

Minimalisms about Truth¹

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Writing in 1927, Russell said:

There is a tendency to use “truth” with a big T in the grand sense, as something noble and splendid and worthy of adoration. This gets people into a frame of mind in which they are unable to think. (*An Outline of Philosophy* p.265)

The pendulum has swung. Minimalism is in vogue. The tendency now is to use ‘truth’ with a small ‘t’ as something trivial and, once understood, unworthy of attention. I’ll leave to others the question of whether this has rendered people more able to think.

So what is minimalism? There are a number of things that the label evokes. In the first place a minimal theory might be a simple one. Secondly it might make minimal metaphysical commitments: to things, to properties, to relations. Thirdly, it might be uncontentious; that is, it might be minimally revisionary of our existing beliefs. In short, a theory might be minimally complex, minimally committing, or minimally revisionary.

Which of these three qualities are the qualities of minimalist theories of truth? In fact there are a number of different theories that have gone under that banner, and they have these qualities to different degrees. My main task here is first to distinguish, and then to map out possibilities. I won’t be concerned to argue for a certain position as much as to argue that various combinations of positions are consistent. In particular, I want to argue that a commitment to minimalism about truth does not bring an automatic commitment to what has been called a minimalist theory of truth-aptitude: the claim that every assertoric sentence which is used in a systematic way will be either true or false.

¹I am grateful for conversations with Frank Jackson, Michael Smith and Graham Oppy, whose paper ‘Minimalism and Truth Aptness’ argues for conclusions very similar to mine.

Nor does minimalism about truth bring a commitment to what has been called minimalism about reference: the claim that every word used in a systematic way will refer. (For reasons that will become clear, I'm not altogether happy with these labels.)

Let me start by sorting out three distinct (but not necessarily inconsistent) claims that have been made under the banner of minimalism about truth. One is primarily negative; the other two primarily positive.

The negative claim

Suppose we imagine ourselves dividing the true sentences from the false: putting the true on one side, the false on the other (imagine ourselves as gods if you like, so we make no mistakes). According to the negative claim there is nothing (i.e. no substantial property) which the truths have in common which distinguishes them from the falsehoods. That is: there is no substantial property of truth. Quite what *substantial* means in this context is, of course, a substantial problem. If we think of properties as classes, then there will be a property of truth: the class of true sentences. Even if we don't know which sentences are members of that set, we can define it conditionally: it will contain 'grass is green' if and only if grass is green, and so on. But of course it isn't the existence of such a class that we mean to be denying when we say that the true sentences have nothing in common, since in this sense everything has something in common with everything else. We mean rather that we can give no useful or explanatory account of what the true sentences have in common that the false ones lack.

What would an explanatory account be like? An example would be a traditional correspondence account. Or at least, an account which defined truth as correspondence with the facts would be a substantial explanatory account *if* it included a substantial account of facts and of the relation of correspondence. That is, it must be committed to an ontology of facts; it must not treat 'corresponds with the facts' as simply a long-winded way of saying 'is true'. In general an account of truth will only be substantial if

it gives us some independent purchase on the notion; it must not be, in Blackburn's phrase, mere Pentagonese.²

The negative claim is not directly about the predicate 'is true'. We could imagine separating the true and false sentences of a language which had no such predicate; and the same point would apply. Nevertheless, if, like English, the language does have such a predicate, then the proponent of the negative account needs to give some account of it. It is here that the familiar disquotational account of the truth predicate comes in. But this brings us to the positive characterizations of minimalism about truth, to which we now turn.

First positive claim

The first positive claim about truth itself comes in two versions. The first holds that there is nothing more to be said about truth than is said by the following list of T-sentences, and what follows from them:

'Snow is white' is true iff snow is white.
'Grass is green' is true iff grass is green. etc.

Nothing more to be said? Of course in one sense there is much more to be said. Here are some things: truth is a subject of some enduring interest in philosophy; far too many papers have been written on it; this is yet another. So the point has to be that there is nothing more of theoretical interest to be said about truth. In particular, there is no reductive account to be given of truth: we cannot reduce talk of truth to talk of some other kind. Call this the *list account*.

Compare this with a parallel account of reference. Someone might hold that there is nothing more to be said about reference than is said by the list of *R-sentences*, sentences like

²Blackburn, *Spreading the Word* (Oxford: OUP, 1984) p. 225.

'Pilate' refers to Pilate.
 'Shakespeare' refers to Shakespeare.³

What's on the list of T-sentences? We can't answer this question just by producing the list, since it's infinitely long; and anyway, that would miss an interesting generalization. All the members of the list have a certain form in common (that's how you made sense of the 'et cetera'). They are all instances of the schema:

(DS) 's' is true iff s

(An *instance* of (DS) is formed where the first occurrence of 's' is replaced with a sentence, and the second is replaced with a translation of that sentence into English; English sentences translate themselves.)

This observation leads us to the thought that one thing we can say to go beyond the simple list idea. Say instead that all there is to be said about truth is said by the list of suitable instances of (DS), and what follows from them. Call this the schema account. (A parallel move can be made for reference.) I think that this is what Horwich believes.⁴

What does *suitable* mean? What do we instantiate the schema with? Clearly it will make no sense if we instantiate (DS) with questions; instantiations must be limited to assertoric sentences. But should the list that we generate contain every instantiation of (DS) with a grammatically well-formed assertoric sentence? Surely not: we are actually in the business of accepting the biconditionals so they can't contain gibberish. Then perhaps the instances should be restricted to *meaningful* assertoric sentence. But this still might lead to troubles.

³For an example of someone who holds such an account see McDowell, 'The Sense and Reference of a Proper Name' *Mind* 86 (1977) 159-85.

The one on which Horwich focuses is paradox. He thinks the instances of the schema should be restricted so that they do not include those that lead to paradox. Actually applying such a restriction leads to some difficulty, since just about any sentence that itself invokes the notion of truth can, if uttered in the right circumstances, lead to paradox. So the restrictions, if enforced at the level of sentences, would have to be very extensive. Indeed they would surely have to be too restrictive. We want to say that

‘Most things Jones said about Nixon are true’ is true if and only if most things that Jones said about Nixon are true

even though in some circumstances this sentence will be paradoxical. So we might try to replace (DS) with a version relativized to circumstance:

(DS*) ‘s’ as evaluated with respect to circumstances C is true iff s in C

Where the circumstance are such that the sentence would be paradoxical, no instantiation of (DS*) is given. Is such an account available? As Horwich himself points out, if we are claiming that everything that is to be said about truth is given by the instances of the schema, then we cannot just help ourselves to the restriction ‘where this does not lead to paradox’ unless we can give a characterization of paradox that does not help itself to the notions of truth and falsehood. We cannot just say that paradoxical sentences are those which can be neither true nor false. So we will have to give an account of the circumstances in which instances of (DS*) will be paradoxical that does not itself mention truth; and it is not at all obvious that that can be done.

In fact it’s not so clear Horwich needs to place any restrictions on (DS) with a view to avoiding paradox. Kripke’s account provides a way of accepting instances of (DS) even when they are formed with paradoxical sentences.⁵ But let’s postpone discussion of this until we need to say more about Kripke’s account.

⁴Horwich, *Truth* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990).

⁵Roughly, you could accept such instances if:

A more pressing worry, I think, is given by the consideration that there are some sentences we might not be prepared to assert even within a biconditional, because we think them in some other way unsatisfactory. A parallel here is given by the schema account of reference. It seems to me quite defensible to refuse to assert instances of the reference schema that involve non-referring terms. Thus it seems to me quite defensible to refuse to assert ‘‘Zeus’ refers to Zeus’, on the grounds that there is no such being. A term cannot refer if there is nothing for it to refer to.⁶ Similarly, it seems to me quite defensible to refuse to assert the biconditional ‘‘Zeus is mighty’ is true iff Zeus is mighty’ on exactly the same grounds. I say that such a stand is defensible; some would take it, others not. The considerations that would be adduced in its support are largely independent of considerations over minimalism about truth. So I think the account of minimalism about truth should simply accommodate, rather than dictate, the decision that is made here. But this takes us on to one of the main concerns of this paper; before

(i) the biconditional connective that features in (DS) has a truth table that gives the value ‘true’ when both sides fail to receive a truth value; and

(ii) the biconditional connective in (DS) occurs only in the meta-language (otherwise we could define an undefinedness predicate, and from this a determinate-truth predicate, and hence get a sentence which says of itself that it is not determinately true). For the details see Scott Soames, ‘Truth, Paradox and Partially Defined Predicates’, Chapter Six of *Semantic Theories of Truth* (Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

However, it’s not clear that such an account would satisfy Horwich, since, if every sentences concerning truth *follows* from the instances of (DS), this would entail that all such sentences are in the meta-language (assuming that only meta-language sentences follow from meta-language sentences). There would be no object language truth talk. Kripke’s own account of truth does not, of course, have such a consequence, since he does not claim that all legitimate talk of truth follows from the instances of (DS).

⁶See McDowell, *op. cit.*

pressing it further, let us look at the other positive characterization of minimalism about truth.

Second positive claim

The second positive minimal claim says, roughly, that expressions of the form '*S* is true' have the same meaning as expressions of the form *S*⁷; and that this, and what follows from it, is all there is to say about truth. I'll call this the disquotational account. It goes further than the schema account in one sense, and less far in another. The T-sentences featuring in the first account are simple truth functional biconditionals. The second account holds in addition that the two sides of each T-sentence are equivalent, in some strong sense of equivalence. They have the same meaning. Asserting one performs the same speech act that is performed by asserting the other. For those who accept the legitimacy of talk about meaning, the second account thus makes a stronger claim about the relation between pairs of sentences of the form *S* and '*S* is true' than is made by the first. Those who deny the legitimacy of talk about meaning will eschew the second account altogether.

However, in another sense the second account goes less far than the first. Someone who accepts the first account thereby accepts the set of biconditionals. In asserting the biconditional '*S* is true iff *S*', the proponent of the first theory *uses* the sentence *S*. In contrast, in claiming that *S* and '*S* is true' have the same meaning, the proponents of the second approach need only *mention* the sentences; they don't have to use them.

⁷'Roughly' since '*S* is true' can be used to convey information to someone who does not understand what *S* means. I don't really know how to make the account less rough here. Perhaps by restricting it to cases in which people fully grasp the sentences concerned, although I don't properly understand the nature of such a restriction.

It is a consequence of the second approach that we can eliminate the truth predicate, at least when it is predicated directly of a sentence. Occurrences of '*S* is true' can be replaced with *S*, and the meaning remains unchanged. (Actually this gets rather complicated when truth is not predicated directly of a sentence, in ways that we won't go into here.) So the second account can be thought of as a redundancy account. In this it's unlike the first: the first, as it stands, gives us no way of eliminating all mention of truth.⁸

Is the second account a reductive account? Firstly: is it reductive of the truth predicate? Any reductive account will be a redundancy account. But is the converse true? There are two things that might be meant by a reductive account:

(i) any sentence containing the term can be replaced with an equivalent sentence not containing the term; moreover there is a general recipe for doing this (otherwise every supervenience thesis would be a reductive thesis). A prime example of this is, of course, Russell's theory of descriptions;

(ii) the term itself gets a reduction.

⁸If we could give the whole list then we could use the list account as the basis of a finite explicit definition: 's is true' would be replaceable with 's = "grass is green" iff grass is green, or s = "snow is white" iff snow is white, or ...' But the list isn't finite, so we can't give such a definition. The list account does not give a finitely axiomatized theory of the kind that Tarski offered. Of course Tarski's own account has met with the criticism that it only gives an eliminative definition of truth by means of a kind of trick; on this see Hartry Field 'Tarski's Theory of Truth', *The Journal of Philosophy* 69 (1972) 347-75.

The redundancy theory of truth gives you the former. Is that good enough? What reason might you have to favour the latter? Perhaps you wanted to reduce the very term; but that looks like prejudice, if you can reduce the discourse. The real reason for wanting a reduction of the second kind is the worry that the predicate might be being simply *eliminated* in a paraphrase. That is, there might be nothing that corresponds to the predicate at the level of the reduced discourse. So the predicate has in no sense been legitimated.

But whether or not we think that the account is reductive at the level of the predicate, there is another sense in which it clearly is not. Suppose we do eliminate every occurrence of the predicate 'true' from the language. Now we imagine ourselves doing what we imagined earlier: classing the sentences into the truths and the falsehoods. That's not a practice that we would have eliminated by eliminating the truth predicate (we just wouldn't have a term for the classes). And we would still have no analysis of what determined which one went into which basket: what they had in common.

Thinking of the proposal as the redundancy account is apt to make us think of it in terms of elimination rules; and these could be quite unspecific. There would be no need to say anything about which sentences the predicate attaches to (to rule out questions for instance). We have not got, so far, introduction rules. We would need these if the account were to have any chance of qualifying as a complete account, since it would need to explain competence in using the predicate. For these we need a notion of a *suitable* sentence to take the truth predicate. Then we can state the rule: whenever you would accept a suitable sentence *S*, accept '*S* is true'.

What is it for a sentence to be suitable? Clearly it must be declarative. Do we need any further conditions? For the schema theory, we saw some worry about paradox. Is the second approach hurt by risk of paradox? Surely not. It is a metalinguistic theory. It just gives us the equivalences; we mention the sentences they contain. It is quite

unproblematic to say that 'This sentence is false' and "'This sentence is false' is true' have the same paradoxical meaning. For the same reason the account is not troubled by lack of reference. We can happily say that 'Zeus is powerful' and "'Zeus is powerful' is true' have the same meaning, whilst denying that 'Zeus' refers.

Are the three accounts I have presented minimalist in the three senses I identified earlier? By and large, yes. They are certainly minimally complex. They are generally minimally committing. They don't require us to accept an ontology of facts, or a relation of correspondence or coherence, although the second positive account does involve a commitment to the notion of sameness of meaning. If there is any area in which they are not minimal it is in the revision they make to our received views. It is somewhat shocking that so little can be said about truth. But that is at most philosophically shocking; I doubt that most non-philosophers have any view on the matter.

Do the three accounts fit together? I think that the negative claim fits very well with either of the positive claims. However, the two positive claims don't fit together as they stand: each claims that it says all there is to say about truth. Suppose however we simply affixed that clause to the conjunction of the two claims. Would we then have a consistent position? Perhaps we would, but it hard to see why anyone would want to hold the first account if they were prepared to hold the second. I think that the main reason restricting people to the first is a desire to avoid talk of sameness of meaning; and that is not really a worry I share. So from now on I'm going to concentrate on the conjunction of the negative claim with the second positive claim. The first positive claim is there for those who want it.

Truth-aptitude

So far we have spoken only of truth. But what of truth-aptitude? What do the positive and negative views have to say about truth-aptitude?

To start with we need to say what truth-aptitude is. At a first stab, we might say that a sentence is truth-apt iff it is either true or false. The difficulty here is that it's not sentences on their own, but sentences uttered in contexts and evaluated with respect to circumstances that are either true or false (what I'll call *utterances*, without prejudicing whether they are spoken). So, to keep things clear, let's say that an *utterance* is *truth-valued* just in case it is either true or false; and let's say that a *sentence* is *truth-apt* just in case there are some combinations of context and circumstance in which it gets a truth value; for short: a sentence is truth-apt iff it is possibly either true or false. (By *sentence* I mean an interpreted sentence, an abstract object which has its (non-indexical) meaning as part of its essential nature.⁹ I believe that this is the right way to think of sentences; but nothing I say will hinge on this. If you would rather think of sentences as physical objects, or at least as objects which have their meanings contingently, then think of a truth-apt sentence as one which gets a truth value in some context and circumstance in which it retains the same meaning that it actually has.)

What consequences does the negative claim about truth have for truth-aptitude? It might seem that there is a quick answer. If truth-aptitude is just the property of being possibly true or false, and neither truth nor falsity are substantial properties, how can the property of possibly being either one or the other be substantial?

⁹For some recent exponents of this view see Soames 'What is a Theory of Truth?', *The Journal of Philosophy* 81 (1984) 411-429, at p.425 and the references to Lewis and Kripke given there.

However compelling this might seem at first glance, it is not a good argument. The negative claim was just the claim that there is no substantial characterization of the difference between the true and the false. That's quite compatible with the view that there is a substantive property of being possibly one or the other. To see this, consider a parallel. Suppose we have a machine that has the task of choosing winning lottery tickets. Some (a few) it assigns to the class of winners; the others it assigns to the class of losers. And suppose that it is truly a random chooser; the only explanation of why a given ticket is a member of the one class rather than the other is that the machine has assigned it to that class. So we will have to give a sort of minimalist theory of what it is to be a ticket that the machine chooses as a winner: it is just to be so chosen by the machine. Does this mean that we can say nothing substantial about the features that something must have in order to be either a ticket that the machine assigns to the winning class or a ticket that the machine assigns to the losing class? Absolutely not. Such a thing will simply be a lottery ticket, and we can give a substantial account of what that is. What we lack is a substantial account of what distinguishes those that the machine assigns to the class of winners from those that it assigns to the set of losers; we do not lack a substantial account of what distinguishes the members of the union of these classes from everything else. Moreover, not much changes if we alter the workings of the machine so that it no longer partitions the tickets into the winners and losers, but rather chooses a class of winners (that receive prizes), and chooses a class of losers (that are eliminated), and leaves the rest of the tickets to go on to the next round. Now being a lottery ticket will not be a sufficient condition on being a ticket that is chosen either as a winner or a loser; but it will be a sufficient condition on being possibly so chosen.

Clearly then there is an important difference between having the property of being chosen as a winner, and having the property of being possibly chosen as either a winner or a loser. But the difference is apt to be missed since the same form of words can be used to describe both properties. Thus suppose our machine is also used to choose

winning premium bonds. Now whilst we cannot say what is distinctive about a lottery ticket that is chosen as a *winner* (rather than a loser), we can say what is distinctive about a *lottery ticket* that is chosen as a winner (rather than a premium bond). It is just what is distinctive about lottery tickets.

Similarly, in the case of truth, the negative minimal claim about truth doesn't *entail* that no substantial characterization can be made of truth-aptitude. What was denied by the negative claim was that anything substantial could be said about what distinguished the truths from the falsehoods; this is quite compatible with the claim that something substantial can be said about what distinguishes the possible truths and falsehoods from everything else. (Again the question 'what is distinctive about the truths' is ambiguous. In asking it, someone could be asking what is special about the truths that distinguishes them from the falsehoods. Alternatively they could be asking what sort of things the truths are: what distinguishes them from different sorts of things like cattle and table-cloths.)

So much for the negative account of minimalism; but what if we accept either of the positive accounts? Do these have consequences for our account of truth-aptitude? Paul Boghossian has argued that the disquotational theory of truth (by which he means something like the conjunction of the negative claim with the second of the positive claims) does indeed have consequences for an account of truth-aptitude.¹⁰ He thinks that it entails that every significant declarative sentence will be truth-apt. (A significant sentence is one whose use 'must be appropriately disciplined by norms of correct utterance.'¹¹) Thus Boghossian thinks that one couldn't consistently maintain the disquotational theory of truth, and hold that, for example, only those sentences reducible to the language of science are genuinely truth-apt.

¹⁰P. Boghossian, 'The Status of Content', *The Philosophical Review* 99 (1990) 157-184.

Boghossian calls this view that all significant declarative sentences are truth-apt the *deflationary* conception of truth conditionality. Since Boghossian means by ‘deflationary’ roughly what I mean by ‘minimal’, this suggests that such a view is simply the extension to the domain of truth-aptitude of the minimal theory of truth. In fact I think it is a claim of a rather different nature. At the very least it is a surprising doctrine; we didn’t expect truth-aptitude to be so easily earned. So what argument does Boghossian give for linking it to truth? His view seems to be that anyone who denies that there is a substantial notion of truth must also deny that there is a substantial notion of truth-aptitude, since ‘any proposed requirement on candidacy for truth must be grounded in the preferred account of the nature of truth’¹². But this is not so; no more than any proposed requirement on candidacy for being a lottery ticket must be grounded in an account of the nature of being a lottery ticket that gets chosen as a winner.

There is no bar of consistency on holding a disquotational theory of truth whilst not thinking that every disciplined assertoric sentence is truth-apt. But why would anyone want to hold such a combination of views? I will offer three possible reasons. The first concerns gappy predicates; the second concerns terms that lack reference; and the third concerns the idea that some assertoric sentences are not truth-apt because they do not express beliefs.

First reason

Scott Soames gives the following example of a gappy predicate:

Smidget: stipulative definition

- (i) any adult human being under three feet in height is a smidget;
- (ii) any adult human being over four feet in height is not a smidget;

¹¹Ibid p. 163

¹²Ibid p. 165.

(iii) anything that is not an adult human being is not a smidget.¹³

This predicate is not vague; its conditions of application are perfectly precise. But it contains a perfectly precise gap. Confronted with Bill, who is three feet six inches tall, we should accept neither

Bill is a smidget

nor

Bill is not a smidget.

But then according to the account of truth which Soames (following Kripke) proposes, neither should we accept

‘Bill is a smidget’ is true

nor

‘Bill is a smidget’ is false.

So any actual utterance of ‘Bill is a smidget’ will fail to get a truth value. This sentence does not, however, fail to be truth-apt, since there are circumstances in which Bill will be considerably shorter or taller than he actually is, circumstances in which the sentence will be true and false respectively. However, it is easy enough to give a sentence containing a gappy predicate which is not truth-apt:

Any man who is three feet six inches tall is a smidget

That sentence will fail to get a truth value relative to *any* circumstance.

Now I don’t see why someone who accepts a minimalist account of truth should be precluded from accepting the existence of gappy predicates. The point becomes more urgent with the realization that on Kripke’s account (as developed by Soames) the truth predicate itself is gappy: it is simply not defined when it is predicated of sentences that themselves lack truth values. Such an account is quite in keeping with the second

¹³Soames, ‘Presupposition’ in D. Gabbay and F. Guentner (edd.) *Handbook of Philosophical Logic, Vol. IV*, 553-616, at p. 584; ‘Truth, Paradox and Partially Defined Predicates’. Soames credits the idea to Nathan Salmon.

positive claim about truth: if S is equivalent to ' S is true', then we would expect one to lack a truth value just in case the other does.¹⁴

Second reason

Much the same point that was made with respect to gappy predicates can now be made with respect to terms that lack reference. It is a reasonable view (certainly not one that should be ruled out by the minimalist theory of truth) that utterances of sentences containing non-referring singular terms simply lack truth values. (Don't say that they are neither true nor false, since that commits you to saying they are not true, and so, where S contains a non-referring singular term you'll lose the equivalence between S and ' S is true'. The former will be neither true nor false, and hence the latter will be false). The same can be said about sentences containing natural kind terms that lack reference, and perhaps about other predicates: these too arguably fail to get truth values.

Now it is not clear that these considerations show that sentences containing empty terms are not truth-apt (rather than simply lacking truth values when actually uttered); since it might be thought that there are circumstances in which they would get truth values, namely those circumstances in which their referents exist. And this in turn will depend on whether we think such terms are contingently empty, or, as Kripke argued for 'unicorn', essentially empty. But to avoid that debate, let me introduce a notion of *real-world truth-aptitude*. A sentence is real-world truth-apt just in case *given what actually exists* an utterance of it could be either true or false. Clearly this is an important notion;

¹⁴Similarly, given certain assumptions that are needed anyway, the Kripke-Soames account of truth is compatible with the first positive claim (see above n.5). The worries that were raised by Horwich in his attempt to exclude paradoxical sentences from the instantiations of (DS) have their proper place as limits on which utterances are truth valued, and which sentences are truth apt.

if a sentence is not real-world truth-apt we will have no chance of expressing a truth by uttering it. Claims that, for instance, the predicates of folk psychology or of morality answer to nothing in the actual world can be understood as claims that sentences containing such terms are not real-world truth-apt. Boghossian has given no reason to think that the minimalist about truth is precluded from making such claims.

Can we give real examples of people who are minimalist about truth, but who have a substantial notion of reference which is used to put constraints on which sentences are real-world truth-apt? This seems to me to be exactly the position that Ramsey held. He's famous for holding the redundancy theory of truth; but he didn't hold a insubstantial theory of truth-aptitude. He says:

But before we proceed further with the analysis of judgement, it is necessary to say something about truth and falsehood, in order to show that there is in *reality no separate problem* of truth but merely a linguistic muddle.¹⁵

That is, there is no separate problem in addition to the question of which things are judgements (i.e. which are truth-apt). The real work is being done by the account of judgement:

It is clear that the problem is not as to the nature of truth and falsehood, but as to the nature of judgement or assertion¹⁶

He was interested in saying which judgements had which truth conditions; and here he says that the chicken's belief that a caterpillar is poisonous is 'somehow related to the

¹⁵Facts and Propositions' reprinted in *Foundations* ed D. Mellor, (London: RKP, 1978) at p.38 (my emphasis).

¹⁶Ibid. p.39. The point is noted by Field in 'The Deflationary Conception of Truth' in *Fact, Science and Morality*, edd. G. MacDonald and C. Wright (Oxford: Basil

objective factors, viz, the kind of caterpillar and poisonousness'.¹⁷ He doesn't spell this relation out; but it's clear that on the basis of the relation he could say which beliefs are truth-apt. If there is nothing for the belief to be related to, then it cannot have the relevant relation. So he had, in effect, a correspondence theory of truth-aptitude; and a redundancy theory of truth.

Another person who holds much the same combination of claims is Michael Devitt. This is surprising, since he protests long and loud that a disquotational account of truth is insufficient, and that he holds a correspondence account. But under scrutiny I think his account is revealed as a correspondence theory of truth-aptitude with a minimalist theory of truth. Devitt says that a sentence of the form 'a is F' is true iff the object designated by 'a' is among the objects to which the predicate 'F' applies.¹⁸ He then goes on to spell out reference using some causal account. But this isn't good enough to provide an account which tells us what distinguishes the true sentences from the false. We still need to know what it is for a predicate to apply to an object. When he comes to say what it is for predicate to apply to an object he just says the following: 'green' applies to grass just in case grass is green, 'yellow' applies to lemons just in case lemons are yellow, and so on. He gives a list account of application.¹⁹ But then he hasn't really given an account of what the true sentences have in common which distinguish them from the false. He gives a list account which is no better than a list account of truth: an account which says that 'true' applies to 'grass is green' just in case grass is green, and so on. Note that it wouldn't help Devitt just to embrace

Blackwell, 1986), and by Sahlin in *The Philosophy of F. P. Ramsey* (Cambridge: CUP 1990).

¹⁷Ibid. p.40.

¹⁸*Realism and Truth*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991) p. 27.

universals; he would in addition have to embrace a substantial relation of instantiating a universal.

So what does Devitt have? He has a correspondence account of truth-aptness. In order to get a truth value a sentence must have terms that refer; and his causal account aims to spell that relation out. Devitt has nothing substantial to say about what distinguishes the true sentences from the false.²⁰

There is a way of blocking the worry from reference failure. This is to adopt a theory of reference which says that whenever you have a well disciplined term it has reference. Boghossian introduces such a theory, which he calls the deflationary conception of reference. He sees it as ‘corresponding’ to the deflationary (i.e. minimal) theory of truth. However, far from being a natural dual to the minimalist theory of truth, such a ‘minimalist’ theory of reference is really in some tension with it. It is indeed minimal in the sense that it puts minimal conditions on what a term must like be in order to have reference; in other words it is minimally complex. But as a result it is not at all minimal in its ontological commitments, nor in the revisions it makes to our prior beliefs.

Boghossian discusses the theory with respect to predicates. But if it really is a theory of *reference* (rather than a theory of properties) it had better work for singular terms as well. So let’s consider a singular term that has a role in language, yet we would

¹⁹Or at least this is what he attributes to Quine in ““Ostrich Nominalism” or “Mirage Realism”?” *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 61 (1980) pp. 433-9; I think he accepts it himself.

²⁰To be more accurate, he doesn’t by the end of Chapter Three of *Realism and Truth*, ‘What is Truth?’. As John O’Leary Hawthorn has pointed out to me, later Devitt endorses claims about explanation that do seem to commit him to a substantial view of truth.

ordinarily not think of as having a reference: 'Zeus' for instance. The 'minimalist' theory of reference will have to say that 'Zeus' does in fact refer. I think that this is a pretty unattractive conclusion by any lights; but I think it is totally wrong to market such a theory as minimalist in the way that the theories of truth we have been looking at are minimalist. It is indeed minimalist in the conditions that it places on reference; but it buys this at the cost of a massive expansion of our ontological commitments. (Note that rejecting the 'minimalist' account of reference that Boghossian proposes doesn't automatically commit one to accepting a reductive account of reference.)

I think what has got confused here is a metaphysical theory of properties: a theory of properties which saw them simply as the shadows of predicates might reasonably be called minimalist, in that it is minimally committing. We don't have a minimal theory of reference at all. So why hold it? Or more to the point: why think that a minimalist about truth ought to hold it? Boghossian thinks that the minimalist about truth is forced to hold it since a robust (i.e. non-minimal) theory of reference entails a robust theory of truth. Why?

If the predicate in 'x is P' might fail to refer to a property, then the overall declarative sentence of which it's a part might fail to possess a truth condition. However, declarative sentences cannot fail to possess a truth condition except against the background of robust conception of truth. Hence, a commitment to a robust conception of reference would appear to entrain a commitment to a robust conception of truth, just as expected.²¹

So the argument actually requires the premise that the minimalist theory of truth will entail that all disciplined assertoric sentences possess truth conditions, and that's an entailment that I've argued doesn't hold. Perhaps Boghossian is confusing the minimalist theory of truth with a 'minimalist' theory of truth-aptitude: the view that every significant declarative sentence will be truth-apt. Perhaps his contention is that a robust theory of reference will entail a robust (i.e. restrictive) theory of truth-aptitude. If

²¹Boghossian, *op. cit.* pp. 166-7

so, we might hope to put Boghossian's argument on its head: if a robust theory of reference really did entail such a theory, then, since a robust theory of reference seems necessary at least for singular terms, we should adopt the robust theory of truth-aptitude. But in fact the entailment doesn't go through: it is quite consistent to say (as a description theorist would say) that when the singular term 'a' in the sentence 'Fa' fails to refer the sentence is false. Hence such a theorist might hold a robust theory of reference, whilst maintaining a minimalist theory of truth-aptitude.

Third reason

The third reason for denying that not all significant declarative sentences are truth-apt is premised on the claim that not all such sentences express beliefs. For instance, expressivists think that moral sentences do not express beliefs. But if we think that all assertoric sentences must express beliefs, this means that such sentences aren't really assertoric. And if only assertoric sentences can be truth-apt, then such sentences aren't.²² (Note this argument invokes a substantial intuition about truth-aptitude, not about truth. So it's compatible with a minimalism about truth which denies that there are any such intuitions to be had.)

I actually think that this argument is problematic as it stands. It requires the idea that every assertoric sentence must express a (possible) belief. But surely there can be assertoric sentences (indeed true ones) which express no possible belief: Moorean sentences like 'It's raining and I don't believe that it is'. I think that the right thing to say is not that every assertoric sentence must express a possible belief, but rather that when a sentence is necessarily used to express some state of mind other than a belief then it is not truth-apt. For instance, expressivists think that moral sentences are used to express desires. But then if they are minimalist about truth they had better not think that

²²Michael Smith presents this argument in 'Why Expressivists About Value Should Love Minimalism About Truth', *Analysis* 54 (1994).

the moral sentences which are apparently true are really true, since we surely can give some account of what distinguishes the sentences that express people's desires from those that do not.

Difficulties

I have argued that Boghossian is wrong in claiming that minimalism about truth entails that every assertoric sentence is truth-apt. But the considerations of the last section show that there is a related point that he could have made: given the minimal account of truth there appears to be a problem with going on asserting sentences whilst denying that they are truth-apt. Let me conclude by spelling out the difficulty. Suppose that you assert *S*. Then by the minimalist theory, that's equivalent to asserting '*s* is true'. But that sentence entails that *s* is true or false, which in turn entails that *s* is truth-apt. So by asserting *s*, and holding the minimalist theory, you appear to be committed to holding that *s* is truth-apt. (A parallel argument works to show that every sentence you assert must be real-world truth-apt.) Now this will be a real problem for anyone who put fairly stringent conditions on truth-aptitude; for we would expect there to be a number of apparently assertoric sentences which people will go on asserting, yet which will not be truth-apt. One response to this is simply to deny the legitimacy of using apparently assertoric sentences that are not truth-apt. The person who takes this line will try to avoid such sentences themselves, and will claim that insofar as others use them, they are simply mistaken. This is perhaps not an implausible line to take for sentences that fail of truth-aptitude through partial predicates or lack of reference; but surely even the most hard bitten expressivist will not want to eliminate all moral talk.

How could the expressivist get out of the difficulty? One possibility is to restrict the suitable instances of the equivalence to the truth-apt sentences. Say that *s* is equivalent to '*s* is true' just in case *s* is truth-apt; otherwise they are not equivalent. (Or, more cautiously: say that say that the equivalence doesn't hold when the sentence is necessarily used to express states of mind other than beliefs.) This would enable

ordinary moral talk to go on as before; but it would still mean that whenever people describe moral statements as true or false they would be making a mistake.

The alternative is to make the truth predicate ambiguous. Say that when predicated of moral sentences, 'is true' gets another sense, or is used metaphorically, or whatever..²³ Either of these approaches would do the job; but at a price. They become highly revisionary of our ordinary linguistic practice. If part of the appeal of the minimalist theory of truth was that it was so unrevisionary, then we can see why its proponents might resist a theory of truth-aptness that pulls in the other direction. But I think that these are arguments against expressivism; they are not compelling arguments against a substantial theory of truth-aptness in general.

²³You could even try to stick the two senses back together by treating 'is true' as a shifty operator, *à la* Kaplan; see his 'Opacity' in *The Philosophy of Quine* edd. L. Hahn and P. Schilpp (La Salle: Open Court 1986) at p.237. 'is true' would be treated as a single operator, whose interpretation in any given instance would be determined by the nature of the sentence it is predicated of. The real problem with this (aside from that generated when different sorts of sentence fall under the same instance of the operator) is that sketched above: minimalism about truth commits us to the view that we can give no account of what the true sentences have that the false ones lack. Yet we can say something about what it is that makes a sentence express a desire rather than fail to express one.