
DEFLATIONISM AND EPISTEMOLOGY

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Abstract

Among the many theories of truth, designed by Western philosophers since Aristotle, the deflationary theories of truth are most disconcerting in their apparent lack of informational content and in their drastic reduction of ontological commitment. The purpose of deflationism and disquotationalism is, mainly, to purge the truth predicate of its cumbersome metaphysical weight, of obscurities and paradoxes, and to reconstruct it with the help of a formal theory, all the while keeping intact the natural intuitions about truth. After underlining a few interesting aspects and problems of deflationism reflected in the theories of Ramsey, Horwich and Field, I will analyze the basic assumptions of these theories and their impact on other philosophical fields. The main question to be answered is the following one: does a deflationary perspective on truth and meaning generate an epistemology devoid of content? The proposed answer will be a negative one.

Keywords: deflationism, truth theory, semantics, sentence, proposition

1. Introduction

The first thing that seems to plead for the Aristotelian-style definitions of truth is their obviousness. The most instinctive thing one could say about a sentence's being true is that it affirms about things that exist and negates about inexistent things. This must have been the idea that led Alfred Tarski to the famous T-sentences.

It is true that he worked mostly with formalized languages, but Tarski wasn't really content with the idea that a good definition of truth could only be stated in a formalized frame. As a point in his attempt to deal with the paradoxes in the realm of natural languages, Tarski [1] distinguished between *language* and an *universal language*, almost in the same way in which David Lewis sketched his distinction between *language* and *languages* [2]. He agreed that the natural language has a set of features that allow it to express paradoxes, but in the meantime he underlined that it is actually a sort of *universal language* we are talking about in this situation. This is how the qualification may help us: "There is, however, no need to use universal languages in all possible situations. In particular, such languages are, in general, not needed for the purpose of science (and by science I mean the whole realm of intellectual inquiry)" [1, p. 411],

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linguistics included. Thus, the emergence of paradoxes from the natural languages would be, at least for the logician, nothing more than the result of an exacerbation of the very concept of ‘language’ in his or her own field of analysis. Tarski again: “I do not refer exclusively to linguistic systems which are formulated entirely in symbols, and I do not have in mind anything essentially opposed to natural languages. On the contrary, the only formalized languages which seem to be of real interest are those which are fragments of natural languages (fragments provided with complete vocabularies and precise syntactical rules), or those which can at least be adequately translated into natural languages” [1, p. 413]. Ironically, Tarski’s hierarchical solution to the liar paradox stipulates a semantic structure that has been criticized later on precisely for not being in accordance with the structure of natural languages.

As it is known, Tarski was not a deflationist – at least not explicitly. The purpose of his theory was to eliminate the semantic paradox and to redeem the truth predicate under its correspondentialist understanding. However, the resulting rigorous theory ended up as an ancestor of the deflationary theories of truth, and Tarski’s material adequacy criterion, later called *T-sentence*, became the one principle situated at the core of these theories.

2. Ramsey

The real, explicit point of departure for the redundancy theory of truth is found in the work of Frank Plumpton Ramsey. His perspective is, from a certain point of view, on the same line with Frege’s: adding ‘is true’ doesn’t improve much the depth or understanding of a sentence [3], and also “it is essential to realize that truth and propositional reference are not independent notions requiring separate analysis, and that it is truth that depends on and must be defined *via* reference, not reference *via* truth.” [4]

Ramsey’s conception of truth is at first based on his theory of judgement, according to which “the fact that I am judging that [snow is white] consists in the holding of some relation or relations between [...] mental and objective factors.” [3]. Further on the idea seems to be clear, namely that truth “consists in a relation between ideas [the mental factor] and reality [the objective factor], [...] and whatever the complete definition [of truth] may be, it must preserve the evident connection between truth and reference, that a belief ‘that *p*’ is true if and only <if> *p*” [4]. Therefore, the ‘second’ *p* is taken to express the reference of the judgement *that p*, which will be therefore equivalent to ‘the judgement *that p* is true’, as they both consist of the same relation between ‘ideas and reality’, they have the same *value* (for ‘value’, see [3]). The problem of truth must thus be reduced to the problem of propositional reference, and the only serious problem that remains is the question “just what it is that beliefs, opinions, claims, statements and the like have in common in virtue of which ‘is true’ can be predicated of them?” [4, p. xv].

The first serious problem with Ramsey's theory seems to be at the very beginning of his paper 'Facts and Propositions', when he explains his conception of 'mental' respectively 'objective' factor. For him, the mental factor of the judgement that, say, 'Snow is white' is 'my mind, or my present mental state, or words or images in my mind', while the objective factor would be "[The snow], or [The snow's being white], or [snow] and [white], or the proposition [snow is white], or the fact that [snow is white]" [3]. One would immediately ask themselves: so the words are exclusively in one's mind, whereas a proposition is a fact? Is the proposition a state of affairs or two states of affairs that intersect each other?

3. Horwich

One of the most striking features of the deflationary theories is their abundance in *negative* characterisations of truth. The first thing that one is being told about a deflationary conception of truth is what the truth is *not*: not a genuine predicate, not a serious concept, not an interesting philosophical notion, not a subject with deep metaphysical insights. This is how Horwich's account of minimalism begins: "The role of truth is not what it seems" [5]. Further on, concerning the role that the truth predicate *does* play, Horwich interprets the disquotational thesis in the following manner: "In fact the truth predicate exists solely for the sake of a certain logical need. On occasion we wish to adopt some attitude towards a proposition – for example, believing it, assuming it for the sake of argument, or desiring that it be the case – but find ourselves thwarted by ignorance of what exactly the proposition is." [5]

Thus, the first place where the truth predicate finds its use is in the case that e.g. (using Horwich's example) we don't know/understand what one of Oscar's utterances says, and yet wish to pronounce ourselves with regard to the utterance: 'What Oscar said is true'. Further on, with the help of the truth predicate we can pronounce ourselves with regard to entire series of propositions, that can be thus 'captured in an ordinary universally quantified statement' of the type 'Everything that Oscar said is true'. When explaining what it is that allows the truth predicate to play such a role, Horwich interprets the disquotational function of truth as a *de-nominalisation*: "for any declarative sentence *p* our language guarantees an equivalent sentence *The proposition that p is true*, where the original sentence has been converted into a noun phrase, 'The proposition that *p*', occupying a position open to object variables, and where the truth predicate serves merely as a *de-nominalisator*. In other words, in order for the truth predicate to fulfil its function we must acknowledge that the proposition *that quarks really exist* is true if and only if quarks really exist, [...] and so on; *but nothing more about truth need be assumed.*" [5, pp. 5-6]

It can be noticed that Horwich's interpretation of the equivalence schema of truth goes the other way around if compared to Halbach, "Semantics and Deflationism" [6]: if the latter sees the truth predicate as the operation that sends the quoted sentence back to its initial form (or to be more precise, to its

translation in the metalanguage), Horwich saw it as the operation that granted a new sentential appearance to the named expression by supplying it with a predicate.

Roughly speaking, Horwich analyses the problem of truth in two steps – the ‘minimal theory’ and the ‘minimal conception’. Thus, the duty of a minimalist is, first, to clarify the structure and the functionality of the ‘uncontroversial instances of the equivalence schema’, and then to prove that these sentences say *all* there is to say about truth, from *any* point of view. The first point does not really contradict the ‘inflated’ truth-theories; the second point is the place that makes the big difference between the two major accounts about the truth. From the minimalist point of view, most of the problems brought out by an inflationary account of truth are fake problems, exaggerating the amount of problems that a well-formed truth predicate might work out, whereas the ‘real’ problems can be solved just as well by the minimalist theory. A very nice example of the way the deflationism solves out such problems is given by Horwich in Norms of Truth and Meaning [7].

One of the first things that comes to mind as an objection when listening to the minimalist point of view is its weak normativity: “In particular, it is commonly supposed that the deflationary view of truth and the use-regularity conception of meaning, insofar as they are articulated in entirely non-normative terms, must for that reason be defective” [7]. If the notion of truth is to be understood solely as governed by the disquotational equivalence, it is hard to see how it could still give an account of notions such as ‘ought’, ‘rational’, or ‘good’, how it could cover the idea that one needs, wants to end up with a true belief.

Horwich’s solution is a typical deflationist solution: truth and meaning do have normative import, yet ‘they are not intrinsically normative’: “true belief is valuable, both pragmatically and morally; [...] we ought to aim to accept sentences only when their truth conditions are satisfied” [7, p. 145]; but this does not mean that, due to this fact, “our concepts of truth and/or meaning are to be explicated in normative terms” [7, p. 145].

Therefore, in Horwich’s account, “The virtue of minimalism [...], is that *it provides a theory that is a theory of nothing else, but which is sufficient, in combination with theories of other phenomena, to explain all the facts about truth*” [5, p. 26]. In contact to a further claim raised against minimalism, namely the trouble with the generalisation power of the disquotation equivalences, “I conclude that we should not expect to contain all instances of the equivalence schema within a finite formulation: an infinity of axioms is needed. *And since this would seem to be an unavoidable feature of any adequate theory of truth, it should not be held against MT* [minimalist theory; my emphasis]. Therefore we must acknowledge that the theory of truth cannot be explicitly formulated. The best we can do is to give an implicit specification of its basic principles.” [5, p. 31]

If we try now to compare Horwich's account of deflationism to Tarski's T-sentences we may well notice a dissimilarity, though built around the same design of equivalence sentences. This dissimilarity is caused by the different ways in which the two logicians understand the T-sentence. First of all, Horwich talks about *propositions* as objects for the truth predicate, whereas Tarski's patients are *sentences*. Then, Tarski develops his analysis of truth in a rigorously constructed *metalanguage*, whereas Horwich does not pay too much attention to the pair object language *for which the truth predicate is to be defined*/metalanguage *with the help of which this definition is built*. This might be an effect of the use of propositions instead of sentences. Finally, the two logicians treat the equivalence in different manners, even though none of them considers it *analytic*.

It may be interesting to note that Tarski doesn't ignore the minimalist view, with whom he is acquainted under the name of 'nihilist conception of truth', as adopted by Tadeus Kotarbinski. The nihilist says, almost just like the minimalist, that "instead of saying: *it is true that all cats are black*, we can simply say: *all cats are black*" [1, p. 410]. The difficulties about this point of view, as Tarski notices, are very close to the problem denounced in Halbach, 'Semantics': the generalisation.

4. Field

Even before his complete conversion to deflationism, Hartry Field's perspective on the problem of truth was situated in a non-factualist perspective, one of the most suitable neighbourhoods for the deflationary discourse. For a non-factualist the point is not to show that there exist or not (for instance) a priori items, but rather to decide which perspective would be the most useful one for research. This is how Field decides, for instance, that *working with* logical sentences assumed as a priori is more convenient than *working without* them. Besides, the notion of a prioricity involves talk about *possibility* – as the possibility or impossibility that logic (his subject for discussing a prioricity) turns out to be empirically revisable [8]. Further on he distinguishes between *logical* and *epistemic* possibility, where the first one is the 'genuine' possibility and the latter is some sort of 'theoretical' possibility, close to the simple thought of what might occur. He shows then that the thing that makes us question the a prioricity of logic is this epistemic possibility that someday, somehow we might find empirical proof that our logic is not valid after all. However this epistemic possibility does not entail logical possibility (the genuine, mathematical possibility to find such a proof), therefore logic may still be regarded as empirically indefeasible. Field calls this view 'undogmatic apriorism'. In this frame of thought, if Field tried to present the disquotational sentences as a priori (according to [6], he did so "in a talk on November 18, 1999"), then he should do it from his undogmatically a priori point of view. This is his precise definition of a prioricity for a particular logic: "I take the claim that a particular logic (say, classical first order logic) is a priori to involve two things: (i) *that it is reasonable to infer according to the rules of that logic without any empirical evidence for the legitimacy of those rules*; and (ii) *that*

those rules are empirically indefeasible, in the sense that no possible combination of observations should count as evidence against their legitimacy.[...] As a consequence of (i) and (ii) we get the following as necessary conditions on the a prioricity of a logic: *i(w)* that it is reasonable to believe the logical principles of logic without any empirical evidence for them; and *ii(w)* that these logical principles are empirically indefeasible, in the sense that no possible combination of observations should count as evidence against them. [...] It is important to bear in mind that the fundamental issue is the a prioricity of inferences rather than of principles.” [8]

From the point of view of the inferences, the disquotational theories of truth are, therefore, straight a priori, since they use the inferences of classical logic. From the point of view of the principles, *i(w)* appears straightforward, since it is very reasonable to believe the disquotational schema (or its instances, if we decide to have a disquotational theory of truth with an infinity of axioms) without any empirical evidence for it. Further on, for the condition *ii(w)* we take into consideration Field’s *undogmatic a priorism* and notice that the disquotational sentences fulfil it quite clearly. It is not the place now for a more detailed analysis. In short, the truth theory does seem to be very much a priori – but unfortunately this happens mainly because of the necessity principles that govern it in the first place. Besides, we must not forget that Field’s most basic principle for the disquotational theory is the cognitive equivalence. There is even another reason not to get too enthusiastic about the a prioricity of the disquotational principles: “I do not know any satisfactory definition of a priori that is not in terms of another modality” [6]. Halbach’s definition had met the verb ‘can’ (“According to the standard conception, the disquotation sentences are a priori if and only if they can be known before any empirical knowledge“ [6]), while Field’s had *possibilities* all over the place.

We should therefore concentrate our attention again on necessity and analyticity. When it comes to these concepts, Field’s arguments seem to be articulated in a more classical style. The disquotation schema is seen as necessary [9] and analytical [10; 10, p. 222] basically on conceptual criteria. Field’s analyticity doesn’t differ very much from the idea of ‘conceptual equivalence’. He is talking about analyticity in terms of ‘cognitive equivalence’, as being the relation that holds between the left side and the right side of an analytic equivalence. And since a sentence’s being disquotationally true must be cognitively equivalent to the sentence itself (as the purely disquotational use of the truth predicate requires), the T-sentences, in their deflationary acceptance, are bound to be analytic.

Of course, Field’s ‘cognitive equivalence’ brings forth a few noticeable problems, the most disturbing ones being those induced by Field’s remark according to which ‘being cognitively equivalent to’ is said not about two sentences, but about two sentence-readings. Several other deflationists have tried to circumvent the issue in various manners, such as Halbach’s concept of *modalized disquotationalism*. Beyond these issues, though, it is important to notice that one of the crucial aspects of a deflationary theory of truth is the type of

necessity it uses to build its T-sentence-based principle, and the way in which it proves its necessity.

This analysis has disclosed so far some important features of the deflationary theories of truth: the truth predicate is their basic object of research and the T-sentences are their main principles, whether conceived as the – quite large – set of instances of ‘T(«p») if *p*’, or as consequences of a principle according to which the T-sentences are – somehow – analytic. The talk about the type of analyticity, or necessity, or a prioricity involved in the T-schema plays a very important role, which also implies that truth is not a substantive property, not a genuine predicate, and definitely not a deep philosophical concept. The conclusion to which I will arrive will be that the area affected by a deflationist view on truth is the field of semantics, the field of semantics alone, and that the concrete effect is a dramatic shrinking of this field, but in order to get to this conclusion I still need to tackle two issues: meaning and propositions.

5. Meaning

This notion can be treated philosophically in a Fregean or a non-Fregean way. From a Fregean point of view, the meaning of a notion is its actual reference, and the meaning of a sentence is its truth value. They are doubled by another semantic value, the sense. From a non-Fregean perspective the problem becomes more complicated, especially in the case of meaning; it could be stated that the meaning of a sentence as well as the meaning of a notion is an inner propriety or inner function of those expressions, a sort of connection between the signs and the ‘reality’ for which they are supposed to stand – or, together with the ‘worldly facts’, it could be a function between sentence and truth-value, as synthesized in [12]. Unfortunately, it seems difficult to describe such a function, and even more difficult to express its co-domain, since actually every word that should refer to the ‘reality’ is still, first of all, a word.

From a Fregean or extensional perspective, if we take the meaning of a sentence to be its truth value, then a theory of meaning would be nothing more and nothing less than a theory of truth, as Davidson emphasized it (this is one of the “few remarks by Frege that sound deflationist in some respects” [6]). On the other hand, Quine in his classical *Word and Object* treats the notion of *stimulus meaning* in a similar way. In fact, Quine’s approach resembles in a way Frege’s notion of *meaning*, since the stimulus meaning comes as an affirmation or a negation of a notion regarded as integrated in the sentence ‘This is a [example] rabbit’, which, from a disquotationalist perspective, could be easily converted into ‘true, it’s a rabbit’ respectively ‘false, it’s not a rabbit’. Following Quine’s concept of *stimulus meaning*, we could give an account of truth without using the concept of ‘meaning’, at least not explicitly. Implicitly we should nevertheless keep in mind that a language is not identified only by means of its words and its grammar, but also by the way in which its speakers understand the words (and the phrases that they build with their help). Whereas a ‘language’ doesn’t necessarily have to be an authorized, official language, but it could also be my personal

language where I might give a personal sense for more common notions – the so called ‘private language’. Therefore the deflationist, for whom it could not be expected that a substantial notion of meaning might play some role in his or her theory of truth, can and must still accept some vestiges of the concept in discussion: for instance, whenever there is talk about a sentence (or more exactly about its truth-value), the sentence can only be taken *as we understand it*. Otherwise any notion of a language would be lost. The deflationists are also approaching the meaning of terms, albeit usually in a very succinct manner, and alongside similar lines of thought.

6. Propositions

One of the disputed matters which concern the concept of truth is the choice of *objects* that are to be analysed as being or not being true. There are quite many candidates to this position, as we have already seen while discussing Ramsey’s conception of truth. One can talk about true *sentences, propositions, utterances, statements, assertions, beliefs, convictions*, etc. Only in the deflationary area we can notice Horwich’s preference for *propositions*, Strawson’s preference for *statements*, and Tarski using *sentences* as the objects of his truth. The matter is not as innocent as it may seem, since the option for one (more or less) linguistic entity or another might seriously affect the very frame of talk about truth. For instance, in our case, Tarski’s choice compelled him to introduce the *metalanguage* as the only appropriate place for the definition of truth, while Horwich’s choice allowed him to do the talk without the need for a separation between an object-language and a metalanguage. They both claim that their choice is determined by the ‘usual’ or ‘normal’ or ‘natural’ use of the term.

Therefore, while Tarski uses as objects for the truth predicate “linguistic objects – as certain strings of sounds or written signs (Of course, not every such string is a sentence)” [1, p. 401-402], Horwich lets some less linguistic entities do the job. What exactly are these *propositions*, apart from being “the *things* that are believed, stated, supposed, etc; the *contents* of such states” [5, p. 17] [my emphasis], is not very clear. But, according to Horwich, it does not really matter. Again a quotation: “As far as the minimal theory of truth is concerned they could be composed of abstract Fregean senses, or of concrete objects and properties; they could be identical to a certain class of sentences in some specific language, or to the meanings of sentences, or to some new and irreducible type of entity that is correlated with the meanings of certain sentences.” [5, p. 18]. One of the things that *do* matter for Horwich is that propositions be *not* sentences, more exactly, that they have a different *ontological* nature from sentences. They do share the form of the sentences that describe them, but they are *something else* than this form. Yet both the left and the right hand side of the equivalence schema for the truth predicate are described as *sentences* [5, p. 4-5].

It might seem that for Horwich the truth-predicate occurs only at the sentential level, perspective which might seem to propose a solution to the problem of paradoxes. Yet Horwich does not theorize too much on his

propositions; therefore, after reading the passages when, talking of the paradoxes, he proposes that some instances of the equivalence schema be not included as axioms of the minimal theory [5, p. 42], we may assume that it would be nonsense to talk about sentences with no propositional content, therefore the equivalence sentences have such a content as well, which is already an opened door for the liar paradox. Even so, it remains interesting to notice that Horwich actually does not define the truth for a language *inside* the language: he defines the truth for propositions with help of sentences, which, as already mentioned, bear a different ontological – or linguistic – status from propositions.

There is more than one reason to prefer sentences to propositions. First of all, if one wants to work out a coherent logical system, one cannot use propositions as its objects in the way Horwich shapes them because, as already showed, he does not give them a clear shape. Then, as Halbach points out, “the problem is that sentences like ‘Oscar was hungry at midday on 1 January 1988’ that are used to describe propositions surely have a form, but I find it surprising that also propositions themselves should share the form of the sentences by which they can be described. This implicit assumption on propositions has consequences that appear very cumbersome.” [6] Also, another problem might be that, the way Horwich describes them, it seems that the real difference between sentences and propositions appears only in the case of sentences with indexical elements, sentences that some deflationary theory do not accept in their core.

7. Deflationism and Epistemology

Let us recap everything we have seen about deflationism so far. First and foremost, from an epistemological perspective, ‘is true’ doesn’t put forward anything that the original sentence wouldn’t put forward itself. The discussed notion differs from any other predicate – except, perhaps, from ‘exists’, or better, ‘refers to’. Saying that ‘«Snow» refers to snow’ emphasises as much about snow as saying that ‘«Snow is white» is true’ emphasises about ‘Snow is white’. This situation is intimately connected to the necessity stipulated by the T-sentences, which are used as the basic principles of a deflationary theory. Further on, a (well formed) deflationary theory talks very little about meaning, and when it does so, the meaning is of a referential nature (this was to be expected, considering the referential nature of logical semantics, and the fact that a deflationary theory of truth consists, to a large degree, of a logical system). Deflationary theories sometimes employ a division of the linguistic realm into language and metalanguage, but whether they do this or not, the most comfortable objects for the truth predicate are *not* the propositions.

We can see now that what is actually deflated by the deflationary theories of truth is not the truth predicate per se. The claim is not that deflationism will employ a lesser truth predicate than the one analyzed by the so-called inflationary truth theories, but that the deflationary truth is *truth as it is actually used*. What is deflated is the *understanding* of this truth predicate – which was

needlessly enriched by the inflationary theories. In other words, deflationism deflates semantics. The field of semantics is shrunk so much that it becomes a mere shadow of syntax. The area of study in question concerns the attribution of meaning to various types of expressions. However, apart from the fact that deflationists do not enjoy talking about meaning in the first place, when they do they either use T-sentences, or expressions of a similarly redundant nature while talking about the reference of terms.

The key for understanding these quirks might be found in an acute awareness of the fact that *semantics is expressed in a language*. Thus, in the words of Hartry Field, “although a meaning attribution may appear to relate a word to a mind-independent entity (a meaning), it really just relates the word to one of the meaning-attributor’s words” [10, p. 160]. This being the case, the semantic values cannot be expressed better than *they already are expressed in the object language*, any other expression would only be, at a hypothetical best, synonymous to them, and semantics cannot use anything other than expressions. This extremely strict understanding of semantics leads to a dramatic shrinking of the field of research in question, or to its deflation.

As to the truth concept itself, the deflationists are isolating it in the realm of semantics: they show that, apart from being too large for expressing our intuitive use of the concept, other approaches are either ambiguous or paradoxical. Considering their take on semantics, this reduces the concept to a purely logical device.

In conclusion, the meta-philosophical consequences of deflationism seem to be as follows: from a semiotic perspective, the only interesting areas are the syntactic ones. Reflecting on the ‘concrete semantic values’ of expressions pulls us away from the narrow realm of semantics and into other fields of research, such as philosophy of language, ontology – *or epistemology*. In this sense, deflationism is retracing some of the internal borders of philosophy, but otherwise its effect appears to be mostly local. Adhering to a version of deflationism or another does not diminish the important questions of philosophy – the only requirement is an agreement that none of these problems will be considered semantic in nature, or as concerning the concept of truth, at least not properly speaking (metaphoric uses of ‘truth’ should encounter no objections). These questions are only irrelevant *from a semantic point of view*. Furthermore, a deflationary theory of truth is compatible with the most classical and the most exotic ontologies and epistemologies alike, according only to the *other* philosophical principles adopted or rejected by its proponents.

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