to argue that a state of affairs is or is not. In this case, “A state of affairs that obtains can be called fact” (Alston, 1997: 18). Alston insists that when a state of affairs is actually what it was claimed to be, then such a proposition is true, otherwise it is false. To be more explicit, Alston gives an example thus: ‘Gold is malleable’. Proposition has both subject and predicate terms. Gold is the subject, which claims to have the content or property of malleability. The point that he strikes here is that if ‘malleability’ is the property attributed to ‘gold’, the truthfulness of the proposition that ‘Gold is malleable’ can be shown by establishing whether the said property is actually in gold or not. This is what is required in the establishment of a proposition’s truth-value. The author (1997: 21) then submits that, “My central concern here is the articulation and defense of a realist conception of truth, in opposition to epistemic conceptions.” Hence, the maxim of truth is captured thus: “A proposition is true if and only if what the maker of a statement with that proposition as content is attributing to what the statement is about, in making that statement, does actually what the statement is about” (Alston, 1997: 26). This maxim is called the T-schema (where T stands for ‘truth’) alluding to Tarski’s view.

Following Tarski’s propositional truth which suggests that ‘X is true if p’ (which Alston calls the T-schema), he (Alston) formulates an instance (T-statement) thus: ‘grass is green if and only if grass is green’. The author gets an instance of Tarski’s T-schema by replacing p with a declarative sentence, and ‘X’ with an expression referring to that sentence. Alston, then, argues that, “The T-schema is not a statement but a statement schema, a form of statement. And each instantiation thereof, each T-statement, provides a condition for the truth of a particular proposition, not a general statement of what it is for a proposition to be true” (Alston, 1997: 27-28). Accordingly, he notes that if “...we understand that any T-statement is conceptually, analytically true, true by virtue of the meanings of the terms involved, in particular the term ‘true’, then we thereby understand what it is for a proposition to be true” (Alston, 1997: 27) in a realist sense.

The problem with Tarski’s view is that true is formulated using sentence, rather than proposition. Thus, to make Tarski’s T-schema wears a universal appeal; the author suggests that this can be done in two ways. Firstly, it is important to make the T-sentence not to refer to any entity; hence he says that we can universally generalise the T-schema thus: “The proposition that p is true if p” (Alston, 1997: 28). In this case, the universal generalisation of the T-schema is true if and only if substitution instances are true. The basic idea of the realist conception of truth is to specify when the content (property) of a position is realised (or not) by asserting what would make the position the case. While Alston affirms largely that Tarski’s semantic conception of truth though does not face the criticisms leveled against sentences as bearers of truth, yet he does not see any good reason why the latter held that the material criterion of adequacy is relevant for the definition of truth in the T-schema.

Apparently, Alston presents a minimalist account of truth which, to him, contrasts with correspondence, pragmatic, coherence and epistemic theories of truth. While these latter theories (pragmatism, coherentism, etc.) are minimalist accounts, his criticisms are directed against correspondence theory in the main. Firstly, the connections between realist conception of truth (minimalist theory) and correspondence theory of truth are shown. These include the fact that (a) “...a true proposition is made true by a fact” (Alston, 1997: 32) and (b) “...there is an identity of content between proposition and fact” (Alston, 1997: 33) However, Alston raises a number of criticisms against what he describes as full-dress correspondence theory when he notes that: (a) in the T-schema “The proposition that p is true if and only if p” is not a definition of truth, whereas scholars like Russell and Wittgenstein who are advocates of correspondence theory seem to define truth, and (b) his minimalist account does not claim that the meaning of a sentence is synonymous with the fact, whereas the

advocates of correspondence theory hold that facts are synonymous to meaning. Alston (1997: 34) writes that, “The meaning of ‘The proposition that lemons are sour is true’ cannot be the same as that of ‘Lemons are sour’. The former has conceptual content which is absent from the latter. One could understand ‘lemons are sour’ perfectly well without any concept of truth whatever.” Though, he affirms that minimalism is a matter of degree, yet he thinks that his position that ‘The proposition that is true that p if p’ fits well into the minimalist framework.

On the question: what it is for a truth-value bearer to be true? Alston stresses that his realist conception of truth defends a different thesis when compared with epistemic theories. The author maintains that his idea of truth (and proposition) goes to examine features that are captured in the concept as well as outside the concept used in expressing a given statement. This, he thinks, is not the case in epistemic theories. So, he reformulates his minimalist account of truth thus: “The proposition is that p is true if it is a fact that p” (Alston, 1997: 38) and thus argues then that it is only by the virtue of the same content can a proposition and fact be related (Alston, 1997: 39). Nonetheless, he grants that correspondence theory is minimalist in this respect since truth and correspondence are tightly connected, though he rejects the claim that fact is dependent on language. It seems aptly to think in this respect, Alston imagines that there are “...no reason to suppose that facts are not objectively real” (Alston, 1997: 41). He goes on to separate his minimalist realism from deflationary theories. He sees his position to be a minimalist account that is committed to arguing that truth has a property, whereas deflationary stance is a contra-position. The author (1997: 42) rejects the position of deflationists because “...deflationists typically employ the T-schema to argue that since ‘The proposition that p is true’ is equivalent to ‘p’, in saying the former one is asserting only that p. Hence it is a mistake to suppose that the former involves the predication of a property of truth to a proposition or to anything else.” He notes that this critique against his position is called the redundancy theory and it is suggested quite clearly by F.P. Ramsey’s counter-position which opines that, “‘It is true that Caesar was murdered’ means no more than that Caesar was murdered” (Alston, 1997: 42). Other criticisms against Alston’s position are considered by him, especially Strawson’s stance that the statement ‘it is true that p’ (the T-schema) does not serve a sentence-making role or does not make any statement on its own right or that it is not applied to anything. Alston, to be sure, provides good reasons how such criticism can be nullified. First, Alston argues that when one affirms a statement as true one does so by attributing the notion of truth to a thing—what is asserted. Secondly, he argues that a belief counts as knowledge only if it is true. Thirdly, he argues that utterances do have concessive force.

The book’s greatest values are its trans-disciplinary nature and concern for practical implantation of truth in epistemological and other intellectual parlance, as well as in every aspect of life. Without a paradigm shift in 20th century epistemological posture, we stand to lose far more benefits of knowledge’s ingredients than epistemologists would imagine. For Alston’s epistemological guidebook to help prevent such losses, its adoption of proposition as bearer of truth is unquestionable. However, we doubt that there could be a monolithic way of deciding what the property of truth is if we do not grasp a language correctly. This makes the emphasis on language by the verificationist crucial to identifying the property of truth. While we consider Alston’s position more tenable when compared to several 20th century perspectives on truth, we should not over-exaggerate its logical import. A further reading and a contentious engagement with the full chapters of the book will show whether Alston succeeds or not in his epistemological project.

Reference

Alston, W. P. (1997), *A Realist Conception of Truth*, New York: Cornell University Press.

The IISTE is a pioneer in the Open-Access hosting service and academic event management. The aim of the firm is Accelerating Global Knowledge Sharing.

More information about the firm can be found on the homepage:
<http://www.iiste.org>

CALL FOR JOURNAL PAPERS

There are more than 30 peer-reviewed academic journals hosted under the hosting platform.

Prospective authors of journals can find the submission instruction on the following page: <http://www.iiste.org/journals/> All the journals articles are available online to the readers all over the world without financial, legal, or technical barriers other than those inseparable from gaining access to the internet itself. Paper version of the journals is also available upon request of readers and authors.

MORE RESOURCES

Book publication information: <http://www.iiste.org/book/>

IISTE Knowledge Sharing Partners

EBSCO, Index Copernicus, Ulrich's Periodicals Directory, JournalTOCS, PKP Open Archives Harvester, Bielefeld Academic Search Engine, Elektronische Zeitschriftenbibliothek EZB, Open J-Gate, OCLC WorldCat, Universe Digital Library, NewJour, Google Scholar

