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Every good story needs a good villain. As Doug Edwards tells it, the Big Bad of the story of truth is the deflationist, who must be vanquished by the intrepid hero, the truth pluralist. In this discussion, I want to explain why the deflationist has been miscast and how they can resist the nuanced and systematic critique of deflationism that Edwards develops in *The Metaphysics of Truth*.

I will focus on three of the main elements of Edwards' critique. I'll begin by addressing an issue that has been actively discussed in recent years—how we should understand the metaphysics of deflationism—and offer a concern for the account that Edwards proposes. Secondly, I'll turn to Edwards' attempt to show that deflationism is, in a certain sense, internally unstable and offer three replies on behalf of the deflationist. Thirdly, I'll have a look at a novel argument for truth pluralism that Edwards develops, which acts as an indirect critique of deflationism, arguing that the deflationist can tidily account for the phenomena mentioned therein. Having critically evaluated some of the main components of Edwards' case for his pro-pluralist, anti-deflationary take on truth, I'll close by explaining why the deflationist should be cast as the hero of our story.

1. What is deflationism about truth?

Many traditional theories of truth, including Russell's correspondence theory, Blanshard's coherence theory, and James' pragmatic theory, tell us that the nature of truth is complex and that it can only be unearthed by careful metaphysical inquiry.¹ Some contemporary theories of truth, such as the pluralist theories that have been defended by e.g. Edwards (2018), Lynch (2009), Sher (2016), and Wright (1992, 2013), are meant to uphold this traditional conviction while offering novel accounts of truth's nature.

Deflationists staunchly resist the traditional conviction about truth. *Substantivists* about truth such as Russell, Blanshard, James, Edwards, Lynch, and Sher have found themselves engaged in prolonged and seemingly irresolvable disagreements about truth's nature. Deflationists tell us that this is because their investigations have been founded upon a questionable aim: to identify truth's elusive nature via metaphysical reflection. Deflationists urge us to cast off the substantivist mantle and to instead base our inquiry about truth on the following question: how do we ordinarily think and speak about truth, and why is it advantageous for us to think and speak in this way? They predict that if we do so, then we will come to see either that truth has no nature at all or that its nature is rather simple.

Using a background distinction between the concept TRUTH and the property *truth*, we can describe this deflationary prediction more carefully.² The concept TRUTH is meant to be a mental

¹ Russell (1912/1998, ch. 12), Blanshard (1939), James (1907, pp. 197-236). Of course, it goes without saying that Russell, Blanshard, and James conceive of metaphysical inquiry in importantly different ways.

² I'll use small caps to denote concepts and italics to denote properties and relations (and for emphasis). For more extensive discussion of the concept-property distinction as it pertains to truth, see Alston (2002), Asay (2013c, ch. 1, 2021a, b), Bar-On and Simmons (2007), Edwards (2018, chs. 1-2, 2021), Eklund (2021, § 2), Lynch (2005, 2009, ch. 1), Scharp (2021a, b), and Wyatt (2018, 2021a).

entity that thinkers deploy whenever they have thoughts involving truth. If I think that nothing that Bruno says about microbiology is true, then it is standardly held that I deploy the concept TRUTH in having this thought. By contrast, the property *truth* is meant to be the property that is possessed by all and only the true truth-bearers. If Larissa asserts that it is difficult for the average New Zealander to climb Mount Taranaki and indeed it is difficult for the average New Zealander to do this, then it is standardly held that the proposition that Larissa asserted (and/or the sentence that she assertively used or her assertion itself) exemplifies the property *truth*.

1.1. Conceptual deflationism

With the basic concept-property distinction drawn, we can clearly differentiate two varieties of deflationism about truth. *Conceptual deflationism* is the view that the concept TRUTH is an *insubstantial* concept. Conceptual deflationists have taken TRUTH to be insubstantial in a number of senses, one of which will be particularly important in what follows. A signature deflationary contention about TRUTH can be put like this: TRUTH's role in our thought and talk is purely *expressive*, rather than *explanatory*.³

To illustrate, if I didn't possess TRUTH, then I clearly couldn't have the belief that nothing that Bruno says about microbiology is true. My only alternative would be to have a belief whose content is logically equivalent to that of the former belief, though having the belief doesn't require possession of TRUTH. If I had a belief of the latter sort, then its content would be *infinitely* complex, having the form: if Bruno says that p and p is about microbiology, then not- p and if Bruno says that q and q is about microbiology, then not- q and... Yet try as I might, I can't use my mental resources to form a belief whose content is infinitely complex. Accordingly, it stands to reason that a human like me would come to possess TRUTH, given the cognitive benefits that this concept affords.

Moreover, it's plausible to take the English predicate 'is true' (as well as synonymous predicates from other natural languages) to express TRUTH. Accordingly, if I didn't possess TRUTH, then I wouldn't be a competent user of 'is true.' Yet if I didn't have 'is true' (or a synonymous predicate) in my linguistic repertoire, then I wouldn't be able to assert e.g. that nothing that Bruno says about microbiology is true. My only alternative would be to assert the infinitely complex proposition mentioned just above, and try as I might, I'm simply too short on time to assert an infinitely complex proposition. This and the above case illustrate a core idea behind conceptual deflationism: that possessing TRUTH expressively improves our thought and talk in the way that is manifested in *blind generalisation* cases such as those above, and that it is for that we came to possess this concept.

This core idea can be separated into a positive and a negative hypothesis. The positive hypothesis is that the, or at least the main, reason that humans have evolved to possess TRUTH is that it is expressively advantageous to possess this concept. The negative hypothesis is that whenever TRUTH is used to express the explanans of an explanation, this is *solely* because of its expressive utility—it isn't because TRUTH picks out a property *truth* that is somehow involved in the explanation.

The positive hypothesis is supported *inter alia* by the apparent dynamics of blind generalisation cases. The negative hypothesis is supported by the apparent fact that whenever

³ Cp. e.g. Armour-Garb (2012, § 2.2), Brandom (2005), and Williams (2002). For more detailed discussions of conceptual deflationism, see e.g. Asay (2013, ch. 8, 2021a, pp. 527-528), Bar-On and Simmons (2007), and Edwards (2018, ch. 3).

TRUTH is used to express the explanans of an explanation, it is in principle *eliminable*, modulo our cognitive and linguistic limitations. For instance, I might explain why I don't regard Bruno as a reliable source on microbiology by pointing out that nothing that he says about microbiology is true. If I were able to have infinitely complex thoughts and make infinitely complex assertions, then I could offer this explanation without relying on TRUTH. This means that were it not for my limited nature, I could get on happily without TRUTH in situations such as this. TRUTH thus seems to be just a convenient expressive resource, rather than a concept which picks out an ingredient of reality—namely, *truth*—that is essentially involved in the explanans of this explanation.⁴ These ideas will resurface in § 4.

1.2. Metaphysical deflationism

A second variety of deflationism is often, though not always, endorsed in conjunction with conceptual deflationism.⁵ *Metaphysical deflationism* is the view that the property *truth*, if it exists, is an insubstantial property. The received view among metaphysical deflationists used to be that *truth* simply doesn't exist. By contrast, contemporary metaphysical deflationists tend to hold that *truth* does exist, though it is merely insubstantial.⁶ Given its prominence in contemporary debates and in Edwards' discussion, I'll restrict my attention to the latter, moderate variety of metaphysical deflationism in what follows (though I admit to having sympathy for the more austere, parsimonious variety of the view).

When thinking about contemporary metaphysical deflationism, perhaps the most important thing to appreciate is that when developing their shared view that *truth* is insubstantial, metaphysical deflationists haven't spoken in unison. In fact, there are at least five basic senses in which *truth* has been claimed to be, or not to be, insubstantial.⁷ In my discussion of metaphysical deflationism in § 2, I'll concentrate on Edwards' understanding of the notion of insubstantiality, explaining how it has changed over the years and offering a concern for his most recent construal of this notion.

2. Edwards on metaphysical deflationism

2.1. Old Edwards vs. New Edwards

Edwards puts forward a novel proposal for how we should understand the insubstantiality of *truth*. However, Edwards' views on this topic have shifted over the past several years, and in evaluating his current view, it is useful to appreciate how it differs from his former view. I'll call the

⁴ Though I can't develop the point here, this deflationary argument looks to be interestingly related to the Quine-Putnam *indispensability argument* in the philosophy of mathematics; see Colyvan (2019) for an overview of the latter. In effect, the conceptual deflationist's contention is that since TRUTH is *dispensable*, modulo our cognitive and linguistic limitations, we should infer that it (probably) doesn't pick out an explanatorily potent ingredient of reality.

⁵ For a notable exception to the trend, see Asay (2013), who endorses metaphysical deflationism while taking TRUTH to be a primitive, substantial concept.

⁶ For the erstwhile received view, see Ayer (1946), Brandom (2005), Grover (1992), Quine (1948, 1970, 1987), Ramsey (1927), and Strawson (1949, 1950), and cf. Armour-Garb and Woodbridge (2021) and Scharp (2021 a, b). For the standard contemporary view, see e.g. Beall (2015, 2021), Horwich (1998b), McGrath (1997), Ramsey (1991), and Soames (1999). For a bit more detail on this distinction, see Wyatt (2021b, § 1).

⁷ For discussion, see Edwards (2013, 2018, ch. 2), Eklund (2021), Scharp (2021a, b), and Wyatt (2016, 2021b).

proponent of his former view *Old Edwards* and the proponent of his 2018 view (whose views about insubstantiality are presumably the same as those of present-day Edwards) *New Edwards*.

Old Edwards held that when metaphysical deflationists claim that *truth* is ‘insubstantial,’ they mean, or at least ought to mean, that *truth* is a highly *unnatural* property, in the Lewisian sense.⁸ Lewis took naturalness and unnaturalness to be graded, inverse features of properties. At one end of the spectrum, Lewis maintained, are the *perfectly natural* properties, and at the other end, gerrymandered properties such as Nelson Goodman’s *grueness*, that are maximally unnatural. Associated with this Lewisian spectrum are criteria that determine the degree of naturalness of a property *P*, three of which are highlighted by Old Edwards (2013, p. 12):

(N1) the length of *P*’s chain of definability from the perfectly natural properties (a shorter chain raises *P*’s degree of naturalness more than a longer chain);

(N2) whether *P* grounds genuine similarities among its bearers (if so, then that raises *P*’s degree of naturalness); and

(N3) whether *P* enjoys causal-explanatory power (if so, then that, too, raises *P*’s degree of naturalness).

On Old Edwards’ construal, then, deflationists maintain, or at least ought to maintain, that *truth* fails to score very highly on the naturalness scale that is marked out by (N1)-(N3).

New Edwards, by contrast, holds that when deflationists claim that *truth* is insubstantial, they mean, or at least ought to mean, that *truth* is an *abundant*, rather than a *sparse*, property.⁹ New Edwards’ notions of sparseness and abundance resemble the notions used by Lewis, but they are meant to be importantly different from Lewisian (un)naturalness.

As New Edwards employs the notions, there are two key differences between naturalness and sparseness. The first is that *P*’s degree of naturalness is partially determined by how *fundamental* *P* is, given (N1), whereas *P*’s fundamentality isn’t relevant to whether *P* is sparse. Following Schaffer (2004), New Edwards suggests that there are properties such as *being a water molecule* that ground genuine similarities and enjoy causal-explanatory power, though they are not fundamental. To mark such properties off from e.g. *grueness*, New Edwards proposes that we characterise sparseness solely in terms of (N2) and (N3) and then categorise *being a water molecule*, but not *grueness*, as sparse in this sense.¹⁰

The second key difference between sparseness and naturalness is meant to be that while (un)naturalness is graded, sparseness and abundance are *absolute*. This means that when categorising

⁸ See Edwards (2013) and Lewis (1983). For defences of similar views, see Asay (2013c, ch. 4, 2014) and Stollo (2014).

⁹ See Edwards (2018, ch. 2).

¹⁰ I should admit that while there may be other good reasons to distinguish sparseness from naturalness, this argument doesn’t strike me as being especially persuasive. If *being a water molecule* grounds genuine similarities and enjoys causal-explanatory power, then it will come out as highly natural, given that the chain of definability that connects it to the perfectly natural properties is presumably fairly short (much shorter, for instance, than the chain connecting *grueness* to these properties). By contrast, *grueness* will come out as being highly unnatural. This seems like an entirely reasonable result. While we do want our theory of properties to rank *being a water molecule* as more natural than *grueness*, we presumably don’t want it to rank *being a water molecule* as *perfectly natural*.

properties as sparse or abundant, we use a threshold, rather than a spectrum. The threshold has it that *P* is sparse iff *P* receives tick marks for both of the following:¹¹

(S1) *P* grounds genuine similarities among its bearers

(S2) *P* enjoys causal-explanatory power.

New Edwards' proposal (2018, p. 37) is that metaphysical deflationists should hold that *truth* is abundant insofar as it fails to receive tick marks for either (S1) or (S2). This means that New Edwards' metaphysical deflationist maintains both that *truth* fails to ground genuine similarities among its bearers and that it lacks causal-explanatory power.

2.2 A concern for New Edwards: the Special Case Constraint

It seems to me that New Edwards (whom I'll just call 'Edwards' from now on) is right to associate (S1) and (S2) with metaphysical deflationism and to distance the metaphysical deflationist from (N1). (N1), after all, has never played a role in the deflationism-substantivism debates, so it seems to be beside the point. However, I do have a residual concern about Edwards' proposal. In short, the concern is that the proposal is insufficiently general. We can bring this point into focus using what I've elsewhere called the *Special Case Constraint*.¹²

In essence, the Special Case Constraint says that in trying to develop a useful characterisation of metaphysical deflationism, we should aim to identify the most *basic* senses in which metaphysical deflationists do, or ought, to take *truth* to be insubstantial. This will ensure that we know what metaphysical deflationism is at root before we go on to examine the view's consequences. This is arguably a desideratum when we are assessing any theory—we want to know which claims are definitive of the theory, not just what the theory entails or predicts.

Edwards suggests that metaphysical deflationism is the view that *truth* is abundant insofar as it fails to ground genuine similarities among its bearers and lacks causal-explanatory power. He's undoubtedly correct that certain paradigmatic metaphysical deflationists—e.g. Jamin Asay (2013, 2014), Julian Dodd (2008), Paul Horwich (1998b), and Michael Williams (2002)—have endorsed or would endorse both of these claims. The trouble, however, is that these claims are special cases of a more basic thesis that should be associated with metaphysical deflationism.

Metaphysical deflationists don't just hold that *truth* fails to ground genuine similarities among its bearers and that it lacks causal-explanatory power—they hold that *truth* lacks explanatory power of *any* sort. To use just one example, the metaphysical deflationist Wolfgang Künne (2003, §5.1.1, p.

¹¹ In speaking about whether properties have causal-explanatory power, I take New Edwards to be speaking about their *causal efficacy*, rather than their *causal relevance*; this distinction is due to Jackson and Pettit (1990, p. 108). See Edwards (2018, ch. 2, n. 31), as well as (*ibid.*, § 4.3) where Edwards suggests that sparse properties have a broad, rather than a narrow, cosmological role, in the sense that is articulated by Crispin Wright (1992).

¹² See Wyatt (2016, pp. 364-365, 2021b, pp. 457-458). There, I argued that Old Edwards' characterisation of metaphysical deflationism also runs afoul of this constraint (see 2016, pp. 375-376, 2021b, p. 465).

A second concern for Edwards' proposal is that it fails to reflect the significance of issues pertaining to the constitution of *truth* within the deflationism-substantivism debates. Yet I've responded elsewhere to the considerations regarding *truth*'s constitution that Edwards (2018, § 2.5) advances (see Wyatt (2016, § V)), so I'll set this concern aside here. For an additional concern about the way in which Edwards applies his account of sparseness and abundance to *truth*, see Jago (2019, pp. 974-975) (this concern also applies to the views on existence that Edwards puts forward at 2018, § 8.6).

373, 2008, §13) has cautiously developed non-truth-theoretic accounts of propositions and propositional expression. As Künne (ibid., p. 373) points out, propositions present a threat to metaphysical deflationism due to the common dictum that they are essentially truth-evaluable. This dictum seems to imply that in explaining the nature of propositions, we must mention that they can exemplify *truth* or *falsity*, yet Künne aims to show that we can save the dictum while resisting this apparent implication.

The issue here is whether *truth* figures in our best explanation of the nature of propositions. If it did, then the explanatory power that it enjoyed would presumably be *non-causal*—the issue doesn't seem to be whether *truth*, or facts about *truth*, cause propositions to have the nature that they do. Rather, the issue is whether *truth*, or facts about *truth*, help to explain what makes propositions the kind of entity that they are, rather than some other kind of entity. We might call this a *constitutive*, rather than a causal, explanation. So, in denying that *truth* enjoys explanatory power in this context, Künne looks to be denying that *truth* enjoys explanatory power of a non-causal sort.

This case and others like it¹³ show that the metaphysical deflationist's negative thesis regarding *truth*'s explanatory power is meant to encompass every potential variety of explanation, including both causal and non-causal varieties of explanation. In light of this, I suggested in earlier work that the thesis be formulated like this:

(Non-Explanatory*) There is a property *truth*, but *truth* lacks explanatory power in that there are no facts that are explained by facts about *truth*'s essence.

Given a plausible background assumption, (Non-Explanatory*) entails that *truth* fails to receive tick marks for both (S1) and (S2) and is thus an abundant property.¹⁴ Yet insofar as (Non-Explanatory*) is more general than the claim that *truth* fails to receive these tick marks, it is clear that the latter is a special case of (Non-Explanatory*). The Special Case Constraint thus issues a verdict in favour of characterising metaphysical deflationism in terms of (Non-Explanatory*), rather than Edwards' construal of metaphysical deflationism.

These considerations show, I think, that we must generalise Edwards' construal of metaphysical deflationism along the lines of (Non-Explanatory*). I have come to think, however, that (Non-Explanatory*) is in need of slight repair, so I'll describe what I now regard as a more satisfactory formulation of the metaphysical deflationist's view regarding *truth*'s explanatory power.

One of my motivations for formulating (Non-Explanatory*) as I did was that I wanted to leave room for the metaphysical deflationist to hold that certain facts involving *truth* do enjoy explanatory power, while others don't. For instance, metaphysical deflationists should happily admit that the fact [Doug believes that the proposition that New Zealand is an island exemplifies *truth*] enjoys explanatory power, insofar as it partially explains e.g. [Doug believes that *truth* exists].¹⁵ That the former fact is explanatorily potent poses no threat to metaphysical deflationism, since it is a fact about Doug's beliefs about *truth*, not a fact about *truth* itself. (Non-Explanatory*) reflects this and is to that extent useful in an account of metaphysical deflationism.

¹³ See the discussion in Wyatt (2016, §§ III.3 and IV, 2021b, §§ 3.3 and 4).

¹⁴ The background assumption is that grounding is either an explanatory relation or a non-explanatory 'backing relation.' For discussion of grounding and explanation, see Bliss and Trogon (2014, § 4).

¹⁵ I'll use square brackets to denote facts.

However, Matti Eklund (2021, p. S642) has pointed out that (Non-Explanatory*) seems to be too capacious. It allows, for instance, that [the proposition that New Zealand is an island exemplifies *truth*] might enjoy explanatory power, as this fact doesn't seem to be about *truth*'s essence. Yet metaphysical deflationists will clearly be inclined to regard this fact as explanatorily inert. As Eklund also points out, moves could be perhaps be made in arguing that this fact is actually about *truth*'s essence, but it seems to me that there is a cleaner way to resolve the problem.

The cleaner solution is to reformulate (Non-Explanatory*) as follows:

(Non-Explanatory) There is a property *truth*, but *truth* lacks explanatory power in that there are no facts that are explained by facts about which entities exemplify/fail to exemplify *truth*.

(Non-Explanatory) entails that [the proposition that New Zealand is an island exemplifies *truth*] explains no facts and thus better captures the metaphysical deflationist's negative attitude towards *truth*'s explanatory power. It also allows that [Doug believes that the proposition that New Zealand is an island exemplifies *truth*] may enjoy explanatory power, since this is a fact about Doug's beliefs about *truth*, not a fact about which entities exemplify/fail to exemplify *truth*. In this way, (Non-Explanatory) is permissive enough without being overly permissive.

Like (Non-Explanatory*), (Non-Explanatory) also entails that *truth* is abundant while being more general than the latter claim. As a result, the Special Case Constraint counsels us to take (Non-Explanatory), rather than the claim that *truth* is abundant, to be a definitive moderate deflationary thesis.

3. Deflationism and globalisation

Thus far, I've argued that Edwards' characterisation of metaphysical deflationism points us in the right direction, even as it fails to carve at the joints of the view. I now want to turn to one of the signature negative arguments of Edwards' book, which aims to undermine what Edwards calls the *deflationary conception of truth*.

Deflationists tend to put a lot of weight on particular schemas involving truth. For the sake of concreteness, we can focus on the *Equivalence Schema*, which is at the centre of Horwich (1998b)'s minimalism:

(E) The proposition that p is true iff p.

Edwards takes the deflationary conception of truth, as it concerns (E), to consist of four theses:¹⁶

Basicness: (E)'s instances are basic

Completeness: (E)'s instances explain all of the uses of the truth predicate (i.e. of 'is true')

Purity: (E)'s instances are given without making any essential connections between TRUTH and other concepts

¹⁶ 2018, p. 41. I've slightly modified the wording of Completeness and Purity, though these modifications won't affect the discussion to follow. I've modified Insubstantiality more significantly, so that it entails that there is no substantial property *truth*. I take it that the deflationary conception of truth should entail this, as it is a characteristic metaphysical claim made by deflationists about truth. Moreover, given the setup of his Globalising Argument (§ 3.1 below), it seems that Edwards intends for Insusubstantiality to have this entailment.

Insubstantiality: There is no substantial property *truth*, and (E)'s instances don't imply that there is.

In chapters 3, 5, and 6 of *The Metaphysics of Truth*, Edwards develops a complex, multi-stage argument against the deflationary conception of truth. He first argues at length that deflationists should reject Basicness, Completeness, and Purity. He then turns to the question of whether the deflationary conception might boil down to Insubstantiality. In § 3.5 of the book, Edwards argues that deflationists can't help themselves to Insubstantiality either, which means that there is no distinctively deflationary conception of truth. Rather, Edwards contends that deflationists about truth are ultimately committed to a *globally deflationary* metaphysics, which forces them to carry their deflationary commitments far beyond truth.

I want to focus on the stage of Edwards' argument that pertains to Insubstantiality. While the target of this stage is the metaphysical deflationist who cashes insubstantiality out in terms of the sparse/abundant distinction, Edwards points out (*ibid.*, ch. 3, n. 12) that his argument should really worry all metaphysical deflationists, no matter how they understand insubstantiality. This means that even if my argument in § 2.2 is on the right track, Edwards' argument constitutes a pressing challenge for metaphysical deflationists.

3.1. The Globalising Argument

I'll call Edwards' argument the *Globalising Argument*, which I take to go like this:¹⁷

P1: The content of Insubstantiality is that there is no substantial property *truth*, and (E)'s instances don't imply that there is

P2: *Truth* exists (An assumption that will be granted by many contemporary metaphysical deflationists)

P3: So, if Insubstantiality is true, then *truth* is an insubstantial property (P1, P2)

P4: If a sentence *S* exemplifies *truth*, then the explanation of this fact involves facts about the reference and satisfaction of *S*'s components

P5: Accordingly, if *truth* an insubstantial property, then *reference* and *satisfaction* must be insubstantial relations

P6: If *P* is a substantial property, then *P* must stand in substantial relations *reference* and *satisfaction* to certain linguistic expressions

P7: If *truth* is an insubstantial property, then there are no substantial properties (P5, P6)

P8: If there are no substantial properties, then the deflationist cannot contrast *truth* with purportedly substantial properties such as *being magnetic* or *being an arthropod*

C: If Insubstantiality is true, then its content is unassertible (P1, P3, P7, P8).

3.2. Concerns for the Globalising Argument

¹⁷ Cp. the anti-deflationary argument in Boghossian (1990), the details of which are importantly different from those of the Globalising Argument.

The Globalising Argument is novel and stimulating, and it should certainly cause deflationists to furrow their brows. However, I think that the deflationist can convincingly resist the argument in at least three ways.

The Tarskian proposal in P4 could of course be called into question, but I will grant P4 for present purposes. My first concern is that even if P4 is true, the inference from P4 to P5 is dubious. This inference seems to rest on the general assumption that if (i) the fact [x exemplifies property P] is partially explained by the fact [x has a proper part y that stands in relation R to an entity z] and (ii) P is insubstantial, then (iii) R is insubstantial as well. As a counterexample, let x be my body, and suppose that my head weighs 5.3 kg. Then x exemplifies the disjunctive property $P =$ having a proper part that pumps blood or having a proper part that weighs 5.3 kg or having a proper part that is the product of 5 and 7 or having a proper part that loves Cassio. Moreover, the fact [x exemplifies P] is partially explained by the fact [x has a proper part y that weighs 5.3 kg]. P is clearly insubstantial, whether we take insubstantial properties to be abundant properties or properties that lack explanatory power. Yet the relation *weighing 5.3 kg* is clearly substantial, whether we take substantial relations to be sparse relations or relations that enjoy explanatory power. This counterexample indicates that the general assumption on which the inference from P4 to P5 rests is false.

Second, P6 seems questionable. Let P be the property *being an arthropod*, which is clearly substantial, whether we take substantial properties to be sparse properties or properties that enjoy explanatory power. It doesn't seem to follow from the fact that P is sparse/the fact that P enjoys explanatory power that P stands in substantial relations *reference* and *satisfaction* to certain linguistic expressions. Rather, it seems that P could be substantial in either of these senses even if *reference* and *satisfaction* are both insubstantial in the same sense.

To illustrate, P enjoys explanatory power given that there are facts, e.g. [lobster L periodically moults], which are explained by facts about which entities exemplify/fail to exemplify P , e.g. [L exemplifies *being an arthropod*]. That P enjoys explanatory power seems entirely consistent with the view that *reference* and *satisfaction* are insubstantial relations insofar as they lack explanatory power. An advocate of the latter view might hold that while *reference* and *satisfaction* do exist, there are no facts that are explained by facts about which entities stand/fail to stand in these relations to other entities. As for the natures of reference and satisfaction, they might hold that we can learn basically all that we need to know about these relations by consulting the classes of instances of the following schemas, where $\langle a_1, \dots, a_n \rangle$ is a tuple of entities, ' $S(x_1, \dots, x_n)$ ' stands for the name of a sentence with free variables x_1, \dots, x_n , and ' $S(a_1, \dots, a_n)$ ' is the result of uniformly replacing x_1, \dots, x_n in S with a_1, \dots, a_n .¹⁸

(R) 'a' refers to x iff $a = x$

(S) $\langle a_1, \dots, a_n \rangle$ satisfies $S(x_1, \dots, x_n)$ iff $S(a_1, \dots, a_n)$.

A final concern is that C doesn't seem to follow from P1, P3, P7, and P8. If there are no substantial properties, then the extension of 'is a substantial property' is empty. This means, as Edwards points out, that it is impossible to identify a property P that differs from *truth* in virtue of being substantial. Yet from this, it doesn't follow that it is impossible to assert the content of Insubstantiality. I can assert plenty of propositions—even some true ones—using predicates with empty extensions, e.g. by assertively uttering 'There are no unicorns.' Likewise, even if the extension of 'is a substantial property' is empty, I can assert a proposition—and if the deflationist is right, a

¹⁸ Cp. Horwich (1998a, ch. 5, 1998b, p. 112).

true one—by assertively uttering ‘There is no substantial property *truth*, and (E)’s instances don’t imply that there is.’ To assert this proposition, it simply isn’t necessary to contrast *truth* with a substantial property. I can assert this proposition while holding that all properties are insubstantial, or while holding that properties, including *truth*, don’t exist at all.¹⁹

4. Domains, truth pluralism, and deflationism

Now that I’ve attempted to fend off Edwards’ attempt to undermine the deflationary conception of truth, I want to consider an argument that he develops in support of truth pluralism, which acts as an indirect argument against deflationism. By way of response, I’ll sketch a deflationary explanation of the phenomena that Edwards takes to motivate truth pluralism.

4.1. The Domain Differences Argument

Edwards (2018, p. 83) summarises this argument, which I’ll call the *Domain Differences Argument*, as follows:²⁰

This argument claims that it is not just that different theories of truth are best suited for different domains, but that truth *has* to be understood differently in different domains, for we cannot get the general distinctions we made between different domains in terms of sparseness and abundance up and running without a pluralist approach to truth.

The argument begins with the familiar thought that there are different *domains of discourse*, e.g. the domains of aesthetic, mathematical, chemical, or institutional discourse. As truth pluralists know all too well, precisifying the notion of a domain is fairly challenging, but it will be suitable to work with the basic, intuitive idea here.²¹

Edwards suggests that when comparing the various domains to one another, we can use two basic models, the *sparse model* and the *abundant model*. In applying the sparse model to the predicates of a domain *D*, we take *D*’s predicates to express sparse properties, and similarly for the abundant model.²² Edwards sensibly proposes (ibid., § 4.4) that the sparse model should be applied e.g. to the chemical domain and that the abundant model should be applied e.g. to the institutional domain.

So far, the proposal might seem fairly uncontroversial, but Edwards contends that it pushes us into some surprising territory. He argues that if we apply each of the sparse and the abundant models to at least one domain *D*, then we must also make a substantial, pluralist commitment

¹⁹ For a complementary, fictionalist response with which I am sympathetic and which Edwards credits to Brad Armour-Garb, see Edwards (2018, ch. 3, n. 10). For a related discussion of semantic deflationism and metaontological deflationism, see Marschall and Schindler (2021).

Of course, in pointing out that a deflationist could assert Insubstantiality’s content while taking all properties to be insubstantial or while holding that properties don’t exist, I don’t mean to suggest that the latter views face no concerns of their own—they do, of course. The point is just that the premises of the Globalising Argument fail to provide adequate support for its conclusion. For relevant discussion of the two mentioned views of properties, see e.g. Edwards (2014, chs. 4-6, 2018, ch. 4).

²⁰ As will become clear, the Domain Differences Argument is distinct from the most influential argument for truth pluralism, which turns on Lynch (2009)’s scope problem (for discussion of a similar problem, see Sher (2016, § 7.2)).

²¹ For more detail, see e.g. Edwards (ibid., ch. 4) and Wyatt (2013).

²² The models can also be applied to *D*’s singular terms (see Edwards ibid., § 4.6), and presumably also to *D*’s quantifiers (ibid., § 6.4), though I’ll focus on predicates in what follows.

regarding the nature of truth. The commitment is to taking truth to involve accurate *representation* in some domains though not in others, a commitment that Edwards seeks to discharge (*ibid.*, § 5.2, ch. 7) by taking truth to be determined by correspondence in e.g. the chemical domain and by superassertibility in e.g. the institutional domain.

So how is truth meant to enter the picture? The details are complex, and Edwards sorts through them with a light touch. The key move pertains to the following schema:²³

(TP) ‘a is F’ is true iff the object to which ‘a’ refers has the property that is expressed by ‘is F.’

Edwards suggests that if it is correct to apply the sparse model to domain D_1 , then it will also be correct to hold that (TP) applies to D_1 -sentences with a right-to-left direction of explanation. By contrast, if it is correct to apply the abundant model to D_2 , then it will be correct to hold that (TP) applies to D_2 -sentences with a left-to-right direction of explanation.

Using Edwards’ helpful terminology, we can express this idea in a more picturesque fashion by saying that if D_1 ’s predicates express sparse properties, then true sentences containing D_1 ’s predicates *respond* to those properties, so that the correct reading of (TP) within D_1 is right-to-left. By contrast, if D_2 ’s predicates express abundant properties, then true sentences containing D_2 ’s predicates *generate* those properties, so that the correct reading of (TP) within D_2 is left-to-right. Yet if we conceive of domains in this way, then it seems that we must understand truth as being representational (of states of affairs involving the exemplification of sparse properties) in responsive domains and non-representational in generative domains. This seems to push us towards truth pluralism and well away from deflationism.

4.2. A deflationary response

To resist the pluralist moral that Edwards derives from the Domain Differences Argument, deflationists need to account for Edwards’ sense that it is correct to read (TP) right-to-left in responsive domains and left-to-right in generative domains without compromising their deflationary credentials. It seems to me that when we look carefully at the details of the argument, it becomes apparent that deflationists can do this. As a result, the argument fails to provide strong motivation for truth pluralism.

Turning first to the institutional domain, which Edwards takes to be a generative domain, compare the following left-to-right and right-to-left instances of (TP):

(TP_{GLR}) The object to which ‘Jacinda Ardern’ refers has the property that is expressed by ‘is the Prime Minister of New Zealand’ because ‘Jacinda Ardern is the Prime Minister of New Zealand’ is true

(TP_{GRL}) ‘Jacinda Ardern is the Prime Minister of New Zealand’ is true because the object to which ‘Jacinda Ardern’ refers has the property that is expressed by ‘is the Prime Minister of New Zealand.’

²³ I’ve slightly modified the formulation of (TP) so that it incorporates the familiar idea that predicates ‘express’ properties while being neutral as to the nature of the expression relation. Edwards’ formulation (*ibid.*, p. 85) involves the questionable and potentially distracting assumption that predicates *refer* to properties; for discussion of predicate reference, see MacBride (2008).

Edwards would hold that (TP_{GLR}) is correct and that (TP_{GRL}) is incorrect. If that's right, then it looks like the deflationist is in trouble. This is because the explanans of (TP_{GLR}) contains 'is true,' which suggests that if (TP_{GLR}) is correct, then TRUTH is a substantial concept and *truth* is a substantial property.

To properly assess this threat, we need first to iron out an interpretive wrinkle. Instances of (TP) contain definite descriptions of the form 'the object to which 'a' refers' and 'the property that is expressed by 'is F,'" and it isn't immediately clear how we are to read these descriptions. Keith Donnellan (1966) famously observed that definite descriptions admit of at least two readings—an *attributive* reading and a *referential* reading. Edwards isn't explicit about whether the descriptions in (TP) 's instances should be interpreted attributively or referentially, so we can consider both interpretations. When we take care to distinguish these interpretations, we see that no matter how the descriptions in (TP) 's instances are interpreted, the right-to-left instances actually seem more accurate than the left-to-right instances when they pertain to the institutional domain.

The referential interpretation yields the following:

(TP_{GLR}^R) Jacinda Ardern has *being the Prime Minister of New Zealand* because 'Jacinda Ardern is the Prime Minister of New Zealand' is true

(TP_{GRL}^R) 'Jacinda Ardern is the Prime Minister of New Zealand' is true because Jacinda Ardern has *being the Prime Minister of New Zealand*.

To my mind, (TP_{GRL}^R) sounds more accurate than (TP_{GLR}^R) .

What explains the fact that Ardern has *being the Prime Minister of New Zealand*? She has this property because (i) she was appointed PM of New Zealand by the Governor-General of New Zealand in 2020 and (ii) according to New Zealand election law, anyone who is so appointed is the PM of New Zealand. By contrast, it doesn't sound at all accurate to say that Ardern has *being the Prime Minister of New Zealand* because some sentence of English (or te reo Māori or Chinese or etc.) is true. For these reasons, (TP_{GLR}^R) sounds inaccurate.

On the other hand, Ardern's having *being the Prime Minister of New Zealand* seems like a good explanation for the truth of the English sentence which says that she is the PM of New Zealand. Moreover, it's entirely compatible with this explanation for us to go on to explain that *being the Prime Minister of New Zealand* is an institutional, socially/legally constructed property along the lines briefly sketched above. For these reasons, (TP_{GRL}^R) sounds like an accurate explanation. This means that the referential reading of the descriptions in (TP_{GLR}) and (TP_{GRL}) doesn't substantiate the disparity that Edwards hears—in fact, it substantiates the converse disparity.

What about the attributive interpretation? This interpretation yields:

(TP_{GLR}^A) ((There is an x such that 'Jacinda Ardern' refers to x and for all y : if 'Jacinda Ardern' refers to y , then $y = x$) and (there is a ζ such that 'is the Prime Minister of New Zealand' expresses ζ and for all w : if 'is the Prime Minister of New Zealand' expresses w , then $w = \zeta$) and (x has ζ)) because 'Jacinda Ardern is the Prime Minister of New Zealand' is true

(TP_{GRL}^A) 'Jacinda Ardern is the Prime Minister of New Zealand' is true because ((There is an x such that 'Jacinda Ardern' refers to x and for all y : if 'Jacinda Ardern' refers to y , then $y =$

x) and (there is a z such that ‘is the Prime Minister of New Zealand’ expresses z and for all w : if ‘is the Prime Minister of New Zealand’ expresses w , then $w = z$) and (x has z)).

Again, to my mind, (TP_{GRL}^A) sounds more accurate than (TP_{GLR}^A) .

(TP_{GLR}^A) entails that the truth of ‘Jacinda Ardern is the Prime Minister of New Zealand’ at least partially explains the fact that ‘is the Prime Minister of New Zealand’ expresses a property. But that doesn’t seem right, since this predicate expressed a property long before this sentence was true, e.g. in 1863, when Frederick Whitaker was the PM.

By contrast, if we want to explain the truth of ‘Jacinda Ardern is the Prime Minister of New Zealand’ in terms of the semantics of its subsentential components, then (TP_{GRL}^A) is a good start. Moreover, opting for the explanation in (TP_{GRL}^A) doesn’t compel us to hold that the true sentence ‘Jacinda Ardern is the Prime Minister of New Zealand’ is responsive to a property, *being the Prime Minister of New Zealand*, that pre-exists election law in New Zealand. Rather, it is compatible with (TP_{GRL}^A) to hold that the existence and exemplification conditions of *being the Prime Minister of New Zealand* are constructed by New Zealand election law. This suggests that (TP_{GRL}^A) doesn’t have the sort of implausible consequence that Edwards associates with right-to-left readings of (TP) within generative domains.

Thus, no matter whether we interpret (TP) ’s instances referentially or attributively, the right-to-left instances seem preferable to the left-to-right instances within the institutional domain. This defuses the threat that generative domains seemed to present for deflationism. The explanans of right-to-left instances of (TP) don’t contain ‘is true,’ so the accuracy of these instances lends no support to substantivist accounts of TRUTH or *truth*.

It’s straightforward to see that responsive domains, such as the chemical domain, also pose no threat to deflationism. For instance, *perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA)* is a manufactured compound that was initially produced by 3M in 1947 and was later used by DuPont in the popular non-stick coating Teflon. Compare the following instances of (TP) :

(TP_{RLR}) The object to which ‘PFOA’ refers has the property that is expressed by ‘is an acid’ because ‘PFOA is an acid’ is true

(TP_{RRL}) ‘PFOA is an acid’ is true because the object to which ‘PFOA’ refers has the property that is expressed by ‘is an acid.’

The referential interpretation of these instances yields:

(TP_{RLR}^R) PFOA is an acid because ‘PFOA is an acid’ is true

(TP_{RRL}^R) ‘PFOA is an acid’ is true because PFOA is an acid.

(TP_{RRL}^R) seems more accurate than (TP_{RLR}^R) . PFOA is an acid because it is a proton donor, and anything that is a proton donor is an acid. It isn’t an acid because some sentence of English (or te reo Māori or Chinese or etc.) is true. By contrast, PFOA’s being an acid seems like a good explanation for the truth of the English sentence which says that it is.

The attributive interpretation of (TP_{RLR}) and (TP_{RRL}) yields:

(TP_{RLL}^A) ((There is an x such that ‘PFOA’ refers to x and for all y : if ‘PFOA’ refers to y , then $y = x$) and (there is a ζ such that ‘is an acid’ expresses ζ and for all w : if ‘is an acid’ expresses w , then $w = \zeta$) and (x has ζ)) because ‘PFOA is an acid’ is true

(TP_{RRL}^A) ‘PFOA is an acid’ is true because ((There is an x such that ‘PFOA’ refers to x and for all y : if ‘PFOA’ refers to y , then $y = x$) and (there is a ζ such that ‘is an acid’ expresses ζ and for all w : if ‘is an acid’ expresses w , then $w = \zeta$) and (x has ζ)).

Similarly, (TP_{RRL}^A) seems more accurate than (TP_{RLL}^A). (TP_{RLL}^A) entails that the truth of ‘PFOA is an acid’ at least partially explains the fact that ‘is an acid’ expresses a property. But that doesn’t seem right, since this predicate expressed a property long before this sentence was true, e.g. in 1887, when PFOA had yet to be manufactured by 3M.²⁴ By contrast, if we want to explain the truth of ‘PFOA is an acid’ in terms of the semantics of its subsentential components, then (TP_{RRL}^A) is a good start. Responsive domains, then, seem to pose no threat to deflationism, as neither the explanans of (TP_{RRL}^R) nor the explanans of (TP_{RRL}^A) contains ‘is true.’

In short, then, my response to the Domain Differences Argument is (i) that contra Edwards, the most plausible way to read instances of (IP) within both responsive and generative domains is right-to-left and (ii) that doing so doesn’t compel the deflationist to regard TRUTH or *truth* as substantial. Responsive and generative domains may, as Edwards proposes, be importantly different, but their differences shouldn’t compel us to reject deflationism and join up with truth pluralists.²⁵

5. Conclusion: the promise of deflationism

I’ve aimed in this discussion to clarify metaphysical deflationism and to defend both metaphysical and conceptual deflationism against two of Edwards’ formidable challenges. Yet it might seem that even if I’ve succeeded in all of this, the result is fairly disappointing. Have I not taken pains to defend an approach to the study of truth which tells us that we don’t need grand theories of TRUTH or *truth* and that we’d be better off directing our attention elsewhere?

What I would emphasise is that when it comes to truth, the deflationist doesn’t simply tell us “There’s nothing to see here.” Rather, as I’ll briefly explain in closing, much of the promise of deflationism lies in the fact that it foregrounds promising lines of research that may be obscured if we approach the study of truth in a traditional, substantivist frame of mind.

I take the *methodology* of deflationism to involve two fundamental components, one negative and one positive. The negative component is the proposal that when developing and testing theories of TRUTH and *truth*, we shouldn’t rely on armchair metaphysics. Despite all of the imaginative and thought-provoking ideas about truth that have come from the armchair, *a priori*

²⁴ It’s easy to see that (TP_{RLL}^A) wouldn’t be any more plausible if we considered an acid that pre-existed humans, e.g. citric acid. The point there would be that it’s not plausible to hold that ‘is an acid’ expresses a property because a particular sentence of the form ‘ x is an acid’ is true.

²⁵ Of course, the accuracy of (TP_{RRL}^R) and (TP_{RRL}^A) does raise a residual concern. If these explanations are accurate, then to explain sentential truth in both responsive and generative domains, it looks like we must invoke facts about reference and property expression, which seems to run contrary to deflationism. However, more work is needed to assess the severity of this concern, given my response to the Globalising Argument in § 3.2. That response suggests that it is open to the deflationist to grant that sentential truth is explicable in terms of reference and property expression and to then go on to argue either (i) that these semantic relations, like *truth*, are insubstantial, though it is expressively useful to employ expressions like ‘refers’ and ‘the property that is expressed by’ in the explanans of explanations or (ii) that these semantic relations are substantial, though *truth* is insubstantial.

metaphysical debates about truth have a tendency to rest on competing hunches—hunches about what truth is, how we ordinarily think and speak about truth and why we do so, whether and why truth is valuable, etc. Yet when my hunch squares off against your hunch, the match tends to end in stalemate. This, suggests the deflationist, is precisely what we’ve witnessed in philosophical debates about truth.

The positive component of deflationism’s methodology is the proposal that we instead found our theories of TRUTH and *truth* (as well as our theories of truth predicates such as ‘is true’) on well-informed accounts of how we think and speak about truth in our everyday lives and why we think and speak about truth as we do. Frank Ramsey (1927, p. 157) pointed us in this direction by describing the problem of truth as “linguistic muddle,” and deflationists have worked to refine and implement Ramsey’s idea ever since.

Though deflationists don’t typically emphasise the point, the positive component of deflationism’s methodology encourages us not only to be wary of armchair metaphysics but to have the courage to pursue research about truth without any of the cosy reassurances that the armchair tends to provide. If we follow the deflationary recommendation to begin our inquiry about truth by developing theories of our ordinary truth-thought and truth-talk, then how, exactly, should we develop those theories? We must certainly begin by constructing hypotheses about ordinary truth-thought and truth-talk, and this activity is sure to involve some *a priori* reflection. Yet the hypotheses that we construct will clearly be *empirical*, and as such, they shouldn’t be tested using a sample size of one (or two, or twenty, for that matter). Rather, they should be tested using experiments which are designed to illuminate aspects of our ordinary truth-thought and truth-talk. They should also be tested by how well they fit with our best empirically-informed theories of language and cognition. In this way, following the deflationary route out of dialectical stalemate requires us to take to heart the Quinean lesson that philosophical inquiry about truth isn’t a self-standing endeavour, but is rather an extension of scientific inquiry about language and the mind.²⁶

It is for these reasons, I think, that the deflationist is best cast as our intrepid hero. Deflationism unsettles us when we imagine that we can learn more about truth by sinking ever deeper into the armchair. It also marks out an alternative path of rich, collaborative, empirically-informed inquiry which promises to produce the most compelling theories of truth that we have devised to date.

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²⁶ For empirically-informed discussions of truth (some of which are critical of deflationary hypotheses about the behaviour of ordinary truth-thought and truth-talk), see Asay (2021b, § 5), Barnard and Ulatowski (2013, 2016, 2019, 2021), Barnard, Ulatowski, and Weinberg (2017), Fisher, et. al. (2017), Kölbel (2008), Matthewson and Glougie (2018), Millikan (2021), Moltmann (2015, 2021), Næss (1938a, b, 1953), Reuter and Brun (2021), Sullivan-Bissett (2016), Ulatowski (2016, 2017, 2018), and Wyatt (2018). See also Scharp (2021a, b).

Though I can’t develop the point here, it should be clear that so understood, the core methodology of deflationism is independent of, while being compatible with, what Wrenn (2015, § 8.2), following Field (1994), calls ‘methodological deflationism.’ This is because the core methodology of deflationism doesn’t commit us to taking the deflationary conception of truth (see § 3 above) as our ‘default’ conception of truth.

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