

Two solutions for deflationism: assertion, explanation, and alethic desires

Jeremy Wyatt



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KO TE TANGATA
FOR THE PEOPLE

Plan for the talk



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- In this talk, I'll have three main aims:
 - To describe the characteristic theses of deflationism about the concept TRUTH (*conceptual deflationism*)
 - To offer a response to Bar-On and Simmons' *assertion challenge* for conceptual deflationism
 - To offer a response to Asay's *alethic desires challenge* for conceptual deflationism

Deflationism about truth



- Philosophers tend to get excited about ‘What is the nature of _____?’ questions
 - Debates about truth have been no exception to this trend
- However: in the early 20th century, a *deflationary* countercurrent developed in debates about truth

“[I]t is necessary to say something about truth and falsehood, in order to show that there is really no separate problem of truth but merely a linguistic muddle... [I]t is evident that “it is true that Caesar was murdered” means no more than that Caesar was murdered, and “it is false that Caesar was murdered” means that Caesar was not murdered.” (Frank Ramsey, ‘Facts and propositions,’ 1927)



Deflationism about truth



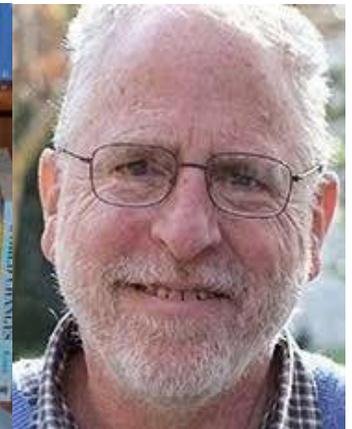
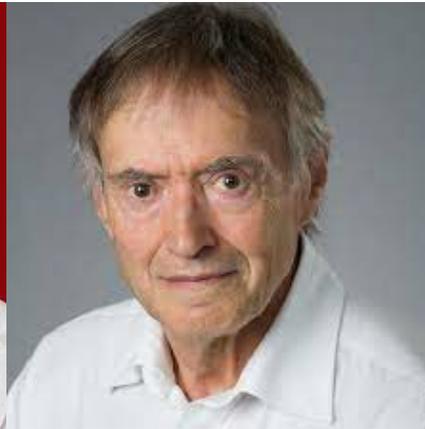
- Deflationists aim to demystify debates about truth
 - They do so by urging us to focus on questions about truth that are highly tractable and thus likely to engender dialectical progress
- In particular, deflationists propose that we replace the metaphysical question ‘What is truth?’ with two questions:
 - The *linguistic question*: What truth-related terms do we use in ordinary contexts (e.g. ‘true’), and what do those terms mean?
 - The *cognitive question*: How do we deploy the concept TRUTH in ordinary contexts, how is this concept related to our other concepts, and why did we acquire this concept?

Deflationism about truth



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- Given its iconoclastic character, the deflationary agenda has faced a consistent barrage of criticisms
 - In this talk: I'll aim to develop responses to two criticisms that currently remain unanswered



Conceptual vs. metaphysical deflationism



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- To start: we should observe that a deflationist may have either (or both) of two targets in mind
 - One potential target is the concept TRUTH, another is the property *truth*
- Whatever else we want to say about its nature, TRUTH is meant to be a mental entity that thinkers deploy whenever they have thoughts involving truth
 - For instance: if I think that some of the things that Susan says about horticulture are true, then it would be standardly held that I deploy the concept TRUTH in having this thought
 - Deflationists about TRUTH are often called *conceptual deflationists*

Conceptual vs. metaphysical deflationism



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- By contrast: the property *truth* is meant to be the property that is possessed by all and only the true truth-bearers
 - For instance: if Brian believes that Jacinda Ardern is taller than Justin Trudeau, then it would be standardly held that Brian's belief fails to exemplify *truth*, since Trudeau is in fact taller than Ardern
 - Deflationists about *truth* are often called *metaphysical deflationists*
- In this talk: our focus will be on conceptual deflationism, rather than metaphysical deflationism

Conceptual deflationism: digging deeper



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- Dorit Bar-On and Keith Simmons characterise conceptual deflationism as the view that:
“our understanding of truth is fully exhausted by this or that particular deflationary account of ‘true,’ so that a deflated, ‘thin’ concept of truth is all that we need in our conceptual scheme.” (“The use of force against deflationism,’ 2007)



Conceptual deflationism: digging deeper



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- Following along these lines, we'll take conceptual deflationism to consist of two core theses:
 - The *Possession Thesis*: The possession conditions for TRUTH are provided by some deflationary account of 'true,' and it would not be advantageous for humans to replace TRUTH with a concept TRUTH⁺ that is identical to TRUTH except that it has more demanding possession conditions
 - The *Function Thesis*: Even if TRUTH denotes a property, it is not the case that TRUTH's cognitive function is to denote a property

Conceptual deflationism: digging deeper



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- An illustration: Paul Horwich's *minimalist conception* of truth
- According to the minimalist conception, to know the meaning of the word 'true' is to be disposed to accept every instance of the *Equivalence Schema* in the absence of supporting evidence:
 - (ES) $\langle p \rangle$ is true iff p
- Likewise: the minimalist conception entails that a person A possesses TRUTH iff A is disposed to accept every instance of (ES) in the absence of supporting evidence



Conceptual deflationism: digging deeper



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- Moreover: the minimalist maintains that humans have no need for a concept $TRUTH^+$ whose possession conditions are more demanding than this
 - *An example:* the concept $TRUTH^T$, whose possession conditions consist of the minimalist possession conditions, plus the Tractarian condition that one think of true entities as being propositions that picture facts
 - The minimalist contends that $TRUTH$ does all of the things we need a concept of truth to do, so that we simply have no need for a concept like $TRUTH^T$

Conceptual deflationism: digging deeper



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- With regard to TRUTH's cognitive function, Horwich is happy to grant that *truth* exists (even though it is an 'insubstantial' property), so he can also grant that TRUTH denotes *truth*
 - However: as a deflationist, Horwich insists that it isn't *because* TRUTH denotes *truth* that it is advantageous for us to possess TRUTH
 - Rather: Horwich takes TRUTH's cognitive function to be that it enables us to make *infinite mental generalisations* using finite cognitive resources

Conceptual deflationism: digging deeper



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- *For instance:*
 - Suppose I am an avid gardener and I know that Philip is an internationally renowned authority on horticulture
 - Maria tells me that Philip has just given a workshop in which he reported an innovative discovery about soil health, though she can't remember what the discovery was
 - As Philip is a horticultural authority, I am inclined to believe the main proposition $\langle p \rangle$ about soil health that he asserted during the workshop
 - However, I face a cognitive predicament: I don't know which proposition $\langle p \rangle$ is
 - If I possess TRUTH, then I can resolve this cognitive predicament by believing:
 - (1) \langle The main proposition about soil health that Philip asserted during his most recent workshop is true \rangle

Conceptual deflationism: digging deeper



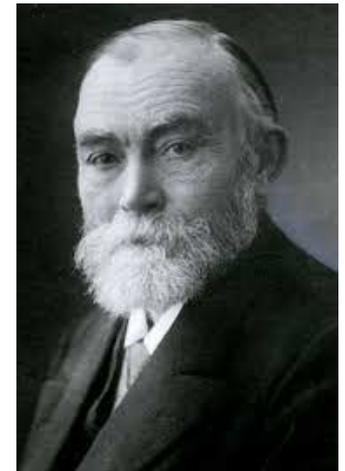
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- Given (ES), (1) is logically equivalent to an infinite disjunctive proposition:
 - (2) \langle If $\langle p \rangle = \langle$ applying worm castings doesn't do much to promote soil health \rangle , then applying worm castings doesn't do much to protect soil health, and if $\langle p \rangle = \langle$ applying orange juice boosts microbial activity in soil \rangle , then applying orange juice boosts microbial activity in soil, and... \rangle
- Because of this equivalence: in believing (1), I *indirectly endorse* the proposition $\langle p \rangle$ that Philip asserted, even though I don't know which proposition $\langle p \rangle$ is
- Horwich hypothesises that “[i]t is in just this role, and not as the name of some baffling ingredient of nature, that the concept of truth figures so pervasively in philosophical reflection.” (*Truth*, 2nd ed., 1998)

The assertion challenge



- Despite the initial plausibility of the minimalist account of TRUTH, Bar-On and Simmons argue that it (and all other varieties of conceptual deflationism) is untenable
- Bar-On and Simmons' *assertion challenge* rests on a plausible idea that stems from the work of Frege:
 - “When we inwardly recognize that a thought is true, we are making a judgement: when we communicate this recognition, we are making an assertion.” (‘Logic,’ 1979)
- We can codify this *Fregean dictum* about assertion as follows:
 - (FD) If A asserts that p , then this is because A presents $\langle p \rangle$ as being true



The assertion challenge



- For instance: suppose that Donald asserts that Wellington is windy
- Given (FD), it follows that:
 - (A) Donald asserted that Wellington is windy because Donald presented ⟨Wellington is windy⟩ as being true
- In (A): we explain one fact in terms of another fact
 - The fact that is explained (the *explanandum*) is [Donald asserted that Wellington is windy]
 - The fact that does the explaining (the *explanans*) is [Donald presented ⟨Wellington is windy⟩ as being true]
- The key question: is the concept of truth that we use to articulate the explanans—call it $TRUTH^F$ —amenable to a minimalist analysis?

The assertion challenge



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- Bar-On and Simmons say ‘No’
 - The minimalist will hold that A possesses TRUTH^F iff A is disposed to accept every instance of (ES) in the absence of supporting evidence
 - This suggests that we should be able to apply an instance of (ES) to account for TRUTH^F 's role in in the articulation of (A)
 - The relevant instance of (ES) would be:
 - (3) $\langle \text{Wellington is windy} \rangle$ is true iff Wellington is windy
 - However: it seems that there is no plausible way to so apply (3)

The assertion challenge



- One way to so apply (3) would be to hold that (A) is equivalent to:
 - (A*) Donald asserted that Wellington is windy because Donald presented Wellington as being windy
- However: it's not very clear what it means to say that Donald 'presented' Wellington as being windy
 - *For instance:* Donald didn't hold Wellington in his outstretched hands, he didn't unveil Wellington by pulling back a curtain, he didn't shine a giant spotlight on Wellington, etc.
- The conceptual deflationist might respond that to present Wellington as being windy is to *represent* Wellington as being windy
 - However: they would then trade the assertion challenge for the challenge of offering a deflationary account of representation

The assertion challenge



- Another way to so apply (3) would be to hold that (A) is equivalent to:
 - (A^{**}) Donald asserted that Wellington is windy because Donald presented ⟨Wellington is windy⟩
- However: (A) and (A^{**}) aren't equivalent either
 - Donald can present ⟨Wellington is windy⟩ to an audience by performing lots of speech acts other than assertion
 - *For example:* by questioning whether Wellington is windy, commanding that Wellington be windy, or asking his audience to suppose that Wellington is windy for the sake of argumentation
 - It follows that presenting ⟨Wellington is windy⟩ to one's audience isn't the same action as presenting ⟨Wellington is windy⟩ as being true to one's audience
- As a result: it looks like TRUTH^F's possession conditions aren't the ones that are identified by the minimalist

The assertion challenge: a response



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- To see how the minimalist can defuse this challenge, we should observe that when we articulate (A)'s explanans, we are using a *complex* concept—PRESENTING ⟨P⟩ AS BEING TRUE
 - The immediate constituents of PRESENTING ⟨P⟩ AS BEING TRUE are: PRESENTING ⟨P⟩ AS BEING F and TRUTH
 - The main question: is sensible to regard the concept TRUTH(=TRUTH^F) that partially composes PRESENTING ⟨P⟩ AS BEING TRUE as the minimalist concept of truth?

The assertion challenge: a response



- To address this question: we should think a bit more carefully about PRESENTING $\langle p \rangle$ AS BEING F
- At least in paradigm cases, this concept can be analysed as follows:
 - (Pres) A presents $\langle p \rangle$ as being F iff A utters a sentence S that expresses $\langle p \rangle$ with the intention of causing A 's audience to believe (implicitly or explicitly) that $\langle p \rangle$ is F
- Applying (Pres) to the case at hand, we get:
 - (4) A presents $\langle p \rangle$ as being true iff A utters a sentence S that expresses $\langle p \rangle$ with the intention of causing A 's audience to believe that $\langle p \rangle$ is true
- Slotting (4) into the explanation (A), we get:
 - (5) Donald asserted that Wellington is windy because Donald uttered a sentence S that expresses $\langle \text{Wellington is windy} \rangle$ with the intention of causing his audience to believe that $\langle \text{Wellington is windy} \rangle$ is true

The assertion challenge: a response



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- It is indeed sensible to regard the concept TRUTH that we use to articulate (5) as being the minimalist concept
- Minimalism tells us that (5) is equivalent to:
 - (6) Donald asserted that Wellington is windy because Donald uttered a sentence S that expresses \langle Wellington is windy \rangle with the intention of causing his audience to believe that Wellington is windy
- Moreover: (5) and (6) do indeed seem to be equivalent
 - In particular: it seems clear that A has the intention to cause A 's audience to believe that \langle Wellington is windy \rangle is true iff A has the intention to cause A 's audience to believe that Wellington is windy
 - In fact: it looks like this equivalence is *psychologically necessary*, in the sense that it holds in all possible worlds in which human psychology operates as it does in the actual world

The assertion challenge: a response



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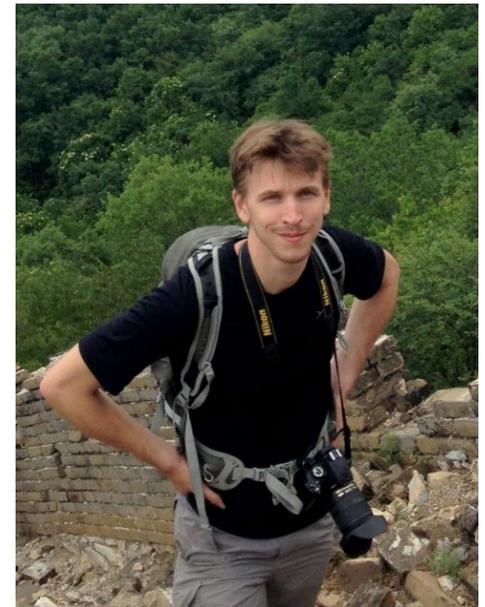
- In short: a careful analysis of the concept PRESENTING ⟨P⟩ AS BEING TRUE reveals that the minimalist concept of truth is hiding just beneath the surface of this complex concept
- As a result: the Fregean dictum about assertion looks perfectly kosher by minimalist standards

The alethic desire challenge



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- A more recent challenge for conceptual deflationism has been put forward by Jamin Asay
- Asay's challenge pertains to our *alethic desires*
 - *A*'s alethic desires: those of *A*'s desires that pertain to the truth of *A*'s beliefs



The alethic desire challenge



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- The case that is meant to generate the challenge:

Phil and Sophia are historians discussing the 2008 earthquake in Sichuan province. Sophia has extensively studied the earthquake and its effects, and Phil is inquiring into how many people died as a result. Sophia tells Phil that approximately 87,000 people died, and Phil makes a note of it for his own research. Later, Sophia reflects on how important it is to her that she got the facts right; Phil's research on the cultural impacts of natural disasters in East Asia is important, and she would be upset if she had inadvertently misled him. Sophia sincerely believes that approximately 87,000 people died because of the quake, and desires that her belief is true, that she has formed the right opinion about the matter. If her belief weren't true, if she had made a mistake in her own research, then Sophia would be upset[...]

But Sophia is no monster. She rightly believes that the earthquake was a terrible tragedy, and has tremendous empathy for all who suffered as a result. Sophia wishes that the earthquake had never happened. In other words, in no way does Sophia desire that 87,000 people died because of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake. What this case shows is that one can desire that one's belief that p is true without desiring that p .

The alethic desire challenge



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- Let b be Sophia's belief that approximately 87,000 people died in the 2008 Sichuan earthquake
- Let d_1 be the desire that b is true
- Let d_2 be the desire that approximately 87,000 people died in the 2008 Sichuan earthquake

The alethic desire challenge



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- As applied to minimalism in particular, Asay's *alethic desire challenge* then proceeds as follows:
 - According to minimalism, A possesses TRUTH iff A is disposed to accept every instance of (ES) in the absence of supporting evidence
 - As Sophia possesses TRUTH, this means that she will be disposed to accept the following instance of (ES):
 - (7) \langle approximately 87,000 people died in the 2008 Sichuan earthquake \rangle is true iff approximately 87,000 people died in the 2008 Sichuan earthquake
 - Given that Sophia is disposed to accept (7), it seems that if she desires that her belief that approximately 87,000 people died in the 2008 Sichuan earthquake is true, then she must also desire that approximately 87,000 people died in the 2008 Sichuan earthquake
 - As a result: minimalism entails that it isn't possible for Sophia to have d_1 but not d_2 , which is implausible
 - This means that: minimalism fails to account for the behaviour of TRUTH within the scope of our alethic desires

The alethic desire challenge: a response



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- To see how the minimalist should address this challenge, we should first recall that the minimalist takes TRUTH's possession conditions to involve a *disposition*— the disposition to accept every instance of (ES) in the absence of supporting evidence
 - Like dispositions generally (e.g. fragility), this disposition can be overridden by other factors
- Moreover: Sophia's case involves a psychological factor that is likely to override her disposition to accept (7)
 - This factor is what Levin, Schneider, and Gaeth have called *attribute framing*

The alethic desire challenge: a response



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- A *framing effect* occurs when “different message frames change and even reverse people’s judgments and decisions about equivalent choice problems” (Carpenter, ‘Framing effects,’ 2018)
- Attribute framing is a specific kind of framing effect which occurs when “some characteristic of an object or event serves as the focus of the framing manipulation” (Levin, Schneider, and Gaeth, ‘All frames are not created equal,’ 1998)

The alethic desire challenge: a response



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- *An example of attribute framing:*
 - Levin and Gaeth found that their participants evaluated samples of ground beef differently, depending on whether they were described as ‘75% lean’ or ‘25% fat’ (‘How consumers are affected by the framing of attribute information before and after consuming the product,’ 1988)
 - Specifically: participants in the ‘75% lean’ condition rated the ground beef as being better tasting, less greasy, higher quality, and leaner than participants in the ‘25% fat’ condition
 - This finding was surprising, since it is obvious that a sample of ground beef is 75% lean iff it is 25% fat
 - The finding illustrates that even in rather straightforward cases, our evaluations of objects can be significantly affected by attribute framing



The alethic desire challenge: a response



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- The key detail: attribute framing seems to play a role in Sophia's case as well
- In this case, we are dealing with a single event e that has two relevant attributes:
 - i. It involves Sophia's belief b being true, and
 - ii. It involves approximately 87,000 people dying in the 2008 Sichuan earthquake
- As in the ground beef case: (i) is exemplified by an event e' iff (ii) is exemplified by e'

The alethic desire challenge: a response



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- We can think of Sophia as being in two conditions, each of which involves a frame that mentions one of these attributes
 - In Condition 1: she is asked ‘Do you desire that the belief that you communicated to Phil be true?’
 - This question frames e in terms of a positive attribute, as we generally think that it is good for a belief to be true, rather than untrue
 - In Condition 2: she is asked ‘Do you desire that approximately 87,000 people died in the 2008 Sichuan earthquake?’
 - This question frames e in terms of a negative attribute, as we generally think that it is bad for 87,000 people to die due to an earthquake
- Given these frames: it wouldn’t be surprising if Sophia responded ‘Yes’ in Condition 1 and ‘No’ in Condition 2

The alethic desire challenge: a response



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- Since attribute framing is at work in Sophia's case, Asay's diagnosis of this case is no threat to minimalism
 - The minimalist can hold that since she possesses TRUTH, Sophia is disposed to accept (7) in the absence of supporting evidence
 - They can also hold that this disposition is overridden by the differentially valenced ways in which the relevant event e is framed
 - Accordingly: Asay's diagnosis doesn't reveal anything about the possession conditions or the cognitive function of TRUTH
 - Rather: it merely illustrates that our desires can be affected by differently valenced frames of the same event

The alethic desire challenge: a response



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- *Note:* this is precisely the sort of thing that we should say about Levin and Gaeth's findings
 - These findings don't reveal anything about the possession conditions or cognitive functions of their participants' concepts (e.g. PERCENTAGE)
 - Rather: they teach us that human desires are fickle, in that attribute framing can move them around even in everyday cases

Conclusions



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- Main conclusions:
 - Minimalism about TRUTH is an attractive version of conceptual deflationism that plausibly characterises the possession conditions and cognitive function of TRUTH
 - Neither Bar-On and Simmons' assertion challenge nor Asay's alethic desire challenge undermines minimalism
 - While minimalists must dispatch other important challenges, this result should raise our confidence that minimalism provides one of the most promising accounts of TRUTH currently on offer



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Thanks for your attention!