The Minimalist Theory of Truth: Challenges and Concerns

Abstract

Minimalism is currently the received deflationary theory of truth. On minimalism, truth is a transparent concept and a deflated property of truth bearers. In this paper, I situate minimalism within current deflationary debate about truth by contrasting it with its main alternative—the redundancy theory of truth (according to which truth is a transparent concept but not a property). I also outline three of the primary challenges facing minimalism, its formulation, explanatory adequacy and stability, and draw some lessons for the soundness of its conception of truth.

1. *Introduction*

The fundamental thesis of deflationism is that truth is a transparent concept. If the truth predicate has any content, the deflationist claims, it is exhausted by its involvement in some version of truth-schema [p] is true iff p (where '[p]' denotes a sentence, proposition, belief or utterance and 'p' denotes the use of [p]. On this view, 'p' and 'p is true' are trivially equivalent since truth is defined exclusively in terms of the appropriate schema:

(Truth for Sentences)   'p is true iff p

(Truth for Propositions)   <p> is true iff p

(Truth for Beliefs)   A belief that p is true iff p

(Truth for Utterances)   An utterance of 'p' is true iff p.

Defined by the transparency thesis, deflationism divides into two main classes according to the degree of one's ontological commitment. On strong deflationism, truth is not only a transparent concept but a redundant one (cf. Ramsey, 'Facts and Propositions'; Ayer, *Language,*

Truth, and Logic; Strawson, 'Truth'). On this view, the truth predicate doesn't designate a property, i.e., there is no property of truth. On weak deflationism, while truth is transparent concept, it is not redundant (cf. Horwich, *Truth*, 'A Defense of Minimalism'; Sosa, 'The Truth of Modest Realism'; Soames, 'The Truth About Deflationism', *Understanding Truth*; Field, 'Deflationist Views of Meaning and Content'; Gupta, 'Minimalism', 'A Critique of Deflationism'). Since 'is true', it is claimed, is logically/expressively indispensible, it functions semantically as a predicate. The implication, for most weak deflationists (more on this later), is that the truth predicate designates a property. For the weak deflationist, though, the property of truth is deflated in some sense, e.g., it is not substantial, theoretically important, interesting, explanatory, a natural kind or anything in this general vicinity.

In this paper, the focus will be on the received variant of deflationism, weak deflationism or what Horwich calls 'minimalism'. I first situate minimalism within current deflationary debate about truth by underscoring the primary reasons for its supremacy among deflationists. I then outline three pivotal challenges facing minimalism, its formulation, explanatory adequacy and stability, and draw some lessons for the soundness of its conception of truth.

2. *Motivations for Minimalism*

At things currently stand, minimalism is the dominant deflationary theory of truth. It is now virtually universally acknowledged that the truth predicate, if nothing else, is a denominalizor that enables one to semantically ascend from statements such as 'Plato claimed that the soul is immortal' or 'Plato claimed that art is a form of mimesis' to a reference to these statements such as 'what Plato claimed **is true**'. In this respect, the truth predicate evidently increases the expressive resources of one's language by enabling the formulation of certain kinds of

statements it would otherwise be impossible to formulate, i.e., universal generalizations (e.g., 'everything Plato claimed is true') and so-called blind ascriptions (e.g., 'whatever Plato claimed at his first university lecture is true').

In view of the logical indispensability of the truth predicate, the strong deflationist's contention that the truth predicate is redundant or eliminable looks spurious. Doubtless, since it performs an irreplaceable expressive function, 'is true' can be said to function semantically as a predicate. On seemingly reasonable assumptions, this implies the truth predicate designates a property. Specifically, if (1) a property is a set, universal, trope or the meaning of the predicate that designates it, and (2) functioning semantically as a predicate is sufficient for defining a property in one of these senses, the thesis that truth is a property looks unassailable. While some philosophers (e.g., Field, 'Deflationist Views of Meaning and Content'; Azzouni, *Tracking Reason: Proof, Consequence, and Truth*; Grover et al., 'A Prosentential Theory of Truth', 83) reject the (~the truth predicate is redundant → truth is a property) inference, they can usefully be classified as minimalists in the broad sense that they are committed to the conjunction of two theses, (a) 'is true' functions semantically as a predicate and (b) 'is true' *may* designate a property.

Numerous commentators, including Quine (*Philosophy of Logic* 11-13), Grover et al. ('A Prosentential Theory of Truth' 81-6), Gupta ('Minimalism' 366-8), Soames ('The Truth About Deflationism' 247-9) and Horwich (*Truth* 3), have effectively demolished the redundancy thesis underpinning the strong deflationary theory of truth (hereafter the 'redundancy' theory).[1] Since some expressions containing the truth predicate cannot be rewritten truth-independently, it is urged, the truth predicate is logically indispensable—it is not redundant, eliminable or replaceable.

Consider the universal generalization 'everything Plato claimed is true'. It might be reconstructed as 'for all p, if Plato claimed that p, then p' or, more specifically, as a long series of clauses, one for each potential claim made by Plato: 'If Plato claimed there is a universal form of happiness, there is a universal form of happiness', 'If Plato claimed children should be educated in mathematics and music, children should be educated in mathematics and music', and so on. The problem with this truth-independent reconstruction is that it is rationally possible to have different propositional attitudes towards it and the generalization it reconstructs, implying their cognitive inequivalence. As Gupta ('Minimalism' 363-5) and Soames (*Understanding Truth* 233-8) have shown, it is possible for a perfectly reasonable person to believe 'everything Plato claimed is true' without believing all its instances. While one might believe 'everything Plato claimed is true' on general grounds (e.g., based on Plato's character or intellect), she might reject a specific claim made by Plato when its content is revealed (e.g., the claim that the children of guardians in the ideal republic should live separately from their biological parents).

Next, consider the de facto reconstruction of the blind ascription 'whatever Plato claimed at his first university lecture is true'. Its truth-independent replacement—'for all p, if Plato claimed p in his first university lecture, then p'—suffers from the same basic defect as the reconstructed universal generalization. The blind ascription and its truth-independent reconstruction are indisputably cognitively inequivalent since it is rationally feasible to have different propositional attitudes towards them for the same reasons this is possible in the case of the universal generalization, i.e., since it is sometimes reasonable to believe one but not the other.

The important point to bear in mind is that a universal generalization is not cognitively, or a fortiori, explanatorily equivalent to the totality of its instances, and a blind ascription is not cognitively or explanatorily equivalent to a statement (or set of statements) endorsing the actual

claim(s) the truth-predicated ascription is blindly endorsing. In other words, as Gupta has shown ('Minimalism', 364), for all x, the generalization Fx might explain something its instances can't. Consequently, the redundancy theorist cannot rewrite generalizations and blind ascriptions involving the truth predicate via counterfactual schemata of the kind proposed.

Perhaps, though, the redundancy thesis might be defended via a different reconstruction strategy. There appear to be only two options available in this case: rewriting the statements in question using (1) ordinary objectual quantification or (2) substitutional quantification.

Consider the first strategy. In this case, the generalization 'everything Plato claimed is true' is rewritten as 'for all x, if Plato claimed x, then x' via the formula $(\forall x)$ (if Plato claimed x $\rightarrow$ x). Unfortunately, this truth-independent reconstruction looks manifestly incoherent. It is generally acknowledged (Black, 'The Semantic Definition of Truth' 51-2; Alston, *A Realist Conception of Truth* 28; Kirkham, *Theories of Truth* 335-6) to be ill-formed in two distinct ways: (a) the second occurrence of 'x' would be in an opaque context beyond the reach of normal quantification and (b) a variable ranging over objects, specifically, the third occurrence of 'x', appears in sentential positions. The same problem applies mutatis mutandis to objectually quantified reconstructions of blind ascriptions.

Azzouni (*Tracking Reason: Proof, Consequence, and Truth* Chapter 3) attempts to surmount this obstacle by introducing a formal system that allows a quantifier to bind a single variable that occurs in both sentence and object position. Withholding final judgment, there seem compelling methodological reasons for rejecting this kind of proposal. At present, the soundness of Azzouni's formal system, and the radical revisions it prescribes for the semantics of quantification, are still objects of considerable disputation. For this reason alone, the onus of arguing the cogency of this approach is daunting to say the least.

Next, consider the substitutional quantification strategy for truth-independent reconstruction. The reconstruction of the generalization 'everything Plato claimed is true' in this case would be the same formula as the objectually quantified reconstruction, 'For all x, if Plato claimed x, then x', except the variables would be interpreted substitutionally instead of objectually—as substitution instances instead of as noun phrases referring to objects. Blind ascriptions would be reconstructed in an analogous manner.

One objection to this strategy concerns the explanation of substitutional quantification: substitutional quantification appears unintelligible in truth-independent terms (cf. Horwich, *Truth* 4-5, 25-6; David, *Correspondence and Disquotation* 88-93; McGrath, 'Weak Deflationism' 75-7; Kovach, 'Deflationism and the Derivation Game 575-76). For example, in the substitutionally quantified formula 'For all x, if Plato claimed that x → x', the variable x is associated not with a range of objects but with a substitution class of expressions. In interpreting this formula, the most intuitive reading seems to be that any result of substituting an English declarative sentence for x in 'For all x, if Plato claimed that x → x' is true, correct or valid. But rather than eliminate it, *truth* or some close cognate is featured centrally in this explanation. Naturally, there are replies to this line of argument. For instance, Hill (*Thought and World*) aims to explain substantial quantification largely in terms of conjunction. While this maneuver may raise more questions than it answers, including how to explain conjunction in non-alethic terms, it (and similar maneuvers) cannot be dismissed outright.

A more powerful objection to the substitutional quantification strategy is that it furnishes us with truth-independent reconstructions only by exploiting a special set of syntactic and semantic rules. The substitutional quantifier would doubtless be a cumbersome addition to our language since it exploits a new-fangled logical apparatus. While this objection is short of decisive, it

explains the default resistance to substitutional quantification reconstrual schemes. At a

minimum, we might say, there is a potent methodological rationale for rejecting this strategy of

truth-independent reconstruction, no less than there is for rejecting the objectual quantification

strategy.

While the supremacy of minimalism among deflationists stems from the implausibility of

redundancy theses, there is a separate question of the motivation for eschewing inflationism.

Some of the more well-known reasons for rejecting inflationism in favor of deflationism include

adherence to the formal simplicity (Horwich, *Truth* Ch. 2 & 3), ontological purity (Horwich

(*Truth* Ch. 4 & 7) and classical interpretation of truth. In respecting these commitments,

minimalism might be viewed as privileged over inflationary theories of truth such as

correspondence and epistemic theories that deny truth is a transparent concept and deflated

property.[2]

3. *Formulation of Minimalism*

In its most common formulation, the minimalist theory of truth (hereafter 'MT') consists of the

infinite set of non-paradoxical propositions instantiating the equivalence schema (Horwich,

Truth 6-7, 17-20 and 'A Defense of Minimalism' 150-51):[3]

(ES)   The proposition that *p* is true iff *p*.

Many have argued this is the only acceptable formulation of minimalism. In view of the

problems plaguing the two other main formulations of minimalism, the objectually and

substitutionally quantified formulations, this seems about right. Though I rest nothing of

substance on it here,[4] it will be instructive to highlight a few of the most potent ones inspiring widespread allegiance to (and interest in) MT among minimalists.

First, minimalism might be formulated as the objectually quantified generalization ($\forall$x) (x is true iff x = p and (p)) (cf. Sosa, 'The Truth of Modest Realism' 177-95; McGrath, 'Weak Deflationism' 73-7). One concern with this formulation of minimalism is analogous to the concern identified (in §2) with objectually quantified truth-independent generalizations and blind ascriptions. Generalizations such as x is true iff x = (p) and p, when interpreted objectually, are incoherent or ill formed since the two occurrences of 'p' refer to different kinds of entities.

Minimalism, it has also been proposed, might be formulated as another kind of objectually quantified generalization: 'For all propositions p, p is necessarily equivalent to the proposition with respect to it that it is true' (McGrath, 'Weak Deflationism' 76). This approach preserves coherence but potentially at the cost of explanatory value. One concern is that *necessity* and *equivalence* are frequently thought best explained in terms of truth (cf. David, *Correspondence and Disquotation* 88-93; Kovach, 'Deflationism and the Derivation Game' 576-7). Although far from decisive (cf. Horwich, *Truth* 21ff), this surely provides a prima facie reason for rejecting the objectually quantified construction in question.

On the other hand, minimalism might be formulated as the substitutionally quantified generalization (p)(the proposition that p is true $\leftrightarrow$ p), where the universal quantifier is interpreted substitutionally rather than objectually, as ranging over classes of expressions (or names of objects) instead of objects (e.g., Williams, 'What is Truth?' Ch. 3). The formula reads 'for each sentence in the language, if we substitute the sentence for the 'p' in 'the proposition that p is true $\leftrightarrow$ p', then we produce a true sentence'.

This formulation of minimalism is susceptible to a couple objections, the second more forceful than the first. (1) It is potentially circular in a similar way as substitutionally quantified reconstructions of universal generalizations and blind ascriptions involving the truth predicate (for opposition to this view, see the previous section). (2) In the formula (p)(the proposition that p is true ↔ p), there are inherent limitations on the substitution class associated with the variable 'p'. Since 'p' represents an English sentence, its substitution class must itself be a set of English sentences. But English does not have the resources to express every proposition that is a candidate to instantiate the equivalence schema.

In short, a variety of objections to objectually and substantially quantified formulations of minimalism have galvanized support for MT among minimalists. An important point to bear in mind is that even if the consensus is correct, that MT (the infinite set of T-propositions) is the only legitimate formulation of minimalism, this is evidently of no great concern to minimalists. After all, one of the fundamental theses of minimalism is that truth is not an ordinary sort of property, "… a characteristic whose underlying nature will account for its relations to other ingredients of reality" (Horwich, *Truth* 2). And as Horwich points out right at the beginning of *Truth*, this implies that "…unlike most other predicates, 'is true' should not be expected to participate in some deep theory of that to which it refers—a theory that articulates *general* conditions for its application" (2) (my emphasis). On this view of matters, it should come as no real surprise that minimalism, strictly speaking, is unformulatable, i.e., that it is an infinitistic, non-uniform theory of truth (MT).

4. Minimalism and Explanatory Adequacy

Besides its formulation, there is an important question concerning the explanatory merits of minimalism. A touchstone for any proposed theory of truth is its explanatory value, its ability to

explain putative uncontroversial facts or generalizations about truth,[5] i.e., to face up to the so-called 'generalization problem'. For the minimalist, the challenge will be to account for the wide variety of generalizations about truth armed only with what Horwich calls the minimalist *conception* of truth, i.e., MT plus theories about the axioms of MT to the effect that they are epistemologically and explanatorily fundamental.

It is has often been argued, though, that minimalism fails this challenge. Minimalism is considered by many explanatorily deficient since it does not contain or imply generalizations about truth, including generalizations relating truth to principles of action (e.g., all true beliefs tend to engender successful action), to modal principles (e.g., all true statements are possibly true), to principles of logic and other principles (cf. Horwich, *Truth* pp. 21-5; Armour-Garb, 'Minimalism, The Generalization Problem and The Liar' 491).

For example, consider truth's relationship to the logical principle of closure:

(C) For any propositions p and q, if p is true and p implies q then q is true.

Minimalism does not contain this logical principle since it consists entirely of individual T-propositions of the form <p> iff p. While minimalism gives us all the instances of (C), it does not give us (C) itself. Minimalism does not imply (C) since (C) is not cognitively, and more importantly, explanatorily equivalent to the totality of its instances (Soames, *Understanding Truth* 247-9; Gupta, 'Minimalism' 364).[6] A universal generalization is not explanatorily equivalent to all its instances for reasons already discussed: since it is possible for a perfectly

reasonable person to have different propositional attitudes towards a generalization and all its instances, generalizations can explain things not explained by their instances.

Unsurprisingly, the minimalist has a reply to this kind of objection. Despite appearances, it is argued, minimalism needn't contain or imply any fact about truth since, crucially, the various facts about truth do not concern truth per se (Horwich, *Truth* 47-9). In particular, for the minimalist, there are no facts about truth independent of the role the truth predicate plays in the formulation of generalizations and blind ascriptions. Since there is no real distinction between generalizations involving truth and generalizations about truth, there is nothing about truth that requires explaining. The implication is that minimalism needn't explain the so-called facts about truth by itself; it need only explain them (or explain them away) in conjunction with 'uncontroversial' external premises.

To be sure, it is highly contentious whether there are bona fide facts about truth. Since pre-reflective intuition is hardly a reliable guide in this case, the minimalist view about the explanatory role of truth is best measured against its explanatory stratagem. Since the minimalist maintains that truth has no traditional explanatory role (i.e., there are no facts about truth in need of genuine explanation), it is important examine her attempt to explain, or explain away, the putative facts about truth.

As a starting point, consider the minimalist's explanation of the logical principle of closure (C). Her default strategy is to derive (C) from MT (the infinite set of T-propositions) and certain other 'unproblematic' assumptions (cf. Gupta, 'Minimalism' 66; Kovach 'Deflationism and the Derivation Game' 577-9).[7] Horwich, for his part, initially claimed to be able to derive (C) by conjoining MT with the logical principle of entailment (*Truth* 21):[8]

(E) $((p \mathbin{\&} (p \to q)) \to q)$

One problem with this strategy concerns the use of (E): one cannot simply help oneself to this principle if it is best explained in terms of truth. Unless there is some indication of how (E) might be explained in truth-independent terms, the minimalist cannot use it as a premise to explain (C). As it happens, though, the received explanation of (E) is an alethic one: all propositions of the form $((p \mathbin{\&} (p \to q)) \to q)$ are propositions that emerge as true. Moreover, for reasons supplied in §3, it is not clear (E) can be formulated as the objectually or substitutionally quantified generalization 'for every sentence p and q if p entails q, then if p, then q. While these formulations cannot simply be dismissed, neither apparently can the problems engendered by them.

In the light of these kinds of concerns, Horwich has recently modified his explanatory strategy. In his most current discussion of the generalization problem ('A Defense of Minimalism'), Horwich attempts to rectify concerns involving explanatory generality via a nifty gambit. He claims to be able to derive (C) by conjoining minimalism with (E) and an *extra* explanatory premise concerning our brute dispositions to accept generalizations based on our acceptance of all their instances:

(D) Whenever someone can establish, for any *F*, that it is *G*, *and recognizes that he can do this*, then

   he will conclude that every *F* is *G* ('A Defense of Minimalism' 157) (Horwich's emphasis).[9]

On (D), if, for any conjunction, we can establish it is true if its conjuncts are true, *and we can recognize that we can do so*, then we will be inclined to accept the generalization 'a conjunction is true if and only if its conjuncts are true' ('A Defense of Minimalism, Note 20). The same

derivation, according to Horwich, can be given mutatis mutandis for any generalization about truth.[10]

On the surface, this kind of strategy has little promise. Undeniably, there are significant problems associated with dispositional semantic analyses, analyses employing dispositions as reductive explanans for semantic notions (cf. Collins, 'On the Proposed Exhaustion of Truth' 672-3). But in view of the enormous complexities involved, it would be unwise to stake out a substantive position on dispositional semantics here.

A different tact has been recommended by Gupta ('Minimalism' 364). For Gupta, even permitting truth-independent formulations of (E) and other required principles doesn't rescue minimalism's explanatory prospects. One concern is that doing so effectively weakens the 'adequacy thesis'. The reliance on numerous external principles, it is argued, vitiates the explanatory value of minimalism. Since the principles of minimalism—the T-propositions—are axioms of *any* acceptable theory of (propositional) truth, the 'unproblematic' external principles such as (E) look to be doing all the explanatory work. Since (E) is consistent with and follows from any proposed theory of (propositional) truth, minimalism's explanation of (C), according to Gupta, is bankrupt. The upshot is that minimalism collapses into an absurdly trivial theory of truth with no axioms whatsoever, what Gupta calls the 'null theory of truth'.

But this line of argument surely misses its mark. It is a precept of minimalism that there are no facts about truth per se, no facts about truth apart from the role the truth predicate plays in the formulation of generalizations and blind ascriptions. If this is the case, the minimalist can simply insist the so-called facts about truth don't require explanation, any more than would be needed for generalizations involving truth such as 'everything Plato claimed is true'. On this plausible

view of matters, it is entirely acceptable for the minimalist to deploy a wide range of external principles in explaining (or explaining away) the generalizations about truth.

A more promising objection to minimalism is a descendant of the 'triviality' objection developed by Gupta himself. In deriving the generalizations about truth, it has been seen that minimalism must necessarily exploit a wide range of external principles/concepts/axioms/etc. Since there is no reason to think any such principle is explicable in terms of or reducible to a smaller set of more fundamental ones, there is no upper limit on the amount of principles needed to sustain the 'adequacy thesis'. While it is not obvious Horwich should be reluctant to exploit myriad external principles in deriving generalizations about truth since MT already contains an infinite number of axioms, there is an ancillary problem that doing so conflicts with a *raison d'être* of minimalism—the simplicity or purity of truth (see the end of §2 for this motivation).

Naturally, there are manifold ways to evaluate the simplicity of a theory. On ontological grounds, minimalism might well be considered a simple theory since it enjoins the purity of truth, i.e., that truth is a property with 'no underlying connections to other ingredients of reality'. But there is a broader, potentially illuminating perspective from which minimalism would seem to fall short on the simplicity metric. According to Gupta ('Minimalism' 365-6), from an 'ideological' perspective minimalism looks to be a maximally complex theory (cf. also O'Leary-Hawthorne and Oppy, 'Minimalism and Truth' 179 & 193; David, *Correspondence and Disquotation* 126-9). First, since minimalism is irreducible (i.e., it requires a separate biconditional for each proposition), an indefinite range of external principles will be required to derive the facts about truth. More to the point, Gupta argues, this implies minimalism effectively contains all concepts and subsumes the ideology of all theories. For instance, deriving the principle of closure (C) requires stipulating the logical principle of entailment (E), deriving the

modal principle (M)—that all necessary truths are true, requires stipulating the principle of necessity (N)—that all instances of '<p> is true iff p' express necessary truths (*Truth* 21), and so on, for all generalizations about truth. In short, minimalism subsumes a massive ideological framework since it effectively exploits an innumerable variety of conceptual primitives, e.g., in the areas of logic, modality, normativity, successful behavior, etc.

Now, as noted, minimalism's reliance on a wide range of external principles is not in itself problematic since MT already contains an infinite number of principles. But in light of the criterion of simplicity, paramount in Horwich's defense of the minimalist conception of truth, minimalism's deployment of n number of external principles, where n has no upper limit, looks intolerable. On first sight, it is a vexing byproduct of minimalism that it enlists a massive ideology, an incredibly wide range of conceptual and theoretical primitives. It follows, on this view of matters, that even if minimalism is prima facie explanatorily complete, a strong case could be made that it's a strikingly complex theory. If this is a cogent line of argument then Gupta is on target in claiming "… it would be natural to be dissatisfied with it (minimalism) and to seek a simpler theory, a theory that explains the phenomena in a more economical fashion" ('Minimalism' 365, my parentheses). This would also effectively imply the infirmity of minimalism's view of truth's explanatory role—that there is nothing to explain about the truth predicate apart from its role in the formulation of generalizations and blind ascriptions.

5. Minimalism and the Instability Concern

The previous section's discussion underscores some potential problems with the minimalist's explanatory pretensions (i.e., the pretense of explaining away the facts about truth). A chief concern is that minimalism explains (away) the putative uncontroversial facts about truth only at

the cost of exploiting a wide range of external principles, and in so doing, founders on the criterion of simplicity. If so, the implication, contra minimalism, is that truth has a genuine explanatory role.

In addition to its explanatory adequacy, there is a related objection regarding the stability of the minimalist conception of truth. If minimalism is unable to explain uncontroversial facts about truth, its view of truth looks to be equivocal, i.e., it threatens to collapse into either that of strong deflationism or some form of inflationism. Moreover, since the converse implication seems valid, the instability of minimalism → the explanatory deficiency of minimalism, it is worth exploring the instability objection independently of the explanatory deficiency objection. If the former objection has force, this ostensibly bolsters the latter objection, and vice versa.

Among others, Boghossian ('The Status of Content'), Wright (*Truth and Objectivity*, 'Response to Commentators'), and O'Leary-Hawthorne & Oppy ('Minimalism and Truth' 184) have developed variants of the instability objection (although O'Leary-Hawthorne and Oppy suspend judgment on it). On this objection, there is no middle road when it comes to the ontological character of truth: either truth is a property in which case 'is true' is amenable to explicit analysis or truth is not a property in which case 'is true' is not amenable to explicit analysis. The attempt to draw a line between a minimal and non-minimal property of truth, it is claimed, requires the employment of a non-minimal concept of truth or of something that relies on such a conception (compare with the 'massive ideology' objection). There is also a similar concern that minimalism cannot both be a complete and consistent theory of truth due to the existence of liar-like propositions and set-theoretic paradoxes (cf. Armour-Garb, 'Minimalism, The Generalization Problem and The Liar' 496-7; Lindström, 'Horwich's Minimalist Conception of Truth: Some Logical Difficulties' 174-8; Grim, *The Incomplete Universe: Totality,*

Knowledge and Truth Ch. 4; Greimann, 'Explicating Truth: Minimalism and Primitivism'), a concern not pursued here.[11]

In the postscript to *Truth*, Horwich attempts to subdue the instability objection of the kind under consideration by emending the minimalist conception of truth, i.e., its conception of the property of truth. According to Horwich, minimalism does not in itself answer the question of whether or not truth is a property, but does so only in conjunction with particular conceptions of *property*:

> Minimalism does not involve, in itself, any particular answer to this question. For it may be combined with a variety of different conceptions of property, some of which will yield the conclusion that the truth predicate does stand for a property, and some that it doesn't. (141)

Field has a riposte to the instability objection not entirely dissimilar to Horwich's. In endorsing the 'pure disquotational theory of truth' (essentially, the sentential version of Horwich's minimalism), Field holds that truth is a (deflated) notion that applies only to sentences as understood by the speaker of a language ('Deflationary Views of Meaning and Content' 250). Since truth is relativized to sentences on this theory, the question of the truth predicate's property-ascribing role (whether it designates a property) becomes a non-starter. It is a question that cannot intelligibly be asked since truth is a 'property' that only applies to the sentences of a speaker's language, and consequently, whose extension oscillates between individual idiolects.

At bottom, the Horwich/Field reply to the instability objection exploits a bipartite, vacillating conception of the property of truth: depending on which view of *property* or which idiolect is operative, minimalism implies either (1) that truth is a deflated property or (2) that truth is not a property. But it can been argued that it is exactly the bifurcation premise underlying minimalism that gives rise to the instability conundrum. Specifically, a claim frequently made is

that on (1) minimalism is committed to truth being a deflated property of some kind in which case it is still susceptible to the instability dilemma, and on (2) minimalism is committed to there being no property of truth in which case it collapses into strong deflationism (cf. Hoffmann, 'A Dilemma for the Weak Deflationist about Truth').

The objection can be framed in other terms. If the minimalist denies there are facts about truth requiring explanation as such, minimalism effectively devolves into the strong deflationary theory of truth according to which the truth predicate doesn't designate a property, i.e., there is no property of truth.[12] If, on the other hand, the minimalist acknowledges there are facts about truth requiring explanation as such, minimalism effectively evolves into some form of inflationism according to which truth is a substantive property of truth bearers (a property with a genuine explanatory role).

This objection likely has more force against Field's pure disquotational theory of truth, since Field's theory has the counter-intuitive implication that the extension of the truth predicate fluctuates between different idiolects and within one's own idiolect (in accordance with the sentences one understands at a particular time). But its bearing on Horwich's version of minimalism should not be discounted since MT has the seemingly problematic consequence that the extension of the truth predicate is a determinate function of one's conception of *property*. The instability challenge looks particularly forceful if one is congenial to the main line of argument discussed in the previous section—that the explanatory completeness of minimalism comes at the cost of onerous and unacceptable theoretical baggage.

Naturally, there is far more to be said about the soundness and stability of minimalism. For starters, a more sustained examination of minimalism's bifurcation premise is needed to reach more definitive conclusions about the propriety of its conception of truth. But undoubtedly, by

way of its bifurcation premise, minimalism can be said to assume an implicit, often

unacknowledged, superstructure. It inter alia incurs significant commitments regarding the

dichotomous nature of concepts (that there is a distinction between trivial-redundant concepts

and trivial-non-redundant concepts), predicates (that there is a distinction between predicates that

express properties and those that don't) and properties (that there is a distinction between

natural/non-natural, explanatory/non-explanatory properties) (cf. O'Leary-Hawthorne and Oppy,

'Minimalism and Truth' 178-9). In my view, these theoretical obligations have yet to be fully

discharged. But whether this is correct or not, it is reasonable to suppose that, in the absence of a

robust defense of its implicit ideology, minimalism looks to be an unsound conception of truth,

perhaps no less so than its strong deflationary counterpart.

Works Cited

Alston William. *A Realist Conception of Truth*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996.

Armour-Garb, Bradley. 'Minimalism, the Generalization Problem and the Liar'. *Synthese* 139, (2004): 491-512.

Ayer, A.J. *Language, Truth, and Logic*. London: Penguin, 1936.

Azzouni, J. *Tracking Reason: Proof, Consequence, and Truth*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Black, Max. 'The Semantic Definition of Truth'. *Analysis* 8, (1948): 49-63.

Boghossian, Paul. 'The Status of Content'. *Philosophical Review* 99, (1990): 157-84.
Collins, John. 'On the Proposed Exhaustion of Truth'. *Dialogue* XLI, (2002): 653-79.

David, Marian. *Correspondence and Disquotation*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.

Field, Hatry. 'Deflationist Views of Meaning and Content'. *Mind* 103, (1994): 249-85.

Grover, Dorothy, Camp, Joseph, and Belnap, Nuel. 'A Prosentential Theory of Truth'. *Philosophical Studies* 27, (1975): 73-125.

Greiman, Dick. 'Explicating Truth: Minimalism and Primitivism'. *Journal for General Philosophy of Science*, 31 (2000): 133-55.

Grim, Patrick. *The Incomplete Universe: Totality, Knowledge and Truth*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991.

Gupta, Anil. 'A Critique of Deflationism'. *Philosophical Topics* 21, (1993): 57-81.
—. 'Minimalism'. *Philosophical Perspectives, Language and Logic* 7, (1993): 359-69.

Hill, C.S. *Thought and World: An Austere Portrayal of Truth, Reference, and Semantic Correspondence*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Hoffmann, G. 'A Dilemma for the Weak Deflationist about Truth'. *Sorites*, 18 (2007): 129-37.

Horwich, Paul. *Truth*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998.
—. *Meaning*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998.
—. 'A Defense of Minimalism'. *Synthese* 126, (2001): 149-65.

Kirkham, Robert. *Theories of Truth*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992.

Kovach, Adam. 'Deflationism and the Derivation Game'. *Mind* 106, (1997): 575-9.

Lindström, Sten. 'Horwich's Minimalist Conception of Truth: Some Logical Difficulties'. *Logic and Logical Philosophy* 9, (2001): 161-81.

McGrath, Matthew. 'Weak Deflationism'. *Mind* 106, (1997): 69-98.

O'Leary-Hawthorne, John and Graham, Oppy. 'Minimalism and Truth'. *Nous* 31.2, (1997): 170-96.

Quine, W.V.O. *Philosophy of Logic*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1970.

Ramsey, Frank. 'Facts and Propositions'. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 7, (1927): 153-70.

Soames, Scott. 'The Truth About Deflationism'. *Philosophical Issues* 8, (1997): 1-44.
—.*Understanding Truth*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Sosa, Ernest. 'The Truth of Modest Realism''. *Philosophical Issues* 3, (1993): 77-95.

Strawson, Peter. 'Truth'. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 24, (1950): 129-56.

Williams, C.J.F. *What is Truth?* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976.

Wright, Crispin *Truth and Objectivity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992.
—. 'Response to Commentators', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 56, (1996): 863-8, 911-41.

Notes

[1] Albeit Grover et al., to repeat, reject the (~the truth predicate is redundant → truth is a property) inference.

[2] The epistemic theory of truth is considered particularly problematic in this case since it compels the abandonment of classical logic.

[3] Needless to say, unprincipled restriction to the non-paradoxical is notoriously problematic. The concern is briefly discussed in §5. For more substantive discussion see Soames (*Understanding Deflationism*) and Armour-Garb ('Minimalism, the Generalization Problem and the Liar').

[4] The critique of minimalism developed here (in §§4 and 5) applies to any of its main formulations.

[5] This is to assume there is a legitimate distinction between generalizations *about* truth (examples to follow in the text) and generalizations *involving* truth or in which the truth predicate participates such as 'everything claimed by Plato is true' or 'it is true that all red objects are colored objects'. More on the proposed distinction to follow.

[6] Curiously, Soames frames this point in terms of logical equivalence (*Understanding Truth* 247): "...universal generalizations are not logical consequences of the set of all their instances". Soames' thesis vis-à-vis the logical inequivalence of universal generalizations and the set of all their instances might be correct but, unlike the 'cognitive/explanatory inequivalence thesis', evidently only follows on classical logic. Moreover, the cognitive/explanatory inequivalence thesis is sufficient to support our argument in this case. If the cognitive/explanatory content of generalizations and the set of all their instances diverge then minimalism's infinitary schematic definition of truth does not imply or explain generalizations about truth such as (C).

[7] In this case, a 'derivation' is meant to contrast with an ordinary explanation—one in which the explanandum is delivered via non-deflationary principles or concepts.

[8] I will not rehearse the specific details of the derivation here. Suffice it to say Horwich attempts to produce a valid argument with the principle of entailment and minimalism as its premises and the principle of closure as its conclusion.

[9] Cf. also *Meaning* for Horwich's dispositional analysis of truth generalizations and other truth-predicated expressions.

[10] Field ('Deflationist Views of Meaning and Content' 249-85) advances a similar solution to the generalization problem.

[11] Although not identical to the instability concern currently under consideration , neither is it completely orthogonal to it, since a theory is incomplete no less for excluding seemingly paradoxical propositions or sets of propositions (on pain of inconsistency) than it is for failing to explain facts about truth (on pain of inflating its conception of truth). Suffice to say, theories of truth such as minimalism that fail to offer some kind of principled answer to concerns over paradox and consistency cannot be considered fully defensible (cf. Soames, *Understanding Deflationism*; Armour-Garb, 'Minimalism, The Generalization Problem and The Liar').

[12] On the other hand, minimalism cannot be said to devolve into the redundancy theory of truth, in this case, since the redundancy theory cannot be properly formulated for propositions. Thanks to an anonymous referee from this journal for pointing this out to me.