NOTA CRÍTICA/CRITICAL NOTICE

Truth Ascriptions: A New Nature of Truth

David Bordonaba Plou

The Nature of Truth: An Updated Approach to the Meaning of Truth Ascriptions, by MARÍA JOSÉ FRÁPOLLI, DORDRECHT, SPRINGER VERLAG, 2013, pp. 169, € 113.00.

I. INTRODUCTION

Truth has a kaleidoscopic nature. Firstly, in natural languages we can find the concept of truth under different guises: as a predicate ('is true'), as an adverb ('truly'), as an abstract name ('the truth') or as a sentential operator ('It is true that'). Secondly, the different theories on truth available have given priority to different features of truth, because truth can perform different semantic and pragmatic tasks: there are fact-stating uses, disquotational uses, prosentence-forming uses or truth-ascribing uses. In her *The Nature of Truth: An Updated Approach to the Meaning of Truth Ascriptions* [2013] M. J. Frápolli defends that contemporary philosophy of language can provide suitable tools to offer a systematized view of the concept of truth. More specifically, she presents a novel approach to the meaning of truth ascriptions that disentangles some perennial debates which surround the notion of truth. Since truth ascriptions are prosentences, they are complex propositional variables that can express any propositional content. In the same way in which demonstratives refer to a salient object, truth ascriptions designate a salient propositional content or set of contents. As has been convincingly argued by some of the defendants of the prosentential theory of truth [Ramsey (1991); Grover et al. (1975); Williams (1992)], from a syntactical standpoint, truth fulfils a very specific task in a truth ascription: it serves to transform a designation of a propositional content into an expression of this

propositional content. However, the author adds, from a pragmatic viewpoint, truth ascriptions can have different pragmatic roles: on the one hand, i) they are used to move contents across contexts (what the author calls *the horizontal role*); and, on the other hand, ii) they are used to "pick up" a given content, directing the attention of the audience to it (what the author calls *the vertical role*). Besides, the author proposes a detailed taxonomy that identifies four types of truth ascriptions. Depending on the number of the contents that are expressed, a truth ascription can be singular or general; and depending on the explicitness of these contents, they can be exhibitive or blind. Accordingly, a truth ascription can be singular exhibitive (e.g. 'It is true that Rachel's car is grey'), singular blind (e.g. 'What Layla has said is true'), general exhibitive (e.g. 'The theory of evolution is true'), and general blind (e.g. 'All that Harry has said is true').

The plan for this critical note is the following: §II presents the classification of the different truth ascriptions made by the author, explaining them in detail. §III is devoted to explaining the horizontal and vertical roles of truth ascriptions as set out in the work. Finally, in Section §IV, I will make some critical points. Firstly, I will show that the division of truth ascriptions into exhibitive and blind fits well for singular truth ascriptions, but not for general ones. And, secondly, I will explain the benefits from replacing the author's distinction between the horizontal and the vertical roles of truth ascriptions with my own distinction between *content-importing* and *content-exporting* roles. My interest will focus on the taxonomy of truth ascriptions and the pragmatic roles they can perform and, to do so, I will be forced to give up discussion of other points of the book: namely, the consequences that the prosententialist theory of truth has for the liar paradox [Frápolli (2013), pp. 87-111], the reasons to interpret Ramsey's theory of truth as a prosententialist one [Frápolli (2013), pp. 111-13], or the redundancy of the truth operator and the different types of redundancies [Frápolli (2013), pp. 114-126]. These points are technical applications derived from her general theoretical framework, and will be left aside in order to focus on what I take to be the core theses of the view defended in this book: the aforementioned taxonomy and the different pragmatic roles that truth might perform.

II. Truth Ascriptions: a Classification Proposal

Truth ascriptions are complex propositional variables. As variables, indeed variables occupying sentential positions, they belong to a wider

category, the family of proforms. The best-known kind of proform has been the family of pronouns [Kaplan (1989)], but the rest of proforms (proadjectives, proadverbs and prosentences) work in a similar way to pronouns: they have a fixed lexical meaning, but only the context in which they are used can supply their semantic values. For example, expressions like 'he' or 'she' belong to the grammatical category of pronouns, and as nominal variables, they will refer, respectively, to a male and a female salient in context. Expressions like 'here' or 'there' belong to the grammatical category of adverbs of place, and as adverbial variables, they will refer to places that are salient in context; the former to a place near the speaker, and the latter to a place further away. In the same way, expressions like 'What Peter has said' or 'What Layla said yesterday' are singular terms but, as sentential variables, they will refer to a salient propositional content.

With this background in place, a detailed explanation of the most original ideas of the book can be provided next: namely, a classification of truth ascriptions and the pragmatic roles they can perform. The later theme will be the aim of §III. Now, I will examine the four types of truth ascriptions proposed by the author in the book.

II.1. *Singular Exhibitive Truth Ascriptions*

These truth ascriptions are singular because there is only one content being ascribed, and exhibitive because they 'show in their wording a singular sentence that expresses their content' [Frápolli (2013), p. 58]. One example of this sort of truth ascription is 'It is true that the distance from the Earth to the Moon is 384.400 km'. This type of truth ascription is unusual in ordinary language. Normally, if a given speaker wants to say that the distance from the Earth to the Moon is 384.400 km, the content will be asserted simply by saying 'The distance from to the Earth to the Moon is 384.400 km'. However, there are occasions in which this kind of truth ascription is used for specific purposes. For example, we use them for emphasis, when we wish accentuate a particular content.

Due to the defining mark of singular exhibitive truth ascriptions, that is, the explicitness of their contents, some authors [Tarski (1944)] have focused on these truth ascriptions in order to argue that the predicate 'is true' is redundant in natural languages. If we can say the same thing just asserting the content, the predicate is redundant on that occasion. C. J. F. Williams has stated this point in a very clear way by saying that the nominalizer 'that' and the de-nominalizer 'is true' cancel each other, the outcome of putting both together being just an assertion of the content [Williams (1992)]. But, this does not mean that the truth op-

erator is unnecessary or superfluous in natural languages. Although in a singular exhibitive truth ascription the truth predicate is semantically redundant, there are other truth ascriptions in which the truth predicate is not redundant at all. The remaining types of truth ascriptions are good examples that will show this non-redundancy.

II.2. *Singular Blind Truth Ascriptions*

Singular blind truth ascriptions are singular in the same sense that singular exhibitive truth ascriptions are, but are blind because the content being ascribed is not explicit in the wording of the truth ascription. Since the content of a singular blind truth ascription is not explicit, it 'has to be borrowed from a content-full speech act' [Frápolli (2013), p. 60]. That is, they inherit their contents from previous assertive speech acts occurring in other contexts. Let us consider the following example, 'What Layla has said is true'. If we wish to know what content the speaker is ascribing to Layla, we will need to search for the content in the context in which Layla originally asserted it. Maybe the context is the same as the speaker's context, but it might be different. In a sense, as the author remarks, singular blind truth ascriptions work in the same way as pronouns. Just as we have to know the reference of a pronoun if we want to know the content of a statement involving a pronoun, we need to know the content of a prosentence if we want to know the content of a statement involving a singular blind truth ascription.

Another noteworthy point of singular blind truth ascriptions stressed in the work is the pragmatic functions they provide. In the above example, if I say 'What Layla has said is true', I am doing two different things. Firstly, I am ascribing truth to a content asserted by another person, but, at the same time, I am asserting the same content. I am stating that Layla and I are in a similar position in the conversation, at least regarding assertive and deliberative levels. Our reasons to assert that same content might differ, but if other participants in the conversation ask us for reasons, both of us should defend the consequences associated with that content.

II.3. *General Exhibitive Truth Ascriptions*

General exhibitive truth ascriptions are similar to singular exhibitive truth ascriptions because the contents being ascribed are explicit, but unlike them in that they communicate general information. One example of this type of truth ascriptions may be 'The theory of evolution is true'. Truth ascriptions such as this are devices that allow us to codify huge

amounts of information in one single act of assertion. Since they convey general information, no particular proposition is really asserted. More specifically, the author maintains that general exhibitive truth ascriptions are rules for making assertions: 'The presence of quantifiers indicates that, in spite of the fact that the act is assertive, no particular proposition is really asserted' [Frápolli (2013), p. 62]. In addition, they are devices for propositional generalization. The author defines the first-order logic counterparts of this type of truth ascription as follows: $\forall p$ (p follows from the Theory of Evolution $\rightarrow p$) [Frápolli (2013), p. 61]. Using truth ascriptions of this type, speakers communicate that any proposition that is part of a specific class, a class that was depicted in the antecedent of the conditional, can be asserted by anyone in the context in which the truth ascription is uttered. If a given speaker asserts 'The theory of evolution is true', the truth ascription entitles anybody taking part in the conversation to assert any proposition that is part of the theory of evolution, or that follows from it.

II.4. *General Blind Truth Ascriptions*

General blind truth ascriptions are similar to general exhibitive ones. Their use asserts no particular content at all because what is really asserted is a rule for making assertions. The difference with general exhibitive truth ascriptions is that the class specifying the information that the participants in the conversation can take as settled is not explicit in the wording of the truth ascription, but rather has to be retrieved from another context: 'a speaker displays a sort of contextually bound rule of inference' [Frápolli (2013), p. 63]. If, for example, someone says 'All that Harry has said is true', Harry's context will provide the relevant class that the prosentence 'All that Harry has said' is referring to. The context can indicate the class as referring to some specific topic, such as in 'All that Harry has said about social integration is true', or to some specific condition under which Harry asserted the contents, as in 'All that Harry has said this morning is true'. Following the author, it can be said that the first-order logic counterparts of these truth ascriptions will be the following: $\forall p$ (p follows from something said by Harry about social integration $\rightarrow p$); and $\forall p$ (p follows from something said by Harry this morning $\rightarrow p$).

III. The Two Roles of Truth Ascriptions

According to the author, the different types of truth ascriptions can perform two different pragmatic roles: vertical and horizontal. The for-

mer amounts to the capacity of truth ascriptions to pick up a proposi-
tional content, thereby attracting the attention of the audience to them.
The latter amounts to the capacity of truth ascriptions to move contents
across contexts. Each role will now be presented in more detail.

III.1. *The Vertical Role of Truth Ascriptions*

When we use exhibitive truth ascriptions, we are pointing out that
these contents can be used without hesitation in our context. When we
say 'It is true that Albert likes swimming pools' or 'The theory of evolu-
tion is true', we are adding these contents to the accepted information in
the context. The author calls this the vertical role because when we use
an exhibitive truth ascription we are distinguishing the content in a way
that makes it eligible for the other participants in the conversation. May-
be we are doing this for emphatic reasons or for other reasons, but it is
clear that the status of the content being ascribed has changed, for now
it is eligible within the context in which the truth ascription takes place.
As the author states: 'When a content is thus distinguished [explicitly ex-
hibited], the pragmatic significance of the whole act is naturally seen as a
way of inserting the content in question into the set of potential premis-
es. This pragmatic function will be dubbed the "vertical role" of truth
ascriptions' [Frápolli (2013), p. 78].

Falsity ascriptions are similar. When we use a falsity ascription, we
are removing one or more contents from the contextually acceptable in-
formation. We are changing their status in a way that makes them ineli-
gible in a non-contentious way.

III.2. *The Horizontal Role of Truth Ascriptions*

When we use a singular blind truth ascription, we are moving con-
tents from a previous context to our context. If I say 'What Layla has
said is true', I am moving to my context the content asserted by Layla,
and, at the same time, I am endorsing this content as a good candidate
for being asserted in other possible contexts. General blind truth ascrip-
tions are similar to singular blind truth ascriptions. The only difference is
the number of possible movements allowed. When I assert 'Everything
the Pope says is true', I am allowing anyone hearing the truth ascription to
assert whatever content asserted previously by the Pope. We can sum this
up by stating that general blind truth ascriptions are devices that allow us
to make an unlimited number of horizontal movements, unlike singular
truth ascriptions, which allow only a limited number of horizontal moves.

Again, in the case of falsity ascriptions there is not much difference.

When we use a falsity ascription, we are negating the possibility of moving a given content from a previous context to our own context.

IV. SOME CRITICAL POINTS

In this section I develop two critical points. The first will show that in understanding general blind truth ascriptions as a way of asserting multiple contents, instead of taking them as rules for making assertions, the theory can do better justice to the asymmetry between general exhibitive and general blind truth ascriptions. The second point will show how the framework could be improved by replacing the author's distinction between the vertical and the horizontal role with the distinction between content-importing and content-exporting roles.

These contentious points directly affect some of the central theses developed in the book. They promote a finer-grained understanding of both general blind truth ascriptions and the pragmatic roles performed by truth ascriptions. Modifying the theory in order to accommodate these points should be desirable, since the overall outcome of this movement allows us to offer a better organized view of the pragmatic roles of truth ascriptions, and to account for the resemblance between blind truth ascriptions and other expressions that allow speakers to target previous speech acts, such as retraction [MacFarlane (2014)] or reaffirmation [Chrisman (2007)].

IV.1. *General Truth Ascriptions: Rules for Making Assertions or Sets of Propositions?*

In §II.3 and §II.4 we saw that when someone uses a general truth ascription no particular content is asserted; what is really stated is a rule for making assertions. I agree with the author that, when someone asserts a general exhibitive truth ascription, she is asserting a rule for making assertions. However, this is not the case for general blind truth ascriptions.

Let us begin with general exhibitive truth ascriptions. When they are uttered, a given rule for making assertions is explicitly stated, a rule that allows speakers in the conversation to make a potentially unlimited number of horizontal movements. Let us consider the following conversation where Harry, a biologist, is speaking with Layla, a philosopher specialized in the philosophy of biology:

(1) Layla: The theory of evolution is true.

(2) Harry: Yes, you are right, natural selection is unquestionable.

(3) Layla: Yes, fossil records provide enough evidence for phyletic evolution.

(4) Harry: What? No no, fossil records demonstrate punctuated equilibrium, not phyletic evolution.

Given that both speakers have extensive knowledge of the processes involved in the species evolution, therefore making it possible for them to make a potentially unlimited number of related assertions, and given that they hold contrary positions, this conversation could last for an indefinite amount of time simply focusing on the phyletic evolution vs. the punctuated equilibrium. This example shows that when Layla asserts in (1) 'The theory of evolution is true', in that context, as the author defends, the general exhibitive truth ascription can be understood as a rule for making assertions.

However, as I will show, general blind truth ascriptions are not rules for making assertions but rather a way of stating multiple contents. When someone says 'All that Harry has said is true', it is far more likely that those true things that Harry has said are relatively small in number. General blind truth ascriptions assert several propositions in one. To illuminate this point, consider the following example: Harry, Rachel, and Alexander are talking about social integration, and Albert, who loves social debates and who knows a lot about social integration, joins the conversation:

(5) Rachel: All that Harry has said is true.

(6) Alexander: I agree with you.

(7) Albert: What has Harry said?

(8) Rachel: Basically, that local governments should manage reception centers, that the ratio between children and educators should be at least 3:1, and that all funding supporting centers should be public.

(9) Albert: I agree on everything, with the exception of the latter. Why should it not be desirable to use private funding for reception centers?

The example shows that Albert, who joined the conversation just after hearing the truth ascription, asks for the contents that are being talked about. He interprets the truth ascription in (5) as an abbreviation for a small number of different contents. In order to get involved in the debate, he wants to know what contents have been expressed by Harry and judged true by all participants in the conversation. I think that, at least if we focus on the requests of this person, the task of performing the truth ascription on this particular occasion is conveying multiple contents, not stating a given norm for making future movements across contexts.

Another idea that can show the legitimacy of *multiple-content-asserting* uses is the following: Does it make sense to say 'All that Harry has said is true, with the exception that … '? I think that this makes sense. For example, in the above example, Rachel in (5) could indeed have said 'All that Harry has said is true, with the exception that all funding supporting centers should be public', instead of just saying 'All that Harry has said is true'. All participants would have understood this truth ascription in the following sense: Rachel thinks that it is true that local governments should manage reception centers, and that the ratio between children and educators should be at least 3:1, but she does not think that it is true that all funding supporting centers should be public. In fact, it is normal to use and understand general blind truth ascriptions as devices for asserting multiple contents. In contexts where there is an ongoing debate, a general blind truth ascription can be used to show our agreement with all contents uttered by someone. Similarly, a general blind falsity ascription can be used to show our disagreement with all the contents uttered by someone. And between the two extremes, speakers can display their agreement with some contents and their disagreement with others, with constructions like 'All you have said is true, with the exception that ...' or 'All you have said is false, with the exception that ...'. If general blind truth ascriptions were rules for making assertions, speakers would only be able to show their support for all or none of the contents uttered by someone. Nevertheless, it is clear that utterances such as 'All that Harry has said is true, with the exception that all funding supporting centers should be public' are totally fine in most situations where a debate is going on. This kind of utterance allows speakers to endorse some contents but not all, thereby enriching the positions speakers can occupy in a given debate.

IV.2. *Are Blind Truth Ascriptions Horizontal and Exhibitive Truth Ascriptions Vertical?*

In the light of the ideas mentioned in §III, it is clear that through

the use of truth ascriptions speakers can perform two different actions: they can move contents across contexts, and they can raise the status of the ascribed contents, making them eligible as contents of future assertions. This distinction is the author's distinction between the horizontal and the vertical role of truth ascriptions, but she is not clear enough with respect to the relation between the two roles and the different types of truth ascriptions.

The aim of this section is to show how a distinction in terms of content-importing and content-exporting roles will lead to a clearer understanding of the relation between the two pragmatic roles and the different types of truth ascriptions. Instead of talking of the vertical and the horizontal roles, as the author does, I will talk of blind truth ascriptions as devices that "import" and give permission to "export" contents, and of exhibitive truth ascriptions as devices that only give permission to export contents. One may wonder what the rationale for this change is. Firstly, the vertical role is identified by the author with the idea of raising the status of the ascribed contents. Since this feature is not exclusive of truth ascriptions, for example a plain assertion also presents its content as eligible within the context in which it takes place, it is more likely to be a general characteristic associated with sincere assertions, whether truth ascriptions or not, than to be a proper pragmatic role of truth ascriptions. Secondly, as I have stated above, we can achieve a more organized framework by identifying blind truth ascriptions with both importing and exporting moves, and exhibitive truth ascriptions with only exporting moves. Let us begin with blind truth ascriptions. The most basic feature of this kind of truth ascription is that they inherit contents from other contexts. For example, if I say 'What Layla has said is true', I am importing to my context a content previously asserted by Layla in another context. I am also giving permission to assert this content in any other context. General blind truth ascriptions function in the same way as singular blind truth ascriptions, but instead of importing one content, they import and give permission to export several contents. However, exhibitive truth ascriptions explicitly display the contents put forward as true. So, it seems there is no reason to assume that when we use them, we are importing any content from another context. Therefore, exhibitive truth ascriptions will only give permission to export contents. If I say, 'The theory of evolution is true', the participants in the conversation should take all contents belonging to the theory of evolution, firstly, as established in the context in which the truth ascription takes place, and secondly, as exportable to any other context.

The critical point of this section can be summarized highlighting the asymmetry between exhibitive truth ascriptions (only export moves), and blind truth ascriptions (import and export moves). Truth ascriptions are tools that draw *dialectical connections* [Chrisman (2007)] between contexts. Unlike exhibitive truth ascriptions that only draw dialectical connections between the context in which the exhibitive truth ascription is uttered and possible subsequent contexts, blind truth ascriptions draw connections between earlier contexts, the context in which the blind truth ascription has been uttered, and subsequent contexts. They function in the same way as other expressions that draw this type of connections, such as, for example, retraction [MacFarlane (2014), pp. 108-110] or reaffirmation [Chrisman (2007), pp. 228-229] of an earlier assertion. With retraction and blind falsity truth ascriptions we can show our disagreement with the contents of earlier assertions. With reaffirmation and blind truth ascriptions, we can show our agreement with the contents of earlier assertions. And with constructions such as 'All you have said is true, with the exception that … ' or 'All you have said is false, with the exception that … ', we can show, respectively, our agreement with some contents but not with all of them, or our disagreement with some contents but not with all of them.

V. Conclusion

Frápolli's book has a direct impact on the issues discussed by different theories of truth. She is not committed to giving a final definition or a comprehensive theory of truth. On the contrary, she focuses on truth ascriptions, defending that truth ascriptions are indispensable to understanding certain pragmatic features associated with the functioning of the notion of truth in natural languages.

Some of the most compelling ideas in this book are: on the one hand, i) the taxonomy distinguishing the different types of truth ascriptions; and, on the other hand, ii) the analysis of the pragmatic roles that these truth ascriptions can play. Although the explanation of these issues represents a great explanatory improvement over other theories [Grover et al. (1975); Williams (1992); Horwich 1998], some of the explanations developed by the author can be challenged. In the case of the taxonomy, I have highlighted that the distinction between exhibitive and blind truth ascriptions works well for singular, but not for general, truth ascriptions. And in the case of the pragmatic roles performed by truth ascriptions, it

is not clear what the status of the distinction is. I think that these are pressing issues that the author needs to face in order to clarify several aspects of her proposal.

Departamento de Filosofía I
Universidad de Granada
Campus de Cartuja s/n, 18071, Granada, España
E-mail: bordonaba@ugr.es

REFERENCES

CHRISMAN, M. (2007), 'From Epistemic Contextualism to Epistemic Expressivism', *Philosophical Studies*, vol. 135(2), pp. 225-254.
FRÁPOLLI, M. J. (2013), *The Nature of Truth: An Updated Approach to the Meaning of Truth Ascriptions*, Dordretch, Springer.
GROVER, D., CAMP J. and BELNAP, N. (1975), 'A Prosentential Theory of Truth', *Philosophical Studies*, vol. 27, pp. 73-125.
HORWICH, P. (1998), *Truth*, Oxford, Oxford Universtity Press.
KAPLAN, D. (1989), 'Demonstratives', in Almog, J., Perry, J. and Wettstein, H. (eds.), *Themes from Kaplan*, New York, Oxford University Press, pp. 481-563.
MACFARLANE, J. (2014), *Assessment Sensitivity: Relative Truth and Its Applications*, New York, Oxford University Press.
RAMSEY, F. P. (1991), 'The Nature of Truth' in Rescher, N. and Majer, U. (eds.), *On Truth. Original Manuscript Materials (1927-1929) from the Ramsey Collection at the University of Pittsburgh*, Dordretch, Springer, pp. 84-94.
TARSKI, A. (1944), 'The Semantic Conception of Truth: and the Foundations of Semantics', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol. 4(3), pp. 341-376.
WILLIAMS, C. J. F. (1992), 'The Prosentential Theory of Truth', *Reports on Philosophy* vol. 15, pp. 147-154.

RESUMEN
    En *The Nature of Truth: An Updated Approach to the Meaning of Truth Ascriptions*, M. J. Frápolli presenta un tratamiento nuevo del significado de las ascripciones de verdad, defendiendo que este tipo de expresiones debería jugar un papel esencial en nuestra comprensión del concepto de verdad. Una parte crucial de su explicación se basa en la taxonomía de los diferentes tipos de adscripciones de verdad que se propone en la obra, así como en los roles pragmáticos de dichas adscripciones. En esta nota crítica se mostrará que la propuesta teórica tiene ciertos defectos que conciernen tanto a la taxonomía propuesta como a los roles pragmáticos de las adscripciones de verdad.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *M. J. Frápolli, pragmática, adscripciones de verdad, pro-oraciones, aserción.*

ABSTRACT

In *The Nature of Truth: An Updated Approach to the Meaning of Truth Ascriptions*, M. J. Frápolli presents a novel approach to the meaning of truth ascriptions, defending that this kind of expression should play an essential role in our understanding of the notion of truth. A crucial part of that account is a detailed taxonomy of the different types of truth ascriptions, as well as the different pragmatic roles truth ascriptions can perform. In this critical notice I will show that the proposed framework has several flaws concerning both the taxonomy and the pragmatic roles of truth ascriptions.

KEYWORDS: *M. J. Frápolli, Pragmatics, Truth Ascriptions, Prosentences, Assertion.*