

# Truth vanishes again: deflationism, assertion, and 'presenting as true'

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# Plan for the talk



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- My main aims during the talk:
  - To briefly describe the main components of *conceptual deflationism* as well as the *minimalist* development of this view
  - To develop a solution to Bar-On and Simmons' *assertion challenge* for conceptual deflationism that draws on recent work by Neri Marsili

# Deflationism about truth



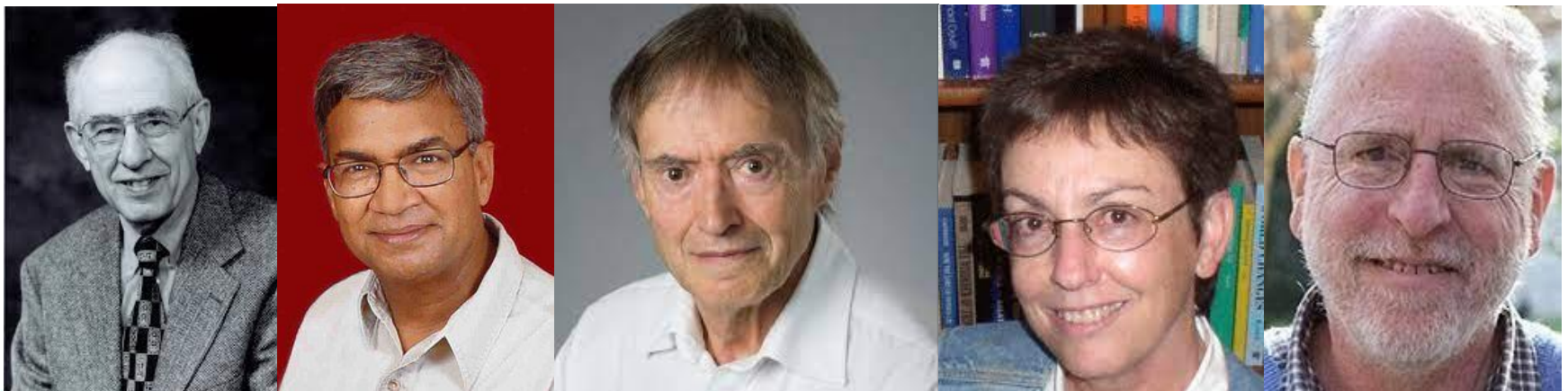
- *Deflationists* about truth aim to demystify traditional philosophical debates concerning truth
  - They do so by urging us to focus on questions about truth that are highly tractable and thus likely to engender dialectical progress
- In particular, deflationists propose that we replace the metaphysical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

# 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 develop a response to a major criticism of deflationism about the concept TRUTH



# Conceptual deflationism



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- 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

# Conceptual deflationism



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- Deflationists about TRUTH are often called *conceptual deflationists*
- 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



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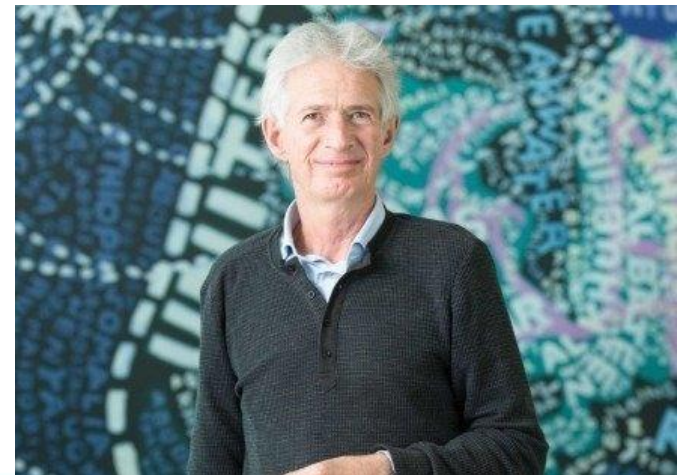
- Following along these lines, we'll take conceptual deflationism to have two core theses:
  - i. TRUTH's possession conditions are provided by some deflationary account of 'true,' and
  - ii. It would not be advantageous for humans to replace TRUTH with a concept TRUTH<sup>+</sup> that is identical to TRUTH except that it has more demanding possession conditions

# Conceptual deflationism: an illustration



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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  $S$  possesses TRUTH iff  $S$  is disposed to accept every instance of (ES) in the absence of supporting evidence





# Conceptual deflationism: an illustration



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- TRUTH's function, according to Horwich, is to enable us to make certain sorts of general statements and to have corresponding general beliefs

# Conceptual deflationism: an illustration



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- *For instance:*
  - Suppose I am renovating my kitchen, and I know that Marie is an expert on kitchen renovation
  - Marie tells me that she recently watched one of Walter's YouTube videos on kitchen renovation, and she remembers him saying one really insightful thing about cooktops, though she can't remember what it was
  - As I know that Marie is an expert on kitchen renovation, I am inclined to believe the proposition  $\langle p \rangle$  that she mentioned
  - 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 proposition about cooktops that Marie mentioned is true $\rangle$

# Conceptual deflationism: an illustration



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- Given (ES), (1) is logically equivalent to an infinite conjunctive proposition:
  - (2)  $\langle$ If the proposition about cooktops that Marie mentioned =  $\langle$ Samsung makes the most reliable cooktops $\rangle$ , then Samsung makes the most reliable cooktops, and if the proposition about cooktops that Marie mentioned =  $\langle$ induction cooktops are less convenient to use than ceramic cooktops $\rangle$ , then induction cooktops are less convenient to use than ceramic cooktops, and... $\rangle$
- Because of this equivalence: in believing (1), I *indirectly endorse* the proposition  $\langle p \rangle$  that Marie mentioned, even though I don't know which proposition  $\langle p \rangle$  is

# Conceptual deflationism: an illustration



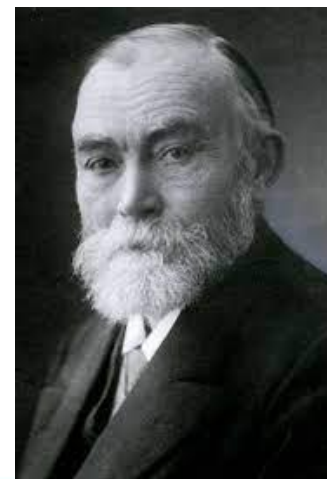
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- Moreover: the minimalist maintains that humans have no need for a concept  $TRUTH^+$  whose possession conditions are more demanding than those of  $TRUTH$ 
  - *An example:* the concept  $TRUTH^G$ , whose possession conditions consist of the minimalist possession conditions, plus the pragmatist condition that one think of all true beliefs as being practically useful
  - 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  $TRUTH^G$

# The assertion challenge



- Despite the initial attractiveness 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  $S$  asserts that  $p$ , then this is (at least in part) because  $S$  presents  $\langle p \rangle$  as being true



# The assertion challenge



- For instance: suppose that Donald asserts that Wellington is windy
- (FD) has the plausible consequence that:
  - (A) Donald asserted that Wellington is windy (in part) because Donald presented ⟨Wellington is windy⟩ as being true
- Moreover: by defining assertion in terms of (FD), we are able to cleanly distinguish assertions from other speech acts, including questions, commands, conjectures, suppositions, etc.
- The key question: is the concept of truth that we use in explanations like (A)—call it *TRUTH*<sup>A</sup>—the minimalist concept TRUTH or some other concept of truth?

# The assertion challenge



- The minimalist holds that TRUTH's function is to enable us to make general statements and to hold general beliefs like the belief in (1)
- On the right-hand side of (A), the relevant proposition is *explicitly* identified, so it isn't necessary to use TRUTH in (A) to make any sort of general statement
- This means that: if  $\text{TRUTH}^A = \text{TRUTH}$ , then it should be possible to generate a *truth-free* statement that is equivalent to (A)
- However: it seems like it is not possible to generate such a truth-free statement

# The assertion challenge



- *Attempt #1*: 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 minimalist might respond by suggesting 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



- *Attempt #2*: Hold that (A) is equivalent to:
  - (A<sup>\*\*</sup>) Donald asserted that Wellington is windy because Donald presented ⟨Wellington is windy⟩
- However: (A) and (A<sup>\*\*</sup>) aren't equivalent
- This is because: Donald can present ⟨Wellington is windy⟩ to an audience without presenting ⟨Wellington is windy⟩ as *being true* to that audience
  - *For example*: he might question whether Wellington is windy, command that Wellington be windy, or ask his audience to suppose that Wellington is windy for the sake of argument
- Given the failure of Attempts #1 and 2: it looks like TRUTH<sup>A</sup> ≠ the minimalist concept TRUTH

# The assertion challenge: a response



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- Two significant details:
  - The concept PRESENT  $\langle P \rangle$  AS BEING TRUE is a *technical*, rather than an ordinary concept
  - The meaning of PRESENT  $\langle P \rangle$  AS BEING TRUE is far from clear
- This suggests a strategy for responding to the assertion challenge

“The task of *explication* consists in transforming a given more or less inexact concept into an exact one or, rather, in replacing the first by the second...The explicandum may belong to everyday language or to a previous stage in the development of scientific language.” (Carnap, *Logical Foundations of Probability*, 1950, p. 3)



# The assertion challenge: a response



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- Following Carnap:
  - Call the concept  $D$  that is being explicated the *explicandum*
  - Call the concept  $T$  that is meant to explicate  $D$  the *explicatum*
- Carnap sets out four conditions that an adequate explicatum should meet
  - i. Similarity:** The explicatum  $T$  should be *similar* to the explicandum  $D$  “in such a way that, in most cases where  $[D]$  has so far been used,  $[T]$  can be used”
    - Carnap notes that “close similarity is not required, and considerable differences are permitted” (1950, p. 7)
  - ii. Exactness:** The characterisation of  $[T]$  should be “given in an *exact* form, so as to introduce  $[T]$  into a well-connected system of scientific concepts” (ibid.)

# The assertion challenge: a response



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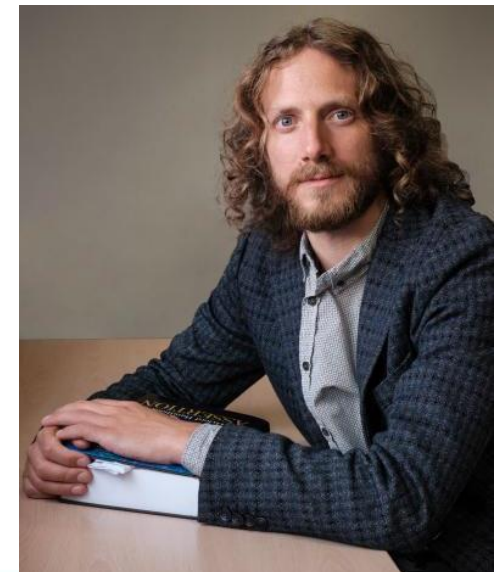
- iii. Fruitfulness:**  $[T]$  should be *fruitful*, in that it is “useful for the formulation of many universal statements (empirical laws in the case of a nonlogical concept, logical theorems in the case of a logical concept)” (ibid.)
- iv. Simplicity:**  $T$  should be *simple*, where its simplicity is measured by “the simplicity of the form of its definition and...the simplicity of the forms of the laws connecting it with other concepts” (ibid., p. 7)
- Carnap notes that (iv) should be seen as a ‘tie-breaking’ condition, i.e. a condition that we use when choosing between explicata  $T_1$  and  $T_2$  that fulfil conditions (i)-(iii) equally well
  - As we will put forward only one explicatum for PRESENT  $\langle P \rangle$  AS BEING TRUE, we can set (iv) aside in what follows

# The assertion challenge: Marsili's explicatum



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- In forthcoming work: Neri Marsili has proposed a definition of presenting  $\langle p \rangle$  as being true
- Marsili proposes that *S presents  $\langle p \rangle$  as being true* in performing a speech act *C* iff *C* is successful/correct/right only if  $\langle p \rangle$  is true
  - In this way, “[t]ruth...establishes a ‘correctness’ or ‘success’ condition for the speech act. It is, in this sense, assertion’s goal”



# The assertion challenge: Marsili's explicatum



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- The explicatum that Marsili's account suggests is: SPEECH ACT  $C$  BEING SUCCESSFUL/CORRECT/RIGHT ONLY IF  $\langle P \rangle$  IS TRUE (call this concept  $T$ )
- Is this an adequate explicatum for the concept PRESENT  $\langle P \rangle$  AS BEING TRUE (call this concept  $D$ )?

# The assertion challenge: Marsili's explicatum



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- ✓ *Similarity*:  $T$  can indeed be used in most (indeed, nearly all) of the cases in which  $D$  has been used
  - *For instance*: We can use  $T$  to differentiate Donald's assertion that Wellington is windy from a question, command, conjecture, or supposition with the same propositional content
- ✓ *Exactness*:  $T$  clearly has the potential to be formulated exactly, so that it forms part of a well-connected system of linguistic, social, moral, and epistemic concepts
  - Doing this would require one to develop a full-blown theory of illocutionary norms, and attempts in this direction have been made (see e.g. Marsili (forthcoming))

# The assertion challenge: Marsili's explicatum



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- ✓ *Fruitfulness*: Properly evaluating  $T$ 's fruitfulness would also require assessing a full-blown theory of assertion and illocutionary norms that incorporates  $T$
- However: even prior to doing this, we can identify apparently true universal statements that incorporate  $T$
  - *Examples*:
    - Every assertion of  $\langle p \rangle$  is successful/correct/right only if  $\langle p \rangle$  is true
    - It is not the case that a question, command, conjecture, or supposition with propositional content  $\langle p \rangle$  is successful/correct/right only if  $\langle p \rangle$  is true



# The assertion challenge: Marsili's explicatum



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## ✓ *Simplicity:*

- As indicated previously, since we are not comparing otherwise equivalent explicata for PRESENT  $\langle P \rangle$  AS BEING TRUE, we can set simplicity aside here
- However: it is worth noting that the concept SPEECH ACT  $C$  BEING SUCCESSFUL/CORRECT/RIGHT ONLY IF  $\langle P \rangle$  IS TRUE seems fairly simple
  - This suggests that it would fare well against otherwise equivalent explicata for PRESENT  $\langle P \rangle$  AS BEING TRUE
- These considerations indicate that Marsili has identified an adequate explicatum for the concept PRESENT  $\langle P \rangle$  AS BEING TRUE

# The assertion challenge: Marsili's explicatum



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- Is the concept of truth in Marsili's explicatum the minimalist concept TRUTH?
- Return to our previous example:
  - (A) Donald asserted that Wellington is windy because Donald presented  $\langle$ Wellington is windy $\rangle$  as being true
- Rephrased in terms of Marsili's explicatum, (A) becomes:
  - $(A_M)$  Donald asserted that Wellington is windy because Donald uttered an expression with semantic content  $\langle$ Wellington is windy $\rangle$ , thereby performing a speech act  $C$  that is successful/correct/right only if  $\langle$ Wellington is windy $\rangle$  is true

# The assertion challenge: Marsili's explicatum



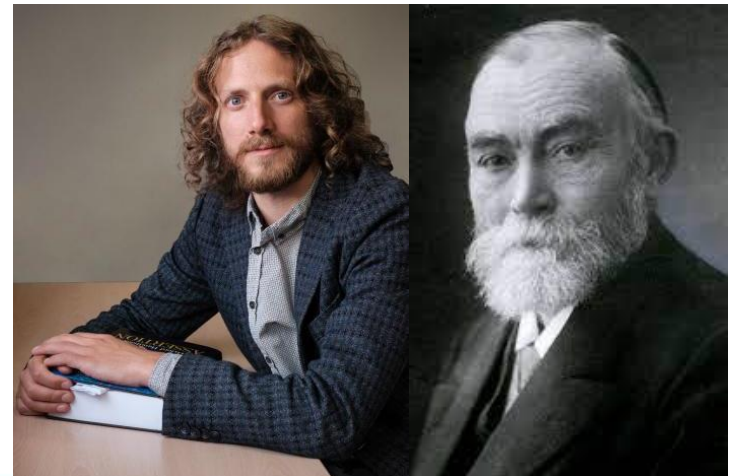
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- If the concept of truth used on  $(A_M)$ 's right-hand side is the minimalist concept TRUTH, then it should be possible to generate a truth-free statement that is equivalent to  $(A_M)$
- This is easy enough to do:
  - $(A_M^-)$  Donald asserted that Wellington is windy because Donald uttered an expression with semantic content  $\langle$ Wellington is windy $\rangle$ , thereby performing a speech act  $C$  that is successful/correct/right only if Wellington is windy
- This indicates that the concept of truth that figures in  $(A_M)$  is indeed the minimalist concept TRUTH

# The assertion challenge: Marsili's explicatum



- We can also use Marsili's explicatum to explicate the Fregean dictum:
  - $(FD_M)$  If  $S$  asserts that  $p$ , then this is (at least in part) because  $S$  performs a speech act  $C$  that is successful/correct/right only if  $\langle p \rangle$  is true
- Again, it is easy enough to generate a truth-free statement that is equivalent to  $(FD_M)$ :
  - $(FD_M^-)$  If  $S$  asserts that  $p$ , then this is (at least in part) because  $S$  performs a speech act  $C$  that is successful/correct/right only if  $p$
- This indicates that the concept of truth used on  $(FD_M)$ 's right-hand side is also the minimalist concept TRUTH



# The assertion challenge: Marsili's explicatum



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- In sum: it looks like the minimalist can defuse the assertion challenge using Marsili's explicatum for PRESENT ⟨P⟩ AS BEING TRUE

# Conclusions



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- Main conclusions:
  - Minimalism about TRUTH is an attractive version of conceptual deflationism that plausibly characterises the possession conditions and function of TRUTH
  - Bar-On and Simmons' assertion challenge fails to undermine 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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Kia ora!