Understanding Deflationism

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A Deflationary Conception of Deflationism.

My aim here will be to say what is right about deflationism about truth -- including how deflationism is best understood, and why, in the end, truth is deflationary. I will do this without presenting any one deflationary theory that tells us what truth is, what the predicate *true* means, or what it is to understand this predicate. I have three reasons for avoiding this level of specificity.

First, any precise and specific theory would require a full-fledged analysis of the liar and related paradoxes. Although much progress has been made toward this end, and although this is where the real philosophical action in theories of truth now lies, in my opinion too many questions remain unresolved for us to be fully confident about any specific and precise analysis of truth. When all is said and done, we will, of course, want our understanding of ordinary ascriptions of truth to non-paradoxical bearers to harmonize with the more complex story that emerges from an account of the paradoxes. To this end, we should try to make sure that insights from these different investigations inform and constrain one another – as I will try, briefly, to illustrate at the very end of my discussion. However, I am not sure that we now know enough to finish the job. Certainly I don't.

The second reason for avoiding a specific deflationary theory is that every such theory that I know of is either clearly false, or at least dubious.¹ Apart from the unacceptable, or dubious, details of particular proposals, one large and daunting difficulty stands in the way of

developing any deflationary analysis of what *true* means, or of what it is to understand the truth predicate. In order to avoid circularity, any such analysis must avoid notions that themselves presuppose the notion of truth being analyzed. For example, if one appeals to meaning, propositions, equivalence relations, or the like, one undertakes an obligation to explain how these can be understood independent of truth itself. This is a difficult problem, to say the least.

My final reason for not offering a specific deflationary theory of truth is my belief that we can clarify the notion of truth in a way that gives us most of what we need for ordinary philosophical purposes, without resolving the contentious issues raised by any complete and precise theory. Instead of proposing any such theory I, will offer a conception of what it is for a truth predicate, or a theory of such a predicate, to be deflationary. I will then argue that our ordinary truth predicate of propositions is deflationary, but that deflationary theories of truth for sentences don't tell the whole story about sentential truth.

I begin with what often is taken to be a paradigm of a deflationary truth predicate – a Tarskian truth predicate for a restricted fragment E of present-day English, encompassing the constructions of the predicate calculus, but not containing any ordinary semantic predicates. Imagine that we have an explicit definition of a Tarskian truth predicate for this language, formulated in a slightly extended metalanguage. The definition makes use of elementary facts about the ontology and syntax of E, plus a little bit of set theory, but it does not employ any undefined semantic terms. Instead, it relies on familiar Tarski-style list-definitions of reference and denotation for the non-logical vocabulary, plus the usual recursive clauses for the logical vocabulary. The definition is understood as introducing, and giving the content of, the predicate *is a Tarski-true sentence of E*; and the definiens provided by the definition is

¹ See chapter 8 of my <u>Understanding Truth</u>, (New York: Oxford Press), 1999 for criticisms of some well-known

substitutable for this predicate, without loss of meaning, in every sentence of the metalanguage in which it occurs. For each sentence S of E, the claim that S is a Tarski-true sentence of E is materially equivalent to the claim made by S itself. That isn't all; the claim made by S is both a necessary and an apriori consequence of the claim that S is a Tarski-true sentence of E; in addition, if we take the ontology and syntax of E as given, then the necessary and apriori consequence relations run in the other direction as well – in other words, the claim that S is a Tarski-true sentence of E is a necessary and apriori consequence of the claim made by S together with a claim specifying the ontology and syntax of E. But for this relatively minor complication, S and the claim that S is Tarski-true in E are necessarily and apriori equivalent. Given elementary facts about set theory, anyone who understands the claims made by the two sentences is in a position to infer one from the other without further ado. In addition, since these inferences are relatively obvious and straightforward, it is plausible to suppose that the reason that a particular sentence of E, for example *the moon affects the tides*, is Tarski-true is simply the reason that the moon affects the tides. These features are hallmarks of a deflationary truth predicate.

It is instructive to compare this deflationary predicate with the one-place predicate *is a true sentence of E*, which is formed by filling in the second argument place of the relational predicate *is a true sentence of* that occurs in ordinary language. Since one can know that S is a true sentence of E without understanding S, and without believing or being in a position to come to believe the claim it expresses, neither the claim made by S nor the claim that S is a Tarski-true sentence of E is an **apriori consequence** of the claim made by

deflationist theories.

'S' is a true sentence of E, using our ordinary truth predicate.² If, as seems plausible, sentences of a natural language mean what they do contingently, and sometimes even change their meanings, then neither the claim made by S, nor the claim that S is a Tarskitrue sentence of E, is a **necessary consequence** of the claim that S is a true sentence of E, either. Analogous points run in the opposite direction. Since one can believe the claim expressed by S without knowing what S means, and without being in a position to determine that S is a true sentence of E, the claim that S is a true sentence of E is **not** an apriori consequence of the claim made by S, or of the claim that S is a Tarski-true sentence of E. And again, if, as seems plausible, the sentences of natural language have their truth conditions contingently, then the claim that S is a true sentence of E is **not** a necessary consequence of the claim made by S, or of the claim that S is a Tarski-true sentence of E. Therefore, although the claim expressed by each sentence S of E can be regarded as both necessarily equivalent and apriori equivalent to claim expressed by the corresponding metalanguage sentence 'S' is a Tarski-true sentence of E, by no stretch of the imagination can the claim expressed by S be taken to be either necessarily or apriori equivalent to the claim expressed by the sentence 'S' is a true sentence of E, which contains our ordinary truth predicate of sentences. This is connected with another difference. The reason that the sentence the moon affects the tides is a true sentence of E is **not** the same as the reason that it is a Tarski-true sentence of E. As we have seen, it is plausible to take the reason that the sentence is Tarski-true to be nothing more than the reason that the moon affects the tides. This reason may be part – but only part -- of the reason that the sentence is true in the ordinary sense. The sentence *the moon affects the tides* is a true sentence of E because

² Throughout I use boldface italics to express corner quotes.

of two things: (i) that it **means** that the moon affects the tides, and (ii) that the moon does affect the tides. Since the first of these reasons is a substantive matter, the predicate *is a true sentence of E* is **not** deflationary.

So is truth for E deflationary or not? That depends on what one means in asking the question. If one means Is there a deflationary truth predicate for E - a predicate that applies to all and only the truths of E which is such that the claim that it applies to a sentence is equivalent, in an appropriately strong sense, to the claim made by the sentence itself? -- then the answer is yes, truth for E is deflationary, in this sense. However, if one means, Is the ordinary truth predicate 'is a true sentence of E' deflationary? -- then the answer is *no*, *it isn't deflationary*. A more interesting question than either of these is whether one needs a truth predicate for E beyond the deflationary Tarskian one. This depends on what one needs a truth predicate for in the first place. It is clear that for some purposes – for example securing the advantages of semantic ascent, and providing the basis for a model-theoretic treatment of logical consequence in E -- one doesn't need anything more than Tarski-style predicates. However, it is far from obvious that we **never** need a non-deflationary truth predicate of sentences. Surely we need a substantive theory of meaning. If some notion of sentential truth plays an essential role in such a theory, then it won't be deflationary. Even if a theory of meaning can be gotten without a notion of sentential truth, any such theory that assigns meanings, or propositions, to sentences will provide the resources for defining a non-deflationary truth predicate. Since we can define sentential truth in terms of the truth of that which a sentence means or expresses, a needed non-deflationary notion of sentential truth should be extractable from a theory of meaning, provided that we can make sense of what it is for that which is expressed by a sentence to be true.

Suppose, then, that one agrees that we cannot get everything we need from deflationary truth predicates of sentences. One still might wonder whether propositional truth is deflationary, where a proposition is the sort of thing that can be believed, asserted, denied, assumed, and so on. What would it mean to say that the property of being a true proposition is deflationary? As I indicated earlier, in answering this question I will put aside any consideration of the liar, or related paradoxes. With this limitation, we may consider pairs of non-paradoxical and non-pathological propositions p and the proposition that p is true.³ My suggestion is that to say propositional truth is deflationary is to say: (i) that p and the proposition that p is true are trivial, necessary and a priori consequences of one another,⁴ and (ii) that any warrant for asserting, believing, denying, doubting, assuming, (or taking any of a variety of related attitudes) toward one of those propositions is a warrant for asserting,

³ In restricting myself to non-paradoxical and non-pathological propositions, I am allowing cases in which propositional truth is ascribed to propositions which themselves ascribe truth (or untruth) to other propositions, provided that all these propositions are unparadoxical and grounded. Thus, although I do not restrict the propositional truth predicate in the way in which Tarski's sentential truth predicates are restricted, I remain noncommittal about what should be said about paradoxical and pathological (ungrounded) cases. ⁴ The claim that a proposition p is an apriori consequence of the proposition that p is true should be understood in the following sense: there is a way of apprehending the proposition that p is true (which also involves apprehending p) such that when the proposition that p is true is apprehended in this way, the agent is able, apriori, to infer p. This corresponds to what I called *apriori consequence in the weak sense* in footnote 3 of chapter 8 of my <u>Understanding Truth</u>, (New York: Oxford University Press), 1999. If we had selected a closely related truth claim – namely the one expressed by *it is true that S* this complication would not have been required, and we could have appealed to what I there called *apriori consequence in the strong sense*. These technical differences don't matter for present purposes. believing, denying, doubting, assuming, (or taking the relevant related attitude) toward the other.⁵

Is this really enough for a propositional truth predicate to count as deflationary? Some might object that it isn't, on the grounds that I haven't explained what *true* means, which, of course, I haven't. But why is this an objection? It is no part of deflationism that the truth predicate must be definable. Consequently, it would be expecting too much to demand that deflationists provide a synonym for the truth predicate, or identified the proposition expressed by the sentence *the proposition that S is true* with the proposition expressed by some other sentence in which the word *true* doesn't occur. Some deflationists may think that truth can be defined, but not all do, and it is not an essential part of the deflationary position.

Others might object that in giving my characterization of deflationism I haven't said anything informative about truth, or the meaning of the ordinary truth predicate of propositions. But why not? To be told that the claim that p is true is necessarily and apriori equivalent to p, and that any warrant one has for bearing an attitude toward one is warrant for bearing that attitude toward the other is to be told something decidedly non-trivial. After all, many other properties of propositions don't have these characteristics.

A further potential objection to my characterization of deflationism is that I haven't explained what it is to understand the truth predicate. In particular, it might be objected (i) that I haven't explained the truth predicate in such a way as to guarantee that someone who

⁵ (ii) should be understood as subject to the following complication: a warrant for believing etc. the proposition that p is true is a warrant for believing etc. p (provided that agent's warrant for believing the proposition that p is true involves apprehending not only it, but also p itself).

did not previously understand it now could, and (ii) that I haven't given non-circular, necessary and sufficient conditions for understanding the predicate. And why not, one might ask? Well, consider my remark that p is necessarily and apriori equivalent to the claim that p is true. What does it mean for two propositions to be necessarily and apriori equivalent? It means that each is a necessary and an apriori consequence of the other. And what does that mean?

First consider necessary consequence: According to the standard definition, which I accept, a proposition q is a necessary consequence of a proposition p if and only if any possible circumstance in which p is true is one in which q is true. Note, in defining *necessary* consequence I have used the notion of truth. Thus, my claim that p is necessarily equivalent to the proposition that p is true presupposes an independent grasp of truth. Although this claim of necessary equivalence is true, it cannot be part of any non-circular explanation of the knowledge which is necessary and sufficient for understanding the truth predicate, and it wouldn't be very informative to one who didn't already know what truth was. If someone didn't already understand what it was for a proposition to be true, then being told that the proposition that p is true is necessarily equivalent to p might help him eliminate some possible interpretations of the truth predicate, but not all, and not enough to ensure correct understanding of the predicate. Nor, I think, should one be tempted to take necessary *consequence* to be primitive, in the hope of avoiding this objection. In order for that strategy to have any hope of success, one would have to posit other primitives as well - including apriori consequence, and perhaps other notions. This seems extravagant. Moreover, there is no reason to be so desperate either for a definition of truth, or for an analysis of what it is to understand the truth predicate. As I will argue, there is much to be learned from deflationary characterizations of truth, even if they don't provide such definitions or analyses.

Similar points can be made about apriori equivalence. As I have indicated, two propositions are apriori equivalent iff each is an apriori consequence of the other. To say that q is an apriori consequence of p is, I suppose, to say that q can be deduced from p using apriori reasoning alone. But what is deductive reasoning of this sort, if not reasoning each step of which can be known apriori to be truth preserving? If this is right, then although it is true that p is apriori equivalent to the proposition that p is true, this statement presupposes an independent grasp of the notion of truth. Thus, the claim of apriori equivalence cannot be part of any non-circular specification of knowledge that is necessary and sufficient for understanding the truth predicate. Moreover, if one didn't already know what truth was, being told of the equivalence could not be expected to ensure that one would arrive at a correct understanding.

But what do these objections show? That the conditions I have specified as being necessary and sufficient for a propositional truth predicate to be deflationary are **not** noncircular necessary and sufficient conditions for understanding the predicate. But this is no objection to the characterization of deflationism, or to the correctness, or informativeness, of the claim that our ordinary truth predicate of propositions is deflationary in this sense. It merely shows that I haven't tried to provide an analysis of what truth is, or what it is to understand it. There are other potentially significant questions I haven't attempted to answer either – for example, whether the notion of a proposition (or of the meaning of a sentence) can be understood independently of truth. Answers to these questions might well be crucial if I were attempting to provide a full-fledged analysis. But I am not. I am merely trying to state some important truths about truth.

It is natural to wonder whether we could do better. For example, could we provide non-circular necessary and sufficient conditions for understanding the propositional truth predicate by switching from statements of the apriori and necessary equivalence of the propositions expressed by S and *the proposition that S is true* (which presuppose the notion of truth) to talk about propositions expressed by instances of the schema, *the proposition that S is true iff S*? Perhaps, but it is not obvious how. Moreover, one approach clearly won't work. Since no one is familiar with all propositions, no one is familiar with all propositions expressible by instances of the schema. Consequently, understanding the truth predicate is **not** believing or accepting **all** those propositions. Nor is there any special subset of the entire collection of (non-paradoxical) propositional instances of the schema such that one understands the notion of truth iff one believes or accepts all the members of that subset.

Can we get around this difficulty by maintaining that to understand the notion of truth is to be **disposed** to accept each such proposition, once it is presented? No we can't, if being disposed to accept these propositions involves accepting them in nearby counterfactual situations. There are propositions expressible by instances of the T-schema that I couldn't be presented with, propositions too complex for me to entertain, as well as propositions which, if I did try to entertain them, would be too complex for me to respond to in any coherent way. At this point one is tempted to say something that no one knows for certain how to evaluate – namely, that one **does** have the relevant dispositions in these problematic cases, even if there are no straightforward counterfactual circumstances in which one would manifest them. Is there a notion of disposition that would legitimate this claim? Perhaps, but it is hard to be sure. In light of this, appeal to such dispositions strikes me as too uncertain a basis on which to rest one's characterization of deflationism.

To make matters worse, there is another problem. Shocking as it may seem, some apparently competent speakers of English, known in the trade as non-factualists, proudly and self-consciously **reject** certain instances of the propositional T-schema. In my opinion, those

who do this are mistaken. However, I am loath to characterize them as not understanding the word *true*, used as a predicate of propositions. In this, I agree with Mark Richard, who gives the following illuminating illustration of what non-factualism about a realm of discourse amounts to.

"...consider Victoria. She is a film buff, but thinks that Bunuel's work was in fact an elaborate hoax, with different people the directors of different [parts] of Bunuel's *oeuvre*. She will tell you quite baldly that she believes that Bunuel doesn't exist. Victoria is committed in some sense to the existence of the proposition, that Bunuel doesn't exist; suppose she recognizes and accepts the commitment. And suppose that she will not only say she believes that Bunuel did not exist; she will say that Bunuel did not exist."⁶

Richard's Victoria is a non-factualist about existence-talk who argues for non-factualism as follows:

- "1. *Obviously*, there is such a proposition as the proposition that Bunuel doesn't exist. The sentence 'Bunuel doesn't exist' is significant, I and others understand it, etc.
- It is obvious to me that if there is such a proposition, I ought to believe it. Believing that Bunuel doesn't exist maximizes the accuracy of my overall picture of the world. And believing it does a much better job of making my behavior fit the way the world is, than not believing it.

⁶ Mark Richard, "Deflating Truth," in <u>Truth</u>, <u>Philosophical Issues 8</u>, edited by Enrique Villanueva, (Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview Publishing Co.), 1997, p. 59.

- Assertion is the (canonical) way we convey belief. So since it is often appropriate for me to convey my belief that Bunuel does not exist, I often ought to assert that Bunuel does not exist.
- 4. A sentence ...Bunuel... makes a claim that is true or false only if there is an object, named 'Bunuel', which potentially satisfies ...x... There is no such object. So the claim made by 'Bunuel does not exist' the proposition that Bunuel does not exist isn't true or false. So I reject the claim that it is true that Bunuel does not exist; to accept this would, in effect, be a recognition that the proposition that Bunuel exists is truth evaluable. But I don't recognize this."⁷

What is important about this example is not the realm of discourse selected, but the structure of the non-factualist position. The non-factualist advocates belief in, and assertion of, certain propositions, even though he or she denies that these propositions are true, on the grounds that they can't properly be evaluated for truth at all. This well-known position has been taken about various philosophically puzzling realms of discourse, including morality and mathematics. Thus, in expanding the position of his fictitious heroine, Victoria, Richard maintains that

"...there are, or could be, many examples of perfectly rational people who hold analogous positions. Someone who takes mathematical discourse to be without truth conditions (because of the non-existence of referents for its terms) may still find it significant. He may acknowledge that many people believe, for example, that 2+2=4. He may find it impossible, and unnecessary, to eschew

⁷ Ibid., p. 60.

mathematical talk in everyday life. His frustrated exclamation to a clerk, that twice \$4.75 *is so* \$9.50, is arguably as much an assertion and as much a reflection of a motivating belief, as any "normal" one. He may still insist that he is not committed to there *really* being numbers; and so he is not committed to what he said *really* being true."⁸

Such is Richard's characterization of philosophical non-factualism. What should a deflationist say about philosophers who take this kind of non-factualist position? One thing to say is that they are wrong about truth. However, although these non-factualists may have false semantic or philosophical views about what the truth predicate means, many are normal speakers of English, who satisfy the usual standards of competence. Because of this, they must be counted as understanding the predicate *true*, even though they explicitly reject certain non-paradoxical, non-pathological instances of the propositional T-schema. These philosophical speakers are, therefore, *prima facie* counterexamples to the claim that in order to understand the ordinary truth predicate, one must be disposed to accept all propositions expressed by instances of the schema *the proposition that S is true iff S*.

Is this, then, a refutation of that claim? Perhaps a proponent of the claim would insist that our non-factualist speakers really **are** disposed to **accept** the very instances of the schema they explicitly reject – they simply allow their false philosophical views to override their robust, linguistically-based dispositions to accept the instances. Here again we are in murky waters about what it is to have a disposition without manifesting it. Surely, however it is conceivable that our non-factualist speakers might start out having dispositions to accept

⁸ Ibid. p. 60.

certain instances of the propositional T-schema that are overridden by their philosophical views, but later lose those specific dispositions altogether, without changing any of their beliefs or linguistic behavior. It would, I think, be highly implausible to suppose that in such a case non-factualist speakers lose their competence with the truth predicate simply by losing dispositions that previously had been systematically overridden, and rendered ineffective anyway. Thus, it seems that we **do** have a counterexample to the claim that understanding the notion of propositional truth is a matter of being disposed to accept all non-paradoxical, non-pathological instances of the propositional T-schema. Perhaps some weakening of the claim could be found that would prove workable. But then again, perhaps not. In any case, we are still without obviously correct deflationary criteria for understanding the truth predicate.

But why is this important? In general the criteria for understanding words in a natural language are pretty loose and quite minimal. One lesson of recent anti-descriptivism in semantics is that understanding a word is not in general to be identified with accepting some privileged set of claims involving the word. This seems to be so for names and natural kind terms. It may also be true of our ordinary truth predicate of propositions. The idea that even if this predicate is primitive, we ought to be able to give informative, necessary and sufficient conditions for understanding it may itself be unfounded.

So how, in the end, should we characterize deflationism? Here, I return to my earlier suggestion. A theory of our ordinary notion of truth for propositions is deflationist just in case it holds (i) that p and the claim that p is true are necessary and apriori consequences of one another, and (ii) that any warrant for asserting, believing, denying, doubting, assuming, (or taking any of a variety of related attitudes) toward one of those propositions is a warrant for asserting, believing, believing, the relevant related attitude)

toward the other. So characterized, deflationism – thought of as a general approach to truth -neither defines truth, nor states what it is to understand the notion of truth in terms that don't themselves presuppose truth. Although particular deflationist theories may attempt to do one, or both of these, deflationism *per se* simply states certain important truths about truth.

Note also that these truths are compatible with the scenarios that created problems for the claim that to understand the truth predicate is to be disposed to accept all propositions expressed by instances of the schema the proposition that S is true iff S. The first of those scenarios involved propositions expressed by instances of the schema that are too complex to entertain coherently. Obviously, such cases are no threat either to the claim that p is equivalent to the proposition that p is true, or to the claim that anything that would constitute warrant for accepting one of these propositions would constitute warrant for accepting the other. The same is true of the second scenario, involving non-factualist speakers who, in certain special cases, accept p while rejecting the proposition that p is true (having lost any initial disposition to accept it). The point to notice about this scenario is that such speakers have warrant for accepting the proposition that p is true (assuming they have warrant for accepting p), even though they don't recognize that they do. In this respect, their position is analogous to skepticism about the external world. The perceptual experience of a certain sort of skeptic, gazing at his outstretched hand in normal conditions, provides him with a warrant for believing that he has a hand, even though he wrongly, and unjustifiably, refuses to acknowledge such warrant because he thinks that the mere possibility of deception by an evil demon makes such warrant impossible. Similarly, the non-factualist who has warrant for accepting p also has warrant for accepting the proposition that p is true, even though he wrongly, and unjustifiably, refuses to

acknowledge such warrant because of his incorrect semantic and philosophical views about truth.

Assessing Deflationism

With our conception of deflationism in place, we are now in a position to assess various deflationist, and inflationist, claims. (Inflationism is the denial of deflationism,) Some of these involve sentential truth predicates. For example, inflationists sometimes hold (i) that our ordinary predicate *is a true sentence of L* is such that ascriptions of it to a sentence S are **not** equivalent in a requisitely strong sense to the claim made by S itself, and (ii) that deflationary predicates of sentences that are specially introduced so as to be give rise to the requisite strong equivalences are not sufficient for all the tasks for which a truth predicate is needed. As I have already indicated, I believe both of these claims to be correct. Nevertheless, I still consider myself to be a deflationist because I take our ordinary truth predicate of sentences to be definable in terms of a sentence's expressing a true proposition, and I am a deflationist about propositional truth. By contrast, full-blown inflationists either reject propositions altogether, or they accept propositions, but maintain that propositional truth is also non-deflationary.

If I am right about the proper way to understand propositional deflationism, there is just one way for those who accept propositions to reject such deflationism; they must reject some equivalences between p and the proposition that p is true that the deflationist accepts. The central theses of deflationism assert certain kinds of equivalences between truth bearers, and the claims that those bearers are true. Propositional inflationism is not a view that accepts these theses, while adding further controversial claims. Rather, propositional inflationists deny what deflationists take to be obvious – including some instances of the propositional T-schema. In this connection, it is worth pointing out that deflationism, as I have characterized it, is compatible with various expansionist views that have traditionally masqueraded under the guise of theories of truth. For example, deflationism is compatible with the view that p is true if and only if p is knowable, as well as with the view that p is true if and only if p is useful for us to believe. It is even compatible with the view that the proposition that p is true is necessarily and apriori equivalent to the proposition that p is knowable, or to the proposition that p is useful for us to believe. What deflationism **does require** is that if someone holds such a view, then he is committed to the claim that for each proposition p, p **itself** is equivalent to the proposition that p is useful for us to believe. Few sensible people will accept such extravagant claims. But, strictly speaking, disputes over such claims have little to do with deflationism. To paraphrase a famous remark of Tarski's, *we may accept [deflationism about propositional truth] without giving up any epistemological [or metaphysical] attitude we may have had; we may remain naive realists, empiricists or metaphysicians – whatever we were before. [Deflationism about propositional truth] is completely neutral toward all these issues.⁹*

Of course, if I am right, the deflationist will maintain that anyone who is **warranted** in asserting, believing, or assuming p is warranted in asserting, believing, or assuming that p is true, and *vice versa*. This relationship surely does **not** hold between the proposition that p is true and the proposition that p is knowable, between the proposition that p is true and the proposition that p useful for us to believe, or between the proposition that p is true and any

⁹ Alfred Tarski, section 18, "The Semantic Conception of Truth and the Foundations of Semantics," <u>Philosophy and Phenomenological Research</u>, vol. 4, 1944. In the paraphrased passage Tarski was talking about his semantic theory of truth. However, it has always struck me that the philosophical neutrality he claimed for his semantic theory was a good model of what deflationists should be aiming at.

other claim that traditional expansionists have wanted to link it with. So the deflationist will properly note that the relationship between p and the proposition that p is true is undeniably **closer** than the relationship between either p or the proposition that p is true, on the one hand, and any other expansionist candidate, on the other. This, in turn, may justify viewing expansionists' characteristic claims -- that p is knowable iff p, that p is useful to believe iff p, etc. -- more as surprising tenets of unusual theories of reality than as corollaries of a theory of truth.

The lesson here is that serious challenges to propositional deflationism come **not** from those who **add** controversial doctrines to the equivalences about truth maintained by deflationists, but rather from those who straightforwardly **deny** what deflationists assert. The real opponents of propositional deflationism are non-factualists who believe, and are willing to assert, p while rejecting, and being unwilling to assert, that p is true. What do these inflationists have to say for themselves? Presumably not that p fails to entail that p is true. In order for that to be so it would have to be possible for p to be true, even though the claim that p is true was not true. Surely that cannot be, if entailment is defined in the standard way, in terms of truth; and non-factualists who accept the standard definition do not claim otherwise.¹⁰ Conceivably, if non-factualists were skeptics about propositions, they might reject all talk of propositions, including talk of propositional truth. However, such skepticism can be neutralized by taking propositions in a minimal and uncontentious way. When S is a meaningful declarative sentence which may be embedded as the

¹⁰ I leave aside possible alternative characterizations of entailment, not involving the notion of truth. In order to help the non-factualist an alternative characterization would have to be given according to which p does not entail the claim that p is true. I know of no plausible characterizations of this sort.

antecedent of a conditional, or the complement of a propositional attitude verb, a speaker who assertively utters S "says something," and a person who sincerely accepts such a remark believes "what was said." Non-factualists interested in discourses including such sentences typically are willing to grant that speakers who assertively utter them do say or assert things which, if they are sincere, they also believe. Since propositions may be taken to be nothing more than what is said and believed in this sense, non-factualists are well advised to grant the existence of propositions. Having done so, they have little alternative but to admit that the proposition that p is true **is** a necessary consequence of p.

How, if they do admit this, can they accept and believe p while rejecting and disbelieving that p is true? The situation, as I envision it, is this: a reflective and rational speaker who understands S, and believes the proposition it expresses, assertively utters S, thereby asserting that proposition; in addition, he understands another sentence R, and recognizes the proposition expressed by R to be a necessary consequence of the proposition expressed by S; nevertheless, he does not believe the proposition expressed by R, he rejects any assertive utterance of R, and he protests that he is not committed to the proposition it expresses. How can this be? Take entailment to be the converse of necessary consequence. How can one fail to be committed to a recognized entailment of something one is fully committed to?

Mark Richard provides an answer to this question on behalf of his imagined nonfactualist, Victoria. In Richard's imagined scenario, Victoria accepts the premise

Bunuel does not exist

while denying the conclusion

It's true that Bunuel does not exist.

Richard grants that this little argument is valid, in the sense that its conclusion is a necessary consequence of the premise. He even grants that his non-factualist, Victoria, recognizes this. What he denies is that Victoria's acceptance of the premise and recognition of the validity of the argument provide her with any reason to accept the conclusion. To think otherwise, he argues, is to beg the question against non-factualism.

Here is what he says:

"To say that the argument is valid is to say that its premise entails its conclusion. That is, necessarily, if the premise is *true*, then so is the conclusion. If it's possible to coherently believe something without believing it to be true, then one can recognize the entailment, believe the premises, but not be committed to the conclusion's truth, or to the conclusion itself. And Victoria's position is that we ought to believe the premise of the argument, but not believe that it is true."¹¹

Richard's idea seems to be that since entailment is defined in terms of truth, a nonfactualist who accepts and believes p, without taking p to be true, may, in good conscience, reject q, while recognizing that p entails q, since this recognition merely ensures that q must be true, **if p is true**, and this tells us nothing about q in a situation in which p is not true. If this thought is correct, then non-factualists may freely reject propositions they recognize to be entailed by propositions they continue to accept.

However, the thought is not correct. All rational speakers and reasoners, even nonfactualists, are governed by normative constraints arising from recognized logical and conceptual relations involving the sentences and propositions they accept. Suppose

¹¹ Richard, "Deflating Truth", page 63.

Richard's non-factualist heroine, Victoria, were to say: *Bunuel doesn't exist and Ingmar Bergman doesn't either*. Having asserted the conjunction, she is committed to what it entails, which includes each conjunct. However, if Richard's thought were correct, this would not be so. Using his all-purpose excuse, Victoria could argue that although she recognizes that the conjunction **entails** each conjunct, this commits her to accepting the conjuncts **only if** she recognizes the truth of the conjunction. Since, as a non-factualist, she doesn't recognize the truth of the conjunction, she may argue that she is free to take any attitude she likes toward the conjuncts. But, surely, such an argument, on her part, would be a joke. Argumentative commitments cannot be evaded so easily.

This should have been evident from the beginning, when considering Richard's purported explanation of how Victoria could, defensibly, accept the premise p of an argument while rejecting its conclusion q, despite recognizing that the former entails the latter. According to Richard's explanation, Victoria's recognition of the entailment doesn't commit her to accepting q because she doesn't accept the **truth** of p, despite accepting p itself. We have seen that this is wrong. But there is another point as well. Richard seems to suggest that **if** Victoria were to accept the **truth** of p, then she really would be committed to the truth of q, and (thereby) to q itself. How so? The obvious answer is that in accepting both the **truth** of p, and the entailment of q by p, Victoria would be accepting a pair of claims (i) that p is true and (ii) that if p is true, then q must be true. But why should accepting these claims commit her to the truth of q because these claims **entail**.

that q is true.¹² But now we have come full circle. Richard's argument on behalf of his non-factualist heroine implicitly presupposes the very thing it was intended to deny – namely that one is, after all, committed to obvious entailments of propositions one asserts or accepts. Since the proposition that Bunuel doesn't exist entails that it is true that Bunuel doesn't exist, the non-factualist position that accepts the former while denying the latter is untenable.

There is, I think, a larger explanatory point in the offing. We are interested, pretheoretically, in the relation of logical consequence among sentences, and of necessary consequence among propositions, because we regard these notions as connected with the argumentative commitments we take up when we accept a set of premises. The reason why a definition of logical consequence in terms of guaranteed truth-preservation serves this interest is that we take the central deflationist point for granted: namely that acceptance of S (and the proposition it expresses) carries with it a commitment to the truth of S (and the proposition it

¹² This is the obvious answer when Richard's reasoning is applied to the general case of an argument in which an agent accepts both the premise of an argument, and the entailment of the conclusion by that premise, but may or may not accept the truth of the premise. However, in the case of the specific argument with premise *Bunuel doesn't exist* and conclusion *it is true that Bunuel doesn't exist*, things are much simpler. Since in this special case to accept the truth of the premise is identical with accepting the conclusion, no appeal to (ii) above is needed. Nevertheless, the general case is dialectically crucial. The deflationist's objection to non-factualism is that since (a) one who accepts p and recognizes that p entails q is committed to q, and (b) p entails that p is true, (c) one who accepts p is committed to the claim that p is true. Since Richard denies (c) which accepting (b), he must reject (a). For this he needs the general argument. What we have seen is that the general argument against (a) fails both because it implicitly presupposes that which it is supposed to refute, and because it fails to recognize such obvious commitments as one's commitment to the conjuncts of a conjunction one has accepted.

expresses), and vice versa. If we didn't take this for granted, then recognition that an argument was guaranteed to be truth preserving would give us no guidance about what acceptance of its premises committed us to. Thus deflationism about truth is central to our practice of using logical and necessary consequence to track our argumentative commitments.

And what are these commitments? Consider the simplest case. Mary asserts that John is fat and happy. Since doing this commits her to John's being happy, for her to deny that John is happy would be for her to incoherently characterize John as being happy while also denying that he is happy. Avoiding this sort of incoherence is a basic argumentative commitment. Using the deflationist insight, we can express essentially the same point using the notion of truth. In asserting the conjunction that John is fat and happy, Mary is committed to its truth, and thereby to the truth of both conjuncts. Thus, if she were to deny a conjunct, she would be committed to denying the truth of a proposition she has already implicitly characterized as true. In this scenario, Mary can correctly be described in two ways: (i) as incoherently predicating a property – being fat – of John while denying that predication, and (ii) as incoherently predicating a property – truth – of the proposition that John is fat, while denying that predication. These are two sides of the same coin.

Contrary to Richard's non-factualist, our argumentative commitments do not arise only when we ascend to talk about truth. Rather, ascent to truth is a way of generalizing and systematizing our understanding of commitments we already have. The utility of the truth predicate in studying the basic forms of argumentative commitment lies in the role it plays in allowing us to abstract away from particular predications and particular argument forms, and to bring them under a small set of general headings: *logical consequence, logical inconsistency*, and so on. If this is right, then the deflationist insight about truth is part and parcel of our understanding of the relationship between and logic and argument.

What about truth-value gaps? As I have characterized propositional deflationism, it holds that whenever one is warranted in denying that p is true, one is warranted in denying p itself. This leaves no room for any non-standard truth value according to which, when p has that value, a denial that p is true may be both correct and warranted, whereas a denial of p itself may not be. However, deflationism does leave room for the kinds of gaps that arise from partially-defined predicates. When F is a predicate and n is a name of an object for which F is undefined, the proposition p, expressed by n is F, is neither determinately true, nor determinately not true. The same may be said for the negation of that proposition, expressed nis not F. Since, to assert either of these propositions would be to make a mistake, each should be rejected, without accepting its negation. The deflationist insight tells us the same thing about propositions that ascribe truth or untruth to these propositions. They too are neither determinately true, nor determinately not true. They too should be rejected, without accepting their negations. We may put the point this way: if any predicates are partiallydefined, then a deflationist truth predicate of propositions will also be partially-defined. In my view, this partiality plays a role in understanding the Liar and Sorites paradoxes. This is one way in which a deflationist understanding of the truth predicate constrains what we say about the paradoxes. Of course, there is much more to a proper understanding of these paradoxes than just partiality, or any other deflationist-inspired idea. But that is another story.¹³

¹³ Thanks to Gilbert Harman for useful comments on a draft of this article.