

review of Mark Richard's "When Truth Gives Out"

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► **To cite this version:**

Isidora Stojanovic. review of Mark Richard's "When Truth Gives Out". book review. 2009.
<ijn_00444548>

HAL Id: ijn_00444548

https://jeannicod.ccsd.cnrs.fr/ijn_00444548

Submitted on 6 Jan 2010

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book review

Mark Richard, *When Truth Gives Out*
Oxford University Press (2008), 184 pages

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Richard's *When Truth Gives Out*, written in an engaging and accessible style, develops around the idea that the notion of truth, contrary to a lot of received wisdom from philosophy of language and logic, is not – or at least, not always – the right concept to employ in analyzing belief, assertion, or their evaluation. The book is organized in five chapters and two appendices, all of which could work equally well as independent essays. In particular, Chapter IV, *What's the Matter with Relativism?*, largely overlaps with his well-known paper 'Contextualism and Relativism', *Philosophical Studies* 119, 2004, 215-42. The choice of compiling those pieces into a monograph, rather than a mere collection of essays, is motivated by the fact that each chapter addresses, sometimes in different ways and from different angles, the question of whether the notions of truth and falsity are the core notions in the analysis of a range of phenomena regarding thought, discourse, inference and disagreement. The take-home message of the book is that if one is prepared to give up the centrality of the notion of truth – whether one trades it for the notion of *relative* truth or, more radically, decides that even relative truth simply isn't the right dimension to understand belief and assertion – then one can start perceiving promising solutions to a number of long-standing puzzles from philosophy of language, logic and epistemology.

Chapter I, *Epithets and Attitudes*, provides a fairly engaging introduction to the matter, with its topic of derogatory terms and, more specifically, racial slurs. Consider the somewhat *démodé* derogatory term for the French 'Frog', and suppose that I point to someone and say 'He is a Frog'. What did I say? Did I say something true, or false, or neither? Which thought did I express (if any)? Chapter I deals with this sort of questions, aiming at the conclusion that truth-conditional approaches – i.e., approaches that take the notion of truth to be the central notion in the analysis of meaning – run into trouble when it comes to accounting for the meaning of slurs, and of derogatory terms more generally. Although no one holds that 'Frog' is simply *synonymous* with 'French', a minimal departure from such a simple view would be to say that 'He is a Frog' has the same truth conditions as 'He is French', but that the former, unlike the latter, also *presupposes* a derogatory attitude towards the French. Similar in spirit, albeit different in detail, is the proposal that while 'Frog' and 'French' are truth-conditionally

equivalent – both predicates apply to the French, and to the French only – a speaker who uses ‘Frog’ rather than ‘French’ *conventionally implicates* that the French are worthy of contempt (or something along those lines). Presuppositional accounts, of the former sort, are discarded on the charge of “misdiagnos[ing] ‘how slurs work’” (p. 21): someone who is using ‘Frog’ is acting in a contemptuous and hostile way towards the French, rather than merely presupposing such a contemptuous attitude and “inserting [it] into a conversation's record” (p. 22), which is what Richard takes such presuppositional accounts to amount to. While this argument against presuppositional accounts may appear somewhat elusive and thin, Richard's dissatisfaction with the “pragmatic” accounts, of the latter sort, which locate the derogatory character of slurs at the level of conventional implicature, rather than at the level of truth-conditional or “semantic” content, is more substantial. Richard's worry is that such accounts (and, *ipso facto*, presuppositional accounts, too) fail to look beyond the language and its use. But slurs are not merely a linguistic phenomenon: they reach beyond language into the thought itself. A person using a racial slur is not merely implicating something negative: the thoughts of this person are also infested. The way in which slurs infiltrate the thought is, in Richard's view, a core problem that will elude any account whose analysis remains at the level of language. Richard's own account is thus characterized by the idea that the way in which the thinker *represents* the object that he or she is thinking about is constitutive of the thought itself. My thought that a certain person is a Frog would thus be a thought with a built-in contemptuous attitude towards the French, a feature that distinguishes it from the thought that the person at stake is (merely) French.

Chapter I offers a novel, albeit somewhat underdeveloped approach to slurs and derogatory terms, and, more importantly for the book's main focus, puts forward the idea that the analysis of thoughts expressed or entertained by a slurring agent overrides the dimensions of truth and falsity. The argument may be reconstructed as follows. An agent's contemptuous attitude towards the French is part of her thought that X is a Frog; to think such a thought is to think badly of X (and of the French more generally). Even if X is French, we cannot accept, or adhere or ascribe to, that agent's thought, because that would imply that we endorse her contemptuous attitude. On the other hand, we cannot unsubscribe from her thought either on the grounds on its being *false*, because that would commit us to endorsing that very same contemptuous attitude: to ascribe *falsity* to that agent's thought is to ascribe *truth* to the thought that X *isn't* a Frog; and to think that someone isn't a Frog is, again, to think badly of the French. *Ergo*, the thought of a slurring agent can neither be true nor false. Truth gives out.

In Chapters II and III, Richard turns to a different set of problems. He considers, on the one hand, the phenomenon of *vagueness*, and on the other, the *liar paradox*. What is the connection between (complex) expressions such as the liar sentence, namely “This very sentence isn't true” and vague expressions such as ‘bald’, ‘tall’ or ‘many’?

Why should the two issues be grouped together and treated along the same lines? Although Richard does not try to articulate the connection explicitly, the likely motivation is that in both cases, a sentence that (arguably) cannot be true still seems to “get things right.” The liar sentence denies its own truth and thus provably cannot be true; yet precisely in denying its own truth, there is something that it gets right. Similarly, a *prima facie* contradictory sentence such as “Joe isn't bald and it isn't the case that Joe isn't bald”, in a situation in which Joe is a borderline case of baldness, also seems to get things right, yet one wouldn't necessarily want to take it to be saying something *true*. So the puzzle is this: how can a person say something and be right without *ipso facto* asserting something true? Richard's answer to this question is that, beside assertion, which he thinks should be analyzed as commitment to *truth*, there are many other sorts of commitments. Elaborating on such other sorts of commitments, he puts forward a proposal whose central idea is that we can assess a commitment as *appropriate*, thereby accounting for the intuition that the speaker can, in some sense, be *right*, without having to invoke the notion of truth.

A long standing objection to views that, like Richard's, hold that not all speech acts are to be evaluated in terms of truth and falsity, is that they are unable to account for logical inference. Consider the inference “Joe isn't bald. Therefore, not everyone is bald.” Assume that ‘bald’ is a vague predicate, and let Joe be borderline bald. If, as Richard holds, the premise in the inference cannot be the assertion of the negation of Joe's being bald, but is, rather, a *sui generis* denial, how could he possibly account for the fact that the inference at stake is a *logically valid* inference? Doesn't validity have to be cashed out in terms of truth and falsity? Richard suggests that it doesn't, and offers an account on which sentences that serve as components (premises and conclusions) of a logically valid argument need not be “vehicles of assertions”, but can be vehicles of various other sorts of commitments, of which *assertoric* commitments are only a subset. The trick is to analyze particles such as 'not' or 'if...then' as devices for compounding commitments *in general*. “If Joe isn't bald, then not everyone is bald” can, then, be viewed as not only a well-formed clause, but also as a logically valid one, even if neither the antecedent nor the consequent are truth-evaluable. Evaluation of truth, in Richard's account, is just a special case of a more general and more basic type of evaluation, namely evaluation of *appropriateness*. Even when *truth* gives out, as in the case of vague expressions, liar sentences, and, more widely, all kinds of normative and evaluative discourse, there is still a notion of validity to hold on to, based on the idea that non-assertoric commitments can still be evaluated as appropriate or inappropriate.

The issue of vagueness is taken up again in Chapter IV, although from a different angle. Here, Richard is concerned with the question of how there can be disagreement over the application of a vague predicate, yet disagreement in which neither party is, properly speaking, wrong. Richard's working example is Didi and Naomi's disagreement

over the issue of whether Mary, who won a million-dollar lottery, is rich. Didi holds that she is rich, while Naomi, for whom a million dollars isn't that much, holds that she isn't, yet there seems to be no objective way of adjudicating between Didi and Naomi. Richard is aware that gradable adjectives are sensitive to contextual variations: if Didi says that Mary is rich in a conversation about life conditions in derelict suburbs of third world countries, while Naomi says that she isn't rich in a conversation about Bill Gates and Donald Trump, then it becomes easy to account for the idea that both Didi and Naomi may be right. The gradable adjectives' dependence on the so-called *comparison classes* is no news, and can be assimilated, in a more or less straightforward way, to familiar forms of context-dependence, like indexicality. Thus e.g. if I say 'It's raining' in Paris, and you say 'It's not raining' in New York, we can obviously both speak truth. But Richard insists that the phenomenon that he is interested in isn't dependence on a comparison class, and cannot be assimilated to any form of indexicality. For, he argues, when the comparison classes are different, we lose the intuition of disagreement, to the same extent that we have no such intuition if I say that it's raining and you say that it isn't, but I'm in Paris and you are in New York. Indeed, Naomi might well accept that Mary is rich relative to the population of suburbs in third world countries, and that, at the same time, she isn't rich compared to Trump, Gates, etc. Richard's scenario is, by assumption, one in which “the salient comparison class is the same in both cases (it is, say, New Yorkers)” (p. 93). The reason why we can fix the comparison class and still be unable to adjudicate between Didi and Naomi is that each places the threshold of what it takes to be rich at a different level of the richness scale. Naomi's threshold is below one million dollar, while Didi's is further up.

Now, gradable adjectives' dependence on a threshold point *in addition to* a comparison class (or a scale) isn't really news either: the idea can be traced at least back to Hans Kamp, 'Two Theories of Adjectives', in *Formal Semantics of Natural Language*, ed. by Ed Keenan, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1975, 123-155. But, whether or not Richard, noticeably parsimonious in his references to the vast literature on vagueness and gradable adjectives, is aware that the importance of thresholds has been previously acknowledged, one should grant him the insight that thresholds and comparison classes, *qua* parameters on which truth value depends, are not on a par. While Naomi may consistently say “Mary is rich for the population of derelict suburbs of third world countries, but isn't rich for the millionaires”, it would be odd for her to say “Mary is rich for a New Yorker relative to a threshold set below one million, but isn't rich for a New Yorker relative to a threshold set further up”. To put the same point differently, one can be tall for an ordinary person and not be tall for a basketball player, but one either is or isn't tall for a basketball player. Whether one is tall for a basketball player requires, of course, fixing a cut-off point within the tallness scale (as restricted to the class of basketball players). But once the comparison class is fixed, one cannot go

on, it seems, playing around with thresholds (or, at least, not with the same flexibility with which one can play around with comparison classes). So, summing up, when F is an adjective such as 'tall' or 'rich', in order to interpret the claim that F applies to some object X, one must first determine the relevant comparison class. Parties who disagree whether X is F, while relying on different comparison classes, are only engaged in a spurious disagreement. This does not seem to hold for threshold-dependence. When Naomi and Didi disagree whether Mary is rich for a New Yorker, the interpretation is not at issue. Each understands what the other is claiming, there is no misunderstanding of any sort, and yet, we seem to lack objective grounds on which to adjudicate between them, to decide that the one rather than the other got the facts right. In a disagreement in which neither party is at fault, again, truth gives out.

But how can there be genuine, substantive disagreement that isn't cashed out in terms of truth and falsity? Richard's answer is twofold. First, Didi and Naomi's disagreement is substantive because they share all the concepts involved in the issue over which they disagree, and, in particular, the concept denoted by the predicate 'rich'. To illustrate the point, suppose that Mary is a dentist, and Didi says "Mary is good" while Naomi says "Mary isn't good." If Didi means to be saying that Mary is a good dentist, while Naomi means to be saying that Mary isn't a (morally) good person, then their uses of the predicate 'good' arguably denote different concepts, and their disagreement is merely verbal, rather than substantive. Secondly, it isn't necessary, according to Richard, that either of the disagreeing parties should get the facts right and latch onto truth. In the picture that he proposes, there is a certain concept in place, the concept of being rich, but the *extension* of the concept, i.e. the range of individuals to which the concept applies, is not determined by the concept itself (together with the facts). Rather, it is open-ended, and gets more and more determined as the concept starts getting entrenched into a linguistic community. Richard thus writes: "Because 'rich' is subject to accommodation, speakers in different conversations (...) are able to impose different extensions (and thus intensions) on 'rich'; the result is that different speaker's uses of 'Mary is rich' can have different truth-values" (p. 100); "What a concept or notion is a concept or notion *of* gets worked out over time via something like a process of cultural accommodation and negotiation" (p. 116). In other words, accommodation and negotiation are processes that make room for a kind of disagreement that falls in between, on the one hand, merely verbal disagreement and, on the other, merely factual disagreement, hence a disagreement that is arguably substantial, yet overrides the dimension of purely extensional notions such as truth and falsity.

Richard's proposal in Chapter IV is interesting and plausible, though not without gaps. One such gap concerns the methodology. Are there any criteria to decide whether a given disagreement is a verbal issue, rather than a case of accommodation and negotiation? And are there any criteria to decide which aspects of meaning are open to

accommodation and negotiation and which aren't? While Richard doesn't lay down any such criteria, he implicitly uses some, as when he writes: "when variation in an expression's semantics [is] not open to contextual negotiation, that variation affect[s] what is said" (p. 102). But this is a very shaky criterion. According to Richard, when Naomi says "Mary is tall" in a context in which the relevant comparison class is her basketball team, what she really says is that Mary is tall *for a player of her basketball team*. But this does not seem correct: even in such a context, what Naomi says is, rather, that Mary is tall, and that's all. Another gap is that the issue of what it takes for two people to share a concept is never really addressed. Thus if Naomi considers only millionaires to be rich, why should we say that her concept is the same as Didi's concept 'rich'? The boundaries between the cases in which we have distinct, albeit related concepts, and those in which there is a single concept, subject to accommodation and negotiation, are as vague as the concepts under consideration. Consequently, whether a disagreement is verbal or not, and whether it is substantive or not, are issues that cannot, and should not, be settled in some objective, context-independent way.

The previous point isn't really hostile to Richard's overarching view. Indeed, the proposal that he presents in Chapter V, *Matters of Taste*, goes in the same direction. He is still concerned here with disagreement, but turns his attention to disagreements over what is cool, who is hot or good-looking, what food is yummy, and so on. In Richard's view, "judgments about what is cool and other matters of taste enjoy a *double relativity*" (p. 132, my italics). Consider our disagreement over the issue of whether some person, e.g. Ethan Hawke, is attractive. We can both give reasons and arguments that support our respective judgments. Our disagreement is substantive, yet there seems to be no objective grounds to say that the one rather than the other got the facts right. From my perspective, Hawke is attractive, from yours, he isn't, and the reason why it makes sense to continue arguing about the issue is that our shared concept of attractiveness is subject to accommodation and negotiation; we have, again, the same sort of relativity as the one discussed in Chapter IV concerning disagreement over who is or isn't rich. But Richard now points out that "not only may the assignment of a truth-value to a claim be 'perspective-relative', but whether a claim is truth-apt may also be 'perspective-relative'" (p. 126). The idea is that in some cases, our respective evaluations of Hawke as attractive are not so much judgments that he is or isn't attractive, as judgments (or reports, if you prefer) that we find him attractive or don't. While the proposal is compelling, it is somewhat unclear why it would only arise with judgments on matters of taste. Why should it be implausible, for instance, to hold that Didi's evaluation of Mary as rich might be of the same kind as my evaluation of Hawke as attractive? In either case, the agent would be simply *asserting her own perspective*, to use a phrase from Lasersohn (Peter Lasersohn, 'Context Dependence, Disagreement, and Predicates

of Personal Taste', *Linguistics and Philosophy* 28, 2005, 643-686), rather than making a truth-apt judgment to the effect that Mary *is* rich or that Hawke *is* attractive.

A more serious problem for Richard's account of disagreement, as well on issues involving concepts such as 'rich' as on matters of taste, is that, as he has acknowledged himself, "all the hard work is yet to come" (p. 123). For, Richard insists that when a concept is subject to accommodation and negotiation, the disagreement is substantive, and it makes sense for the disagreeing parties to go on disagreeing, to challenge one another's evidence and arguments for the claims that they are putting forward, to try to prove the other party to be wrong. In other words, the disagreement should allow for a rational resolution; at the end of the day, the process of accommodation and negotiation should result in having one of the parties emerge as the one that somehow "got it right". But if truth has given out from the start, what else is there to ground the one party's perspective as somehow better, or superior, or "more right", than the other's? Richard, while fully aware of the issue, has preferred not to address it in this book.

When Truth Gives Out is written in an entertaining, almost colloquial tone, with most of the technicalities confined to appendices, and dry argumentation carefully avoided. However, this "easy" style can easily prove to be treacherous. For, the thread of argument is often elusive, and the precise reconstruction of the argument may require considerable effort. What is more, the discussion is often sparkled with interesting and provocative ideas, but whose role within the general argument is not always clear. Thus, for example, in Chapter I, we find the idea that "whether a thought is true or false can be as much a matter of the context in which it is asked *Is that true?* as it is of how things are independently of asking" (p. 15). The idea is deeply "relativist": the truth of a thought isn't fixed once and for all by what the world is like, but is relative to the context from which the thought is evaluated for truth; the same thought, evaluated as true in one context, may be (correctly) re-evaluated as false from another. However, the exact contribution of this relativist stance to the discussion of derogatory terms and racial epithets remains unclear. Throughout the book, one often gets the impression of being presented with a patchwork of interesting, thought-provoking ideas, rather than a single, unified and well-structured picture. But despite this somewhat impressionistic character, *When Truth Gives Out* is rhythmized by a unifying motto, aptly captured by its witty title.