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Troubles with Deflationism

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Introductory remarks

What makes deflationary views about truth deflationary? One familiar answer is this: according to deflationists, truth is not really a *property*. Call this *metaphysical deflationism*. Here's another answer: the term 'true' is not an ordinary predicate, unlike 'red' or 'square'. For example, according to the disquotationalist, the term 'true' is merely a logical device for disquotation; according to the prosententialist, 'true' is not a predicate at all; and according to the redundancy theorist, 'true' is altogether eliminable from the language without expressive loss. These, then, are all versions of what we can call *linguistic deflationism*. Metaphysical deflationism and linguistic deflationism seem to go hand in hand – there is no property of truth, and the term 'true', despite surface appearances, is not a property-ascribing predicate, but a term that plays some other kind of role, or perhaps no role at all.

So it might seem clear that deflationists and substantivists are opposed along these metaphysical and linguistic dimensions. But on a second look, perhaps it isn't really so clear. Horwich is a prominent deflationist, and yet he thinks that 'true' is a perfectly good English predicate, and we might well take that to be a conclusive criterion of standing for a property of *some* sort. And on the other hand, Frege is a substantivist about truth (according to Frege, truth is "primitive and simple" and "the goal of scientific endeavour"). And yet Frege famously endorses the equivalence thesis, that 'p' and "'p' is true' are equivalent in content -- predicating 'true' makes no difference to content. So it seems that one can, like Horwich, be a deflationist and accept that truth is a property. And, like Frege, one can be a substantivist about truth, and yet accept what the linguistic deflationist says about the word 'true'. At this point, one may start to worry that there really is no completely clear way to capture the disagreement between the deflationist and the substantivist.

But we think there is. We can mark off the deflationist from the substantivist without getting bogged down in murky metaphysical questions about what kind of property truth may be, or tricky linguistic questions about the status of the equivalence thesis. It is, we think, a distinctive mark of deflationism that truth is *conceptually isolated*. The idea is this. On the one hand we have the concept of truth. On the other we have a family of concepts to which truth is

traditionally tied: meaning, validity, belief, truth-aptness, assertion, verification, practical success, and so on. According to the deflationist, there are no rich conceptual connections between truth and these other concepts. In one direction, we need none of these concepts in our account of truth. And in the other direction, we need nothing beyond deflationary truth in the account of these other concepts. Suppose we accept this or that deflationary account of the term "true". Then we should accept that this account exhausts our understanding of the concept of truth. We will thus be left with a deflated concept of truth – a *thin* concept whose understanding is exhausted by the deflationary account of "true". This thin concept is isolated from these other concepts, and plays no explanatory role other than the one the deflationist assigns to it (if one is assigned at all). Call this *conceptual deflationism*. As we see it, all deflationists endorse conceptual deflationism – and no substantivist does.

To make it clear what we have in mind here, consider an example drawn from Horwich. Consider the following apparent platitude: *true beliefs engender successful action*.¹ On its face, this "fact about truth"² seems to forge substantial links between truth, belief and action. But according to the deflationist, this appearance is misleading: we need only a deflationary account of truth to explain the role of truth here. Consider Horwich's account of this platitude. The axioms of Horwich's minimal theory of truth are all and only the instances of the sentence schema

The proposition that *p* is true if and only if *p*,

instances like "The proposition that penguins waddle is true if and only if penguins waddle". The denominating function of "true" embodied in these axioms exhausts what there is to be said by way of explaining truth – no other notions enter into the theory. The minimal theory of truth is, as Horwich puts it, "*a theory of truth that is a theory of nothing else*"³. Moreover, it is a *complete* theory of truth – we are not to gain *further* understanding of truth by appeal to anything other than the equivalences. In particular, alleged platitudes that make use of truth locutions cannot be regarded as in any way *enhancing* our understanding of truth. By the same token, if we resort to truth-talk in our explication of other concepts, we cannot expect the notion of truth to contribute to our understanding of these concepts.

In particular, Horwich argues that this is so for the thesis that true beliefs engender successful action. Horwich considers the following instance:

If all Bill wants is to have a beer, and he thinks that merely by nodding he will get one, then, if his belief is true, he will get what he wants.

At one point in his explanation, Horwich makes "the familiar psychological assumption"

that if one has a desire, and believes that a certain action will satisfy that desire, one will perform the action.⁴ That is, conceptual connections are assumed between belief, desire and action. But *all* that is assumed about truth in Horwich's explanation is its denominalizing role. In the course of the explanation, we move from "The proposition that if Bill nods then Bill has a beer is true" to "If Bill nods then Bill has a beer"; and a little later we move from "Bill has a beer" to "The proposition that Bill has a beer is true". These are the only steps where truth has a role to play, and it is the role given to it by the equivalence schema.

This style of explanation, says Horwich, extends to all other facts involving "true". In the present case, while we will learn more about the concepts of belief, desire and action by an improved understanding of their inter-relations, there will be no such improvement in the case of truth. The equivalence schema tells us all there is to know about truth, and it exhausts all that truth can contribute to our understanding of any other concept. In this sense, then, truth is isolated from other concepts.

Our target today is conceptual deflationism. On the one hand we have the concept of truth; on the other we have the concepts to which truth is traditionally tied: meaning, assertion, validity, and the rest. Conceptual deflationism runs in two directions: in one direction, an account of truth can be given independently of these other concepts – truth is “presuppositionless”, to use Chris Hill’s term.⁵ In the other direction, an account of these other concepts requires truth only in its deflationary role (if it has a role at all). We think conceptual deflationism is mistaken about both directions.

Truth-aptness

Let’s take up the first of these directions – can we give an account of truth independently of these other notions? To fix ideas, consider disquotationalism. A natural disquotational definition of ‘true’ for a given language is given by:

$$\text{(DisquT)} \quad x \text{ is true iff } (x='s_1' \ \& \ s_1) \text{ or } (x='s_2' \ \& \ s_2) \text{ or } \dots ,$$

where 's₁', 's₂', ... abbreviate sentences of the language.⁶ Or we could present disquotationalism axiomatically, where the axioms are the T-sentences:

$$'s_1' \text{ is true iff } s_1$$

$$'s_2' \text{ is true iff } s_2$$

... .

(Both characterizations are infinitary, so there are issues regarding the stateability of the

disquotational account, but we leave to that one side here.) Which sentences should be admitted into DisquT or the T-sentences? Clearly not imperatives such as ‘Shut the door!’ or interrogatives such as ‘Is the door closed?’ These sentences are not *truth-apt*, for example, the T-sentence “‘Shut the door!’ is true if and only if shut the door!’ makes no sense. So it seems that the notion of truth-aptness must appear in the very statement of disquotationalism: either DisquT or the list of T-sentences must be accompanied by the restriction “*where 's₁', 's₂', ... abbreviate truth-apt sentences of English*”. This raises two concerns for the disquotationalist. First, is truth-aptness a rich concept that does not belong in a deflationary, presuppositionless account of truth? Second, is the notion of truth-aptness itself dependent on the concept of truth? After all, it might seem natural to characterize a truth-apt sentence as one that is either true or false.⁷ If so, then disquotationalism appears to be circular.

As a first step, the disquotationalist might embrace *syntacticism*, according to which a sentence is truth apt if it displays the appropriate syntax. If a sentence is indicative in form – if it can be embedded in conditionals, negation, propositional attitude constructions, and so on – then it is truth-apt.⁸ This would certainly exclude imperatives and interrogatives and other inappropriate grammatical forms. But it is clear that declarative syntax is not sufficient for truth aptness. Suppose that in a logic class I write the sentence ‘Fred has flat feet’ on the board (perhaps in order to introduce the symbolization ‘Fa’).⁹ The sentence is declarative, but, lacking any context to render it true or false, it is not truth apt. Or consider a tongue-twister, say ‘She sells sea-shells by the sea-shore’¹⁰ – again, this is declarative but not truth-apt. So more than declarative form is needed.¹¹

Wright and Boghossian have proposed the strengthening of syntacticism to *disciplined syntacticism*. For a sentence to be truth-apt, it must not only be declarative, but it must also be part of a discourse that is *disciplined*, a discourse where “there are firmly acknowledged standards of proper and improper use of its ingredient sentences”.¹² This is a *minimal* account of truth aptness, according to Wright, because the truth-aptness of a sentence depends only on surface features: the syntactical form of the sentence (its having “all the overt trappings of assertoric content”, as Wright puts it),¹³ and the disciplined character of the discourse. According to Wright: “if things are in all these surface respects as if assertions are being made, then so they are”.¹⁴ So, for example, evaluative statements – such as ‘Pre-emptive wars are wrong’ – are truth apt, because the requisite surface features are present. According to disciplined syntacticism, only the appearances matter where truth aptness is concerned – and it is in this way that disciplined syntacticism is minimal.

Does *disciplined* syntacticism help the disquotationalist about truth? Clearly, requiring the sentences 's₁', 's₂', ... to be declarative in form does not introduce the kind of rich concept that might compromise the disquotational account. But if the very statement of disquotationalism includes a requirement that sentences to be governed by norms of correct use, by “acknowledged standards of proper and improper use”, then that might seem to compromise the *presuppositionless* character of truth. Moreover, there are standards of proper use for tongue-twisters and logic examples and other kinds of sentences that are not truth apt – what is special about the norms or standards governing the use of *truth-apt* sentences? In the same breath in which he speaks of discipline and norms, Wright speaks of assertoric content and the making of assertions. Now, it may be natural enough to treat truth-aptness in terms of assertion, along the lines of “A sentence is truth-apt if it can be used to make an assertion”. But this treatment seems unavailable to the disquotationalist. Surely disquotationalists will not want to articulate their deflationary theory in terms that include such a rich notion as assertion, especially one which seems so intimately tied to truth.

There is reason anyway to doubt that disciplined syntacticism provides an adequate account of truth aptness. We have already seen that declarative syntax is not sufficient for truth-aptness. It can also be argued that declarative syntax is not *necessary*.¹⁵ Asked under oath whether he murdered Jones, Smith may reply: “No”. If he didn’t murder Jones, then what Smith says is true. If he did murder Jones, then what Smith says is false, and he has committed perjury. Asked what I bought at the store, I may say: “Two red apples”. If I did buy two red apples, then what I said is true. Our utterances, Smith’s and mine, appear to be truth-apt, but they are not declarative in form.¹⁶ Following Stainton, we may distinguish between three senses of ‘sentence’: sentence_{syntactic} (an expression with a certain structure), sentence_{semantic} (an expression which expresses a proposition), and sentence_{pragmatic} (an expression which can by itself be used to perform a certain speech act).¹⁷ Arguably what I said counts as a sentence_{semantic} (I have expressed the proposition that I bought two red apples) and a sentence_{pragmatic} (I have asserted that I bought two red apples). Similarly with Smith’s sentence. But neither of our utterances counts as a sentence_{syntactic}. Declarative syntax is unnecessary for truth aptness.¹⁸

Notice further that sentences like Smith’s ‘No’ and my ‘Two red apples’, though apparently truth apt, cannot figure in DisquT or the T-sentences – obviously, “No” is true if and only if no’ is not well-formed. And the problem is compounded by perfectly ordinary truth ascriptions referring to these sentences - for example: “What Smith said in court today was true”. Here the disquotationalist faces a dilemma. If ‘No’ is admitted as truth apt, then the definiens of

DisquT will contain ‘What Smith said in court = “No” and no’, which is ill-formed. If ‘No’ is excluded on the grounds that it is not declarative, then we have a run-of-the-mill truth-ascription that the disquotational theory cannot handle.

Perhaps the disquotationalist will point out that Smith’s utterance is associated with a declarative sentence, namely ‘I did not murder Jones’ (and mine with ‘I bought two red apples’.) What is the nature of this association? One might say: *both express the same proposition*, or *both are used to make the same assertion*. This suggests the following strategy. Accept that there are truth-apt sentences that are not declarative. Do not, however, admit them into DisquT or the T-sentences – admit instead their associated declarative sentences. This removes the threat of ill-formed instantiations. But now the disquotationalist’s restriction is either “*where 's₁', 's₂', ... is a declarative sentence that expresses a proposition*” or “*where 's₁', 's₂', ... is a declarative sentence that makes an assertion*”. And the familiar problem is back: disquotational truth is supposed to be a mere logical device, not a concept whose explication requires substantive semantic concepts such as *assertion* or *expressing a proposition*.

Assertion

Let’s now turn to the other direction: do we need more than the thin deflationary concept of truth for an adequate account of other concepts? Deflationists typically focus their attention on sentences like ‘Fermat’s last theorem is true’, ‘What John said yesterday is true’, and ‘Everything Gandhi said is true’. These sentences do not directly present the evaluated sentences, unlike “‘Penguins waddle’ is true’; instead, the evaluated sentences are indirectly referred to, or belong to a domain that is quantified over. In all these cases, truth applies to sentences, whether they are directly presented, referred to indirectly, or quantified over. These are the first-order uses of ‘true’. But there are other uses of ‘true’ that are not first-order – uses that are more reflective or theoretical. When we say “To assert is to present as true” or “Meaning is given by truth-conditions”, or “Evaluative statements are not truth-apt”, we are not calling any specific sentence true, nor are we making oblique reference to some set of sentences and saying of its members that they are true. Rather, we are identifying conceptual connections between truth and other notions. Truth appears to have a substantive explanatory role in these cases, an important role in the explanation of assertion, meaning, evaluative statements. But according to deflationists, this appearance is illusory. For the minimalist and the disquotationalist, the role of ‘true’ is strictly limited to its disquotational or denominalizing function – recall Horwich’s treatment of *True beliefs engender successful action*. Can the deflationist maintain the thesis that, despite appearances, truth is explanatorily inert? We consider three cases: assertion, meaning, and

realism.

Consider first, *assertion*. According to Frege and others, assertion and assertoric force is to be understood in terms of truth: to assert that p is to *present p as true*.¹⁹ (There is a parallel at the level of thoughts: making a judgment is to recognize a thought as true.) Frege's view of assertion is a natural one. There are many speech-acts I can perform that involve a given proposition: I can suppose it, propose it, float it, question it. Frege plausibly claims that the distinguishing mark of assertion – what sets it apart from other speech-acts – is the fact that when I assert something, I present a certain proposition *as true*.

So here is the challenge to the deflationist: to explain how to achieve a proper theoretical understanding of what it is to assert that p without help from the concept of truth. How might the deflationist respond? Consider disquotationalism or Horwich's minimalism. According to these deflationary views, the function of 'true' is exhausted by its disquotational or denominalizing role. Now consider the thesis that to assert is to present as true. The thesis involves the use of the truth-predicate; in Horwich's terms, it is a fact about truth that needs to be explained. With the denominalizing role of 'true' in mind, a deflationist might claim that the thesis that *to assert that p is to present p as true* is equivalent to the thesis that *to assert that p is to present p* . This commits us to the claim that to present p as true is just to present p ; for example, to present as true the proposition that aardvarks amble is just to present the proposition that aardvarks amble. But this claim is false, for there are many ways to present a proposition. I can present a proposition as worthy of your consideration, or as a conjecture, or as a remote possibility, or as outrageous – and I can also present it as true. Presenting as true is just one way of presenting. So it seems that we cannot disquote away truth from the locution "present as true".

Illocutionary deflationists such as Ayer will take a different tack. They will agree that there is an undeniable connection between assertion and truth, but that it is misleading to present the connection in terms of the slogan *to assert is to present as true*. Better to reverse the order: *to present as true is to assert*. Assertion is not to be characterized in terms of truth; rather, our use of the predicate 'true' is to be characterized in terms of assertion. To predicate 'true' of a sentence (or a thought, or a proposition) *is just to assert the sentence (thought, proposition)*. The illocutionary deflationist will take on board the equivalence thesis, and agree that the *content* of "'Aardvarks amble' is true' is no different from that of 'Aardvarks amble'. But though 'true' does not add content, it does introduce assertoric force.

But there is a difficulty with this illocutionary account, a difficulty articulated by Frege. At first glance, it may seem surprising that Frege should oppose illocutionary deflationism. Frege

does emphasize the illocutionary aspect or role of truth - he regards truth as belonging to the same family of concepts as assertion and judgment. Moreover, Frege famously endorses the equivalence thesis, that 'p' and "'p' is true' are equivalent in content - predicating 'true' makes no difference to content.²⁰ But according to Frege, 'true' also makes no difference to the *force* with which the thought is expressed. Frege says:

If I assert "it is true that sea-water is salt", I assert the same thing as if I assert "sea-water is salt". This enables us to recognize that the assertion is not to be found in the word 'true' ... " (1979: 251)

If one's deflationary view of 'true' is based on the equivalence thesis, then, according to Frege, 'true' cannot be the mark of assertion. Indeed, Frege says that "there is no word or sign in language whose function is simply to assert something" (1979: 185).

Frege is explicitly opposed to illocutionary deflationism, and for good reason. If one accepts the equivalence thesis, there seems to be no difference between asserting that *p* and asserting that *p* is true. Further, the locution '*p* is true' can occur as the antecedent of a conditional, where it cannot be produced with assertoric force. Further still, I can say 'It is true that aardvarks amble' with a variety of different illocutionary forces – I can be supposing, conjecturing, pretending, or acting.²¹ As Frege puts it:

In order to put something forward as true, we do not need a special predicate: we need only the assertoric force with which the sentence is uttered. (Frege 1979: 233)

We can learn a lesson from Frege: deflationism about the word 'true' is one thing, deflationism about the concept of truth quite another. According to Frege, 'true' adds neither content nor illocutionary force. But for all that Frege is not a conceptual deflationist. One can be deflationary about first-order uses of 'true' without being deflationary about second-order uses. If Frege is right, truth is implicated in the assertoric force with which a sentence is uttered. The Fregean point is precisely that presenting *as true* (that is, asserting) is not a matter of ascribing a property to a sentence or thought, but rather is a special kind of doing or act, different from conjecturing, or surmising, or assuming, etc. Even if we grant, with Frege, that first-order uses of 'true' submit to the equivalence thesis, we still need to employ the concept of truth for explanatory purposes. Frege is not at all shy about using truth-locutions in an explanatory way in connection with assertion, logic and science. Assertion is to present as true; logic is the science of the most general laws of truth; the goal of scientific endeavour is *truth*.²² A deflationary treatment of first-order uses of 'true' need not bring conceptual deflationism in its train.

Deflationism, Truth, and Meaning

Since Davidson's seminal "Truth and Meaning" (1967), it has been widely accepted that at least part of what constitutes the meaning of a sentence is its *truth condition*. Davidson famously proposed that a theory of meaning for a language L could be given by a Tarskian truth theory for L, which yields as theorems biconditionals of the form

s is true iff p,

where 's' is a mentioned sentence of L and 'p' is a used sentence of the theorist's language that specifies s's truth-condition. In the special case of a theory of meaning for, say, English that is given *in* English, the theorems will be the T-sentences of English. Thus, for the sentence "Worms wriggle" the meaning-giving theorem will be its T-sentence:

"Worms wriggle" is true iff worms wriggle.

Now, following Dummett (1959), deflationism is often thought to be *incompatible* with a Davidsonian truth-condition theory of meaning.²³ The reason for the incompatibility is thought to be that, if one accepts that the Tarskian T-sentences exhaust all there is to say about the concept of truth, then one cannot at the same time regard the T-sentences as meaning-giving, on pain of circularity.²⁴ Putting the point in terms of knowledge (as does Horwich) "knowledge of the truth condition of a sentence cannot simultaneously constitute *both* our knowledge of its meaning *and* our grasp of *truth* for the sentence" (1990: 71).

It is worth noting at the outset that the status assigned to the T-sentences by deflationists is very different from the status assigned to them by Davidsonian truth-condition theorists of meaning. Like the Davidsonian, the deflationist takes the T-sentence to be a pairing of a worldly condition (described by the used sentence on the right hand side) with a mentioned sentence (quoted on the left hand side). However, for the Davidsonian, the pairing is substantive: the worldly condition specified on the right hand side is the condition *for the particular sentence's truth*, which (at least partially) constitutes the meaning of the sentence. The T-sentence itself is intended to be *informative*, because it reveals the key meaning property of the sentence. And it is *contingent*, since the quoted sentence might have had a different truth-condition (and thus a different meaning). For the deflationist, on the other hand, the pairing is simply a consequence of using a logical device that removes the quotation marks and allows us to *use* a previously mentioned sentence to describe the world. The T-sentence is neither informative nor contingent; it is *definitional*.

However, the deflationist must recognize at least this much contingency in the use of the T-schema. Appending "true" to the sentence "Worms wriggle" may be just another way of speaking of the wriggling of worms, but only *given what that sentence means*. In a world in which crickets chirp and "Worms wriggle" means what our English sentence "Crickets whisper" now means, "Worms wriggle" would be false, not true, even as worms continued to wriggle. The schema would then have a false instance.²⁵ To avoid false instances of the truth schema, one must find a way to guarantee that the quoted instance on the left hand side has the right meaning.²⁶ Returning to the stock example of "Snow is white", we should think of the right-to-left direction of the T-biconditional as follows:

*Given that "Snow is white" means that snow is white, if snow is white, then "Snow is white" is true.*²⁷

But this means that we must recognize meaning as an 'independent variable' (as we might put it) that factors into the T-schema.²⁸ The deflationist must agree that whether a sentence can be properly called "true" (or rather "false") depends on the meaning it has, as well as on the way the world is. But this means that meaning is (at least) *whatever determines truth-value*, given how the world is. On a fairly intuitive (and not specifically Davidsonian) understanding of "truth-condition", this is just what a truth-condition is. So, a sentence's meaning must at least include the condition of its truth, whatever else it may include. This "Determination Argument" presents a persistent challenge to the deflationist: to show how a theory of meaning that makes no appeal to truth-conditions (in the above, intuitive sense) could explain this fact. If the deflationist rejects the claim that the meaning of, e.g., "Snow is white" is (at least in part) constituted by snow's being white, we may reasonably wonder why it is snow's whiteness, rather than the conductivity of copper or the greenness of Brussels sprouts that decides whether "Snow is white" is true or not.²⁹

The Determination Argument and the challenge to the deflationist can be presented in more epistemological terms. When you understand a sentence – know its meaning – you know *something* that allows you to declare the sentence true or false, provided you know all the facts. But how is this to be explained, unless (part of) what you know in knowing meaning is the condition of the sentence's truth? The deflationist could try to replace the notion of a truth-condition with that of a verification condition or assertibility condition, or with the notion of convention-governed use, or communicative intentions; she could adopt a conceptual role semantics or an inferential role semantics.³⁰ But on any of these views, it becomes mysterious how grasp of non-truth-related features of the sentence allows you to assign a truth-value to the

sentence given knowledge of all the facts. The intuitive truth-conditionalist idea is that, if knowledge of meaning at least involves knowledge of truth-conditions, there will be no mystery. For knowing the truth-condition of "Snow is white" is knowing precisely *which* condition is relevant to deciding the sentence's truth-value. Moreover, familiar 'twin-earth' arguments suggest that knowing a sentence's conceptual role, or the condition for its proper use, or any other non-truth related feature is not sufficient for knowing whether the sentence is true or false (even when one knows all the relevant nonlinguistic facts).³¹

Here, then is the objection to the deflationist: a deflationary theory of truth cannot explain meaning in terms of the notion of a truth condition – but meaning cannot be explained in any other way. Faced with this objection, the deflationist may try to devise a suitably deflationary construal of the notion of *truth-conditions*, instead of insisting that deflationism is incompatible with truth-conditional theories of meaning.³² After all, consider again the T-sentence

"Worms wriggle" is true iff worms wriggle.

the deflationist and her opponent alike agree that the used sentence on the right hand side is directly about the world, that it describes a worldly condition, the condition that worms wriggle.³³ So on either theory, there is a worldly condition associated with the sentence "Worms wriggle". Why can't the deflationist agree to call this condition a 'truth' condition, as long as it's recognized that all we mean by this is that the worldly condition is to be picked out by disquoting some sentence? Our response is that this way of paying lip-service to the truth-condition theorist is at best misleading. A truth-condition is that in virtue of which a given sentence is true or false – it is a condition such that, by being appropriately *semantically* associated with the sentence, *renders* the sentence true if it obtains. It is this truth-conferring semantic association that is supposed to explain the particular meaning the sentence has. But it seems that, on the deflationist account, there is no room for a substantive semantic relation between the worldly condition and the sentence – no room for the ideas of 'conferring of truth' and 'appropriate semantic association' between the sentence and the worldly condition.

Thus talk of deflationary truth conditions seems ill-conceived. The deflationist can accept that worldly conditions are associated with sentences by the T-biconditionals. But while for the substantivist these conditions are *truth-conditions*, for the deflationist they cannot be. The deflationist can allow that there are worldly conditions, and she can allow that there is (deflationary) 'truth'; what she cannot make room for are *conditions of truth*. If this is right, then deflationism about truth will, after all, be incompatible with a truth-conditional theory of meaning. If, as many believe, truth-conditions are inescapable in a theory of meaning, this spells

trouble for the deflationist.

Deflationism, Realism and Anti-Realism

So far, we've been bashing deflationism for various things it *can't* do. As a final complaint, we want to consider opposition to deflationism for something it *can* do, perhaps all too easily – namely, settle willy-nilly certain long-standing metaphysical debates. Specifically, deflationism about truth appears to have direct consequences for debates between *realists* and *anti-realists*. Before looking at these consequences, we want to point out that the various lines of thought that take deflationism to have these consequences presupposes a specific, *semantic* construal of the debate. Traditionally, the debate over realism was taken to be a *metaphysical* debate about, roughly, whether, in any given domain (say, ethics, or mathematics), there are entities that exist, or states of affairs that obtain, independently of us – whether our statements or judgments in the relevant domain concern a 'mind-independent reality'. By way of cashing out this rather metaphorical way of putting things, Michael Dummett (in his seminal 1959 paper "Truth") proposed to 'semanticize' the metaphysical idea of a reality as fixed with facts independently of our knowledge of them. He suggested that it be understood as the claim that, for any statement S in the relevant domain, S is either determinately true or determinately false, true or false "independently of whether we know, or are even able to discover, its truth-value" (1993:230). This has had the effect of construing realism as a *semantic* view, a view which involves "acceptance, for statements of the given class, of the principle of bivalence". (*ibid.*).

Why think that this semantic criterion is adequate to capture traditional disputes over Realism? Because, presumably, one who accepts Bivalence for a given class of statements must suppose that statements in the class are *made true* (or false) by things independent of us, things (facts, states of affairs, entities, properties) of which we may forever, perhaps even in principle, have no knowledge or evidence. Associated with each statement in the class there will be a set of truth-conditions which may obtain completely independently of any human judgment, and whose obtaining or otherwise will determine the statement's truth-value. A *realist* in a given domain thus becomes portrayed as someone who maintains no less than a full-blown, 'radically non-epistemic', Correspondence notion of *truth* and a *truth-condition* theory of meaning to go with it.

We can see that if *this* is how the realist position is understood, being a deflationist would rule out being a realist, in any domain. For, as we have seen, deflationism about truth is incompatible with holding a Correspondence view, and also, we have argued, it rules out a truth-conditional view of meaning. However, we must note that, on the above construal, the opponent of the realist is *not* someone who rejects any robust notion of truth and truth-conditions

altogether. Rather, it is someone who adheres to a more sober, humanly attainable, *epistemic* notion of truth, for whom Dummett proposed the term “anti-realist” (*cf.* 1993: 464). Having semanticized the debate over realism, Dummett arrives at a global form of anti-realism which is directly supportable by arguing that “a theory of meaning in terms of truth-conditions is never tenable” (1993: 472). But, though this global anti-realism is antagonistic to Correspondence truth and truth-conditions, it is not formulated in deflationist-friendly terms. Instead, it “would require displacing the notion of truth – of a statement’s being true independently of our knowledge – from its central role in the explanation of meaning, *substituting that of what we take as establishing truth*: we should no longer be concerned with the criterion for the *truth* of a statement, but with the criterion for our *recognizing* it as true” (1993:472, our emphases.). Dummett’s epistemically-constrained truth and truth-conditions (like Putnam’s notion of ‘internally realist truth’) would equally be a target of attack for the deflationist. For ‘epistemic’ truth is as robust or ‘inflationist’ as Correspondence truth. (Indeed, Dummett himself argues *against* deflationism in various places, precisely because, although he is suspicious of Correspondence truth, he still believes truth is a ‘robust’ notion.³⁴)

This means that the Dummettian argument which purports to show that deflationists cannot be realists will equally show that they cannot be *anti*-realists. And there is yet another, different route to the same conclusion. Deflationism would seem to rule out being an anti-realist in any domain, if being an anti-realist in any given domain requires denying that statements in that domain can meet some substantive requirement for being true or false. This is because, as we saw, deflationists are not in a good position to place substantive requirements on truth-aptness. For a deflationist, to say that a statement S is truth-apt is simply to say that we *can* say of S that it’s true. But given the T-schema, we can say of *any* S that it is true provided we can claim S. Along these lines, Crispin Wright (1992) and Paul Horwich (1993) have argued, specifically, that, if one is a deflationist, one cannot uphold a noncognitivist view in ethics. Thus, consider the indicative sentences “Torture is wrong”, or “You ought to give money to charity”. According to noncognitivists, these sentences are different from the sentences of ordinary empirical discourse (“Snow is white”, “The table is dirty”) in that they are ‘non-factual’: they express “no proposition which can be either true or false” (Ayer 1952:107). But, on the assumption that there is nothing more to truth than what is given by the T-schema, it seems impossible to rule out the ethical sentences as true or false. Since, like any indicative sentence, they are disquotable, what more could we require of them that would show them deficient in the truth department? Being well-formed indicative sentences of English, they seem disquotable, and thus ‘*truth-apt*’, or ‘truth-assessable’. But then they will be either true or false after all. “Torture

is wrong” will be true if torture is wrong, false otherwise.

This line of reasoning is applicable in *any* domain, not just ethics (see Boghossian (1990)). Generalized, the argument from deflationism against anti-realism could go as follows (adapting Jacobsen 1996):

1. Being indicative, sentences in domain D are suitable substituents in the LHS of the truth-schema.

So, 2. Sentences in domain D are truth-apt.

So, 3. Sentences in domain D are either true or false.

So, 4. Domain D is a factual domain of discourse

So, 5. Anti-realism is false for domain D.

Once made explicit, however, the argument can be challenged at several points. What isn't clear, however, is whether a *deflationist* can resist this argument. If not, then it will turn out that being a deflationist *does* rule out being an anti-realist in any domain of indicative discourse. Earlier we saw that a sentence's being in the indicative mood is not sufficient for its being a legitimate substituent in the LHS of the disquotations schema. (Indeed, even having disciplined syntax is insufficient.) If so, then the first premise of the above argument can be rejected. However, a deflationist who wishes to reject the first premise so as to reject the above argument will have to tell us how to restrict truth-aptness so as to exclude certain indicative sentences, specifically, sentences in domains that are, as we might intuitively put it, 'not in the business of stating facts'. But it should hardly seem attractive to a deflationist to restrict truth-aptness by appealing to a distinction between factual and non-factual discourse. Indeed the most common way of drawing that distinction is in terms of ... *being truth-apt!*

There may be another way of drawing the factual/nonfactual distinction: in terms of assertoric force. Consider sentences such as: "I promise to do the dishes tonight", "I'd like to know what time it is", "I shall arrive early". Though indicative in form, such sentences are not standardly used to make assertions. In general, indicative mood and assertoric force don't always line up. Using the mood/force distinction, an anti-realist about a given domain might try to portray sentences about that domain as nonfactual not because they fail to be truth-assessable but rather because they are not put forth with *assertoric force*. This move does not appeal to a robustly semantic notion of truth, but rather to the pragmatic notion of assertoric force, a notion needed independently of the realism debate. Alternatively, one may distinguish nonfactual

domains from factual ones in terms of the character of the *truth-makers* of sentences in the respective domains. In nonfactual domains, the thought would be, the entities or worldly conditions or states of affairs that render the sentences true or false are in some way or other necessarily dependent on human judgments or responses, so that sentences will *be* true or false only insofar as those judgments or responses determine them to be so.³⁵

To adopt either the pragmatic or the metaphysical move is to reject the inference from 3 to 4 above – from the claim that sentences in a given domain are true or false to the claim that the domain is factual. However, neither move seem available to the deflationist. As we have argued, explaining assertion and assertoric force may itself require appeal to the notion of truth. And the notion of a truth-maker would seem as unavailable and unpalatable to the deflationist as the notion of a truth-condition (and for much the same reasons).

Debates between realists and their opponents gain impetus from considering certain *contrasts* between different domains such as ethics and physics. And it seems, naively, that one should be able to be a realist in one domain without being a realist in another. For example, it seems as though one may be a scientific realist while being a noncognitivist in ethics. Interestingly enough, such partiality would seem to be disallowed by the two lines of reasoning sketched above – the one purporting to show that deflationism rules out realism, and the other purporting to show that it rules out anti-realism. Where does that leave us with respect to deflationism? As we see it, someone who thinks there are significant debates to be held concerning realism has two options: to reject deflationism *or* to reject the construal of realism/anti-realism debates in terms of the semantic notion of truth (since the short route from deflationism to a deconstruction of the debates relies on that construal). The difficulty we have seen is that it looks like alternative construals are not readily available to deflationists.

Our task today has been mainly negative: to raise some systematic difficulties for deflationism about truth. But we hope some positive lessons have emerged. Given the character of the difficulties we articulated, it seems to us that to make progress in our understanding of truth our main efforts are better directed not at finding a *property* or ‘hidden underlying essence’ shared by all and only true things. With Frege and Davidson, who declare truth ‘primitive, simple, and unanalysable’, *and* with the deflationists, we may agree that there is nothing to be gained from a direct metaphysical investigation into the nature of truth. However, with Frege and Davidson, and *pace* conceptual deflationism, we may insist that there *is* much to be gained from studying the relations between our *concept* of truth and other concepts, and from investigating the

explanatory role played by truth in our conceptual scheme.

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Notes

¹ This "fact about truth" is considered by Horwich, 1990, pp.23-24.

² The phrase is Horwich's; see Horwich 1990, p.22f.

³ *Op. cit.*, p.26 (original italics).

⁴ See (5), Horwich 1990, p.24.

⁵ Hill 2002, p.4.

⁶ DisquT is suggested by remarks in Leeds (1978: 121-131, and fn.10), and versions of it are presented explicitly in Field (1986: 58), Resnik (1990: 412), and David (1994), Ch.4 and p.107.

⁷ This is the way it is characterized by Jackson, et. al. For example: "Non-cognitivism in ethics holds that ethical sentences are not in the business of being either true nor false – for short, they are not truth apt." (1994: 287)

⁸ Syntacticism is mentioned, but not endorsed, by Jackson *et. al.* (1994: 291-293).

⁹ The example is from *op.cit.*, p.293.

¹⁰ The example is from Porubcansky 2004.

¹¹ Notice also that if we embrace syntacticism, we settle immediately issues that surely cannot be settled so quickly: non-cognitivism about ethical statements would be false, and performatives – such as 'I name this ship "Queen Mary II"' – would count as true.

¹² Wright 1992, p.29. As Boghossian puts it, the sentence must be "significant", or, more fully, must "possess a role within the language: its use must be appropriately disciplined by norms of correct utterance" (1990: 163).

¹³ Wright 1992, p.29.

¹⁴

¹⁵ Here we are indebted to Porubcansky 2004.

¹⁶ One would be hard-pressed to say that our utterances, despite appearances, are really declarative. The claim is not supported by evidence in linguistics. For example, syntactically elliptical sentences, like 'Alex does too', cannot usually initiate a discourse. But the sentence fragment 'Two red apples' can - for example, to buy apples from a fruit peddler. (See Stainton (2000: 448). See Stainton's article for more on sentences and sentence fragments.

¹⁷ Here we follow Stainton 2000. These three ways of understanding 'sentence' is further refined by Stainton, but the present formulation is sufficient for our purposes.

¹⁸ Jackson, Oppy and Smith argue that disciplined syntacticism does not go far enough (see also Smith 1994). They contend that it ignores a platitudinous connection between truth aptness and belief: a sentence counts as truth apt only if it can be used to given the content of a belief. And since, in their view, any adequate analysis of a concept should comprise all the platitudes about a concept (and nothing more), the connection between truth aptness and belief cannot be omitted. Their preferred account of truth aptness, though richer than disciplined syntacticism, will be minimal in the sense that it makes no controversial assumptions – it is composed only of platitudes. It seems, however, that this platitude-respecting minimalism cannot be endorsed by the disquotationalist, or by deflationists generally. As Jackson, Oppy and Smith themselves point out, platitudes can be substantive. On their account of truth-aptness, in order to show that a sentence is truth-apt it needs to be shown

that the state an agent is in when she is disposed to utter a sentence ... bears the relations to information, action and rationality required for the state to count as a belief. This is a substantial matter. (p.296)

¹⁹ Frege distinguishes between judging and the mere entertaining of a thought, and correlatively, between the act of assertion the mere expression or articulation of a thought. At one place he writes:

Once we have grasped a thought, we can recognize it as true (make a judgement) and give expression to our recognition of its truth (make an assertion). (1979: 185).

See also (1979: 139) for one of many passages in the same vein,

²⁰ Frege writes:

[T]he sentence 'I smell the scent of violets' has just the same content as the sentence 'It is true that I smell the scent of violets'. (1956/1999: 88)

In general,

... the sense of the word 'true' is such that it does not make any essential contribution to the thought. (1979: 251)

²¹ Frege writes :

[I]n the mouth of an actor upon the stage, even the sentence 'The thought that 5 is a prime number is true' contains only a thought, and indeed the same thought as the simple '5 is a prime number'. (1892/1960: 60).

²² Frege 1979, "Logic", p.2 (italics in the original).

²³ One author, Hartry Field, goes as far as characterizing "the main idea behind deflationism" as "that what plays a central role in meaning and content not include truth conditions" (1994: 253).

²⁴ See Soams (1984) (though Soames (1999) abandons the incompatibility claim.), Etchemendy (1988), Horwich (1990), Brandom (1994), and Rumfitt (1995). For a subtle discussion of the incompatibility, see Gupta (1993). Horisk (1999) discusses and rejects several arguments that attempt to show the circularity.

²⁵ Depending on how sentences are individuated, "Worms wriggle" may even be false *in our world*, if there is a language in which it *actually* means that crickets whisper or whatever.

The present point applies even if "is true" is conceived as a proform naming a sentence rather than as predicate (as in Grover, Camp and Belnap (1975)). Whether or not one should attach "is true" to the name of a sentence still depends on what the sentence is taken to mean.

²⁶ Various restrictions have been proposed to ensure that sentences used to instantiate the schema are not only meaningful, but have a particular, fixed meaning. For example, Tarski (1944: 350) suggests that the language of the mentioned sentence (the object language) be contained in or at least translated into the language employed in its disquotation (the metalanguage), where the object language is part of the metalanguage. Davidson (1984: 34) suggests that we add indices to the truth-predicate, and take truth to be a relation between a sentence, a person, and a time. Alternatively, one could restrict the application of the disquotational schema to entities whose meanings are held fixed. Thus, we saw that Horwich (1990) constrains the disquotation schema by requiring that the utterance under discussion is the same utterance as that used to articulate that utterance's truth-condition. And Field (1994) suggests that the sentences that are legitimately 'plugged' into the disquotational schema are sentences in one's idiolect, sentences whose meanings can be presumed "given" to the speaker. Clearly, what motivates these restrictions is precisely the recognition that truth (however understood) depends on meaning.

²⁷ In (200X: section 4), Horwich makes a similar proposal in connection with the deflationist schema for reference and being-true-of. In a related discussion, Wright (1992: 213) proposes a formulation of the Tarskian biconditional which builds into it an explicit "meaning condition":

(DTM) "Snow is white" is true if, and only if, (a) "Snow is white" means *that snow is white*; and (b) snow is white.

As pointed out in Bar-On et. al. (DTM) fails to represent the dependence of truth on meaning. For, the left-to-right conditional of (DTM) claims that that "Snow is white"'s meaning *that snow is white* is

a necessary condition of “Snow is white”’s being true. Naively, this seems wrong. In a world in which “Snow is white” meant that grass is green, and grass were green, the sentence would still be true. At any rate, this left-to-right conditional is not part of the claim that truth depends on meaning; nor is it justified by it.

²⁸ A deflationist cannot avoid recognition of this role of meaning by insisting – as does Horwich (see above, p. xx) – that truth applies in the first instance to propositions, and only derivatively to sentences. As long as we allow that sentences, too, can be called "true" or "false", we must rely on the notion of a sentence *expressing* one proposition rather than another. A sentence will be true just in case the proposition it expresses is true. But what proposition a sentence expresses clearly depends on (or just is) what the sentence means.

²⁹ The Determination Argument is briefly presented in Lewis (1972). For an interpretation and discussion of Lewis' argument, as well as possible objections to it on behalf of deflationism, see Bar-On, Horisk, and Lycan (1998).

³⁰ For some deflationist suggestions along these lines, see REFs.

³¹ For an argument, see Ch. 10 of Lycan (1984).

³² Several authors have appealed to a notion of ‘*deflationary truth-conditions*’. REFs

³³ The ‘substantivist’ here is someone who thinks truth is a substantive notion, not merely a logical device. That is, it is someone who rejects deflationary accounts falling under (ii). Such a substantivist, though, may agree with the deflationist (as I do) that there is no single ‘robust’ metaphysical property shared by all and only true sentences.

³⁴ See the above quotation. Dummett is *not* a deflationist about ‘the criterion for our recognizing [a statement] *as true*’. [Link to Brandom]

³⁵ See Wright REFs