

Truth as Conceptually Primitive

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Theories of truth, in the sense understood here, are supposed to provide ‘conceptual analyses’ of the concept of truth.¹ I take this to mean that theories of truth are supposed to state what anyone who has any beliefs that this or that is true must be at least disposed to accept about truth upon consideration; such claims are conceptually analytic. I engage in talk of ‘concepts’ as a shorthand for claims about what subjects are able to believe. To have the concept of truth is to be able to believe that things are true. Read no more than that into my talk of the concept of truth. A conception of truth is a set of putatively conceptually analytic claims for it. The aim in the theory of truth is to state the actual conception of truth, the one that includes all and claims that anyone who has any beliefs that anything is true must be disposed to accept upon consideration.

I will proceed in two parts. In part 1 I survey the dismal history of theories of truth. Some of what I have to say here is original but much of it is not. When what I have to say is not original I will not spend a lot of time saying it. In part 2 I offer what I believe to be the right view about the conception of truth. My claim will be that the concept of truth is primitive in that its conception is circular: there is no true, non-circular statement of what it is one has to be disposed to accept about truth upon consideration in order to possess the concept of truth. Since, for reasons to be stated, the view that there is no true conception of truth is unworkable, on the view I endorse our conception of truth is circular. I will explain how this differs from the claim that the conception is somehow completely empty, and I will explain why this view is attractive and how it avoids the problems surveyed in §1 while in a friendly spirit making most popular theories of truth out to be at least partly right. Toward the end of the paper I will also offer a diagnosis of

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the problem responsible for the dismal history of theories of truth: proponents of familiar theories of truth have made the mistake of thinking that a definition that is supposed to report actual usage must satisfy the usual logician's criteria for definition, which include non-circularity.

1. The great divide among theories of truth is between those theories that take some set of attributions of truth conditions to particular sentences (relative to a context) or utterances to be conceptually analytic for the concept of truth, and those that do not (Patterson 2002). Without attempting to answer to everyone's use of 'deflationary' and 'inflationary', I will call 'deflationary' those theories that treat attributions of truth-conditions to sentences or utterances as conceptually analytic. I'll hereafter leave 'or utterances' as well as 'relative to a context' tacit. All other theories are, on my usage, 'inflationary'. This leaves theories that include instances of the propositional schema 'the proposition that p is true iff p' (Horwich 1999) or related universal quantifications, e.g. Künne's ' $\forall x(x \text{ is true iff } \exists p(x = [p] \text{ and } p))$ ' (Künne 2003, 337) on the inflationary side of the line, despite the fact that such views are often referred to as 'minimalist'. My reasons for doing this will become clear below. I will call the non-minimalist forms of inflationism—e.g. the correspondence theory and others to be discussed below—'traditional' inflationary theories. Note also that I will refer to attributions of truth conditions as 'T-propositions'; these are to be conceived of not as particular sentences attributing truth conditions to an utterance, sentence, or proposition, but as the propositions often taken to be expressed by such sentences.

The standard criticisms of deflationism are familiar (see e.g. Gupta 1993, David 1994). The main problem, from which all others flow, is that holding that the proposition

that 'snow is white' is true in English iff snow is white

is analytic of the concept of truth ties the concept of truth to the meaning that 'snow is white' actually has in English. This has the consequences (granting a few uncontroversial assumptions) at least (i) that if English had been different in certain intuitively irrelevant ways, so would have the concept of truth, (ii) that intuitively

irrelevant changes in English will alter the concept of truth itself, and (iii) that one can't possess the concept of truth without knowing the meaning of every expression of English—which is why deflationists of this sort generally take the concept of truth to be language-relative. Call this nest of related issues the 'problem of necessity'.

If the problem of necessity isn't bad enough to scare one away from deflationism the semantic paradoxes pose a grave threat to its coherence (here I agree with Simmons 1999). As commonly expressed, the deflationary idea is that 'the' T-propositions for the sentences of some language L are part of the conception of truth for L . This sounds simple enough until it occurs to one that if the only sentence on the blackboard in room 101 is 'the only sentence on the blackboard in room 101 is not true in L ', our T-propositions, plus the claim that the only sentence on the blackboard in room 101 is 'the only sentence on the blackboard in room 101 is not true in L ', imply the logically false proposition that

The only sentence on the blackboard in room 101 is true in L if and only if the only sentence on the blackboard in room 101 is not true in L .

Further paradoxes, in particular the Curry, make matters even worse. Here the deflationist has two options: she can either accept that the conception of truth is logically trivial, or she can reformulate deflationism so as either to get rid of some T-propositions or to keep them without logical triviality through sufficient logical revision. Call the need to do one of these things the 'problem of paradox' for deflationism.

Let us briefly review how a deflationist might address the problem of paradox through logical revision. Many logical approaches to paradox are intended precisely to show how all of the T-propositions for a language as expressed by T-sentences in that language can be true. Readers may consult the literature for the history here. Some of the most sophisticated accounts currently on offer (Field 2008 and Priest 2006) involve modifying the language's consequence relation and the conditional.² These views manage to make all instances of

²Another approach for which I have a great deal of respect is Glanzberg's version of contextualism (e.g. 2004), which I would discuss if I had more space.

'p' is true \leftrightarrow p

true in their object languages³ (though for Priest many are also false), and hence to make all of the propositions they express true. This looks to be precisely what the deflationist needs, since if it works there is no need for the deflationist to move away from the general claim that the conception of truth for *L* consists of the T-propositions for *all* of its sentences.

The costs of such views, however, are well known, and my point here will be that they are particularly incompatible with the deflationary pretension to analyze a concept of truth that pretty much everybody possesses. Consider Priest and Field again. On both stories a great many classical inferences are invalid (e.g. disjunctive syllogism for Priest, nested conditional proof for both), the semantics of the conditional is highly artificial, and the deduction theorem fails, which is to say that it is not the case that 'p \rightarrow q' is true iff q follows from p on the language's consequence relation. Priest requires the dialethic view that sentences can be true and false, while Field admits that his object language contains no open sentence satisfied exactly by its untruths, which is to say that in this respect the view advances not at all beyond Tarski. This isn't to say that these views couldn't be part of a deflationary account of our conception of truth.⁴ They would merely need to be seen as claiming that getting straight about the conception of truth requires recognizing that logic is non-classical in various ways, and that to understand the conception of truth requires expressive resources not available in any language in which that conception can be expressed, since both views involve 'ascent to a stronger metalanguage' in defining the consequence relation and Field's case in defining the set of untruths.⁵ The problem, however, for the deflationist is that these claims are particularly

³I ignore niceties about Gödel coding as well as about corner-quotes in this simple exposition.

⁴Let me be clear here that Priest isn't a deflationist (he is, rather, a teleological inflationary theorist); the topic currently under discussion is whether dialetheism could solve the deflationist's problems.

⁵One suggestion here will be that the revision theory of Gupta and Belnap 1993 offers a conception of the T-sentences on which all of them can be *true*, whether or not paradoxical sentences appear in the object language, because we can read the T-sentences as expressing 'revision rules' that determine what the extension of 'is true' is, given any candidate extension. But this is no good: on this view a T-sentence expresses a function from extensions to extensions for the truth predicate. But functions from extensions to

unsuited to be analytic of a concept that pretty much everyone who can talk possesses: plenty of ordinary wielders of the concept of truth fail to accept many of the tenets of these approaches to paradox.

Solving the problem of paradox through logical revision thus involves claims about the conception of truth that the deflationist should want to avoid. Seeing this, the deflationist might want to try out the view that our conception of truth is simply classically inconsistent. The attraction of this is that holding that the conception of truth is logically trivial in a simple way might be more suited to the aim of analyzing a concept that pretty much everyone wields that would be holding that it is logically non-trivial in a complicated way. Unfortunately, however, the claim that the conception of truth is classically inconsistent is simply unworkable. The problem is that the extension of a concept is a subset of the set of things of which the associated conception is true.⁶ Having an inconsistent conception thus constrains the extension of a concept down to the empty set: the belief that anything falls under the concept is not just false, but conceptually false. There certainly are such concepts—see here the familiar example of the concept of a round square—but holding that the concept of truth is among them would be disastrous, since nobody could thereby truly or even rationally think that anything is true. Given that rational beliefs that things are true are necessary for communication and testimony (See my 2007 and forthcoming) we cannot be content with a conception of truth on which it is conceptually false that anything can be true. Thus, since the deflationist cannot maintain that the conception of truth is classically inconsistent, she is stuck accepting some logical approach to paradox—but, as noted, such approaches look to be quite incompatible with the analytic pretensions of deflationism.

We should now consider whether propositional minimalism fares better than deflationism. It certainly does better with the problem of necessity: since propositions as traditionally conceived have their truth-conditions essentially there is no problem

extensions are the semantic values of *adverbs*. There is no such thing as asserting or believing the content of an adverb, nor can adverbs be 'true'. The revision theory, whatever its virtues might be, is useless as a contribution to natural language semantics or to the account of the conception of truth.

⁶See §2 for an explanation of why I say 'a subset of'.

accounting for intuitions about what truth conditions propositions might have had but don't. Propositional minimalism also don't suffer from the problem of paradox, though its proponents commonly fail to realize this (Horwich 1999, 40-44, Künne 2003, 350). This is because such accounts concern the concept of truth as applied to propositions and there are no paradoxical propositions.

To see this, suppose that there were a proposition that attributed untruth to itself. If there were such a proposition it would be true iff it were not true, and everything would be the case. Since not everything is the case, we may conclude (i) no propositions are true iff they are not, and furthermore (ii) that there are therefore no propositions that attribute untruth to themselves, justifying the move from (i) to (ii) by the fact that if there were a proposition that attributed untruth to itself, its truth condition would be that it be untrue. (The extension to other paradoxes, in particular those that still bedevil logical approaches to paradox that undermine the classical treatment explicitly appealed to here, is obvious. To take the Curry as an example, assume for *reductio* that there is a proposition such that if it is true, $0 = 1$, and reason *mutatis mutandis*.) This can be the end of the matter; there is no 'revenge problem' (Beall 2007) for propositions because in denying the existence of some putative proposition one does not attribute to any proposition a special status that no proposition can attribute to itself, nor does one saddle one's theory with an implication that by the theory's own lights is untrue.

This impossibility of 'semantic revenge' is what distinguishes the argument just given against the existence of paradoxical propositions from a structurally similar argument against the existence of paradoxical sentences. Consider the sentence L, which reads 'L is not true'. L appears to be true iff L is not true. But if L is true iff L is not true, everything is the case. However, it is not the case that everything is the case. Here we can at least draw the conclusion analogous to (i) in the previous paragraph: it is not the case that L is true iff L is not true. Unfortunately, the move to (ii) is unavailable here. We cannot just deny the *existence* of L since, after all, it is displayed in this paragraph and appears to be true if and only if it is not. We are forced, rather, to enter a non-trivial suggestion as to how L fails to have the truth condition it appears to have. (See my 2007, 2007b and 2009 for my own views on this. The distinction between the treatment of putatively paradoxical propositions and of putatively paradoxical sentences parallels a

point about set-theoretic and semantic paradox raised by Field at 2004, 103 and discussed at length in my 2008a.)

Of course, in the case of propositions one *could* try deny the move from (i) to (ii)—one I treated above as justified by the claim that if a proposition that attributed untruth to itself existed, it would be true iff it wasn't—by deploying some logical approach to paradox adapted to propositions. This move may even look necessary to many, since many will take it that there *are* paradoxical propositions. After all there appear to be sentences that express them: the only sentence on the board in room 101 appears to express the proposition that the only sentence on the board in room 101 is not true. However, notice that the proposition expressed is *itself* a perfectly coherent proposition to the effect that a certain sentence is untrue: there is nothing paradoxical about the proposition that the only sentence on the board in room 101 is not true *all by itself*. The problem arises not with respect to that proposition, but from the appearance that the only sentence on the board in room 101 *expresses* it. Since expressing a certain proposition is a semantic feature of a sentence, this means that the real problem of semantic paradox is one in the semantics of sentences. Since we can deny the existence of paradoxical propositions without cost, and since putative examples of paradoxical propositions are really examples of sentences that appear, paradoxically, to express propositions that they could express only if everything were the case, the propositional minimalist needs no approach to semantic paradox beyond denying the existence of paradoxical propositions.

Hence propositional minimalism suffers from neither the problem of necessity nor the problem of paradox. Propositional minimalism has one outstanding debt, however: the account of truth for propositions has to be extended to sentences and utterances, and it is not clear how this is to be done. The needed extension is obvious: a sentence or utterance is true iff it expresses a true proposition. The question, however, is whether the propositional minimalist can offer a conception of expressing a proposition on which doing so isn't derived from having a truth condition since, if it were, the propositional minimalist's account of the expression relation would appeal to a concept of truth for which the propositional minimalist cannot account. In order to offer the required sort of account of the expression relation, the propositional minimalist needs, for each sentence

or utterance, that it have some feature other than its truth condition that determines a proposition expressed—and this in a systematic way that answers to speakers' ability to associate propositions with novel sentences. Those who, unlike propositional minimalists, take truth and meaning for sentences to be primary have a story about this that is obvious in its general outlines: speakers assign referents to names and extensions to predicates, etc., and thereby truth-conditions to sentences; the proposition they take to be expressed by a sentence is the truth-condition they assign to it.⁷

The propositional minimalist needs a similar story, told without truth-conditions. No plausible candidate for this is on offer, nor is it at all clear what it could be; other systematic features of sentences, such as justification or assertibility conditions, fail to determine the propositions they express since they fail to determine truth conditions (Brandom 1976). Until the relevant account is offered the presumption is against the propositional minimalist being able to eliminate the self-defeating appeal to a concept of truth her account doesn't analyze.⁸ If this isn't bad enough, the propositional minimalist's account of the proposition-expression relation will re-introduce the problem of paradox, for although there are no paradoxical propositions, there certainly are sentences that appear to express propositions they could express only if everything were the case, as discussed above.⁹

I have now catalogued the problems facing deflationism and propositional minimalism. I don't claim decisively to have established that these problems cannot be overcome, but suppose the foregoing is enough to convince us to give traditional inflationism a try, on the grounds that both the problems of necessity and paradox stem

⁷Fine grained' theorists of propositions will need to add something to truth-conditions to individuate their propositions and it isn't clear what this could be, but this is why I am not a fine-grained theorist of propositions.

⁸In Patterson 2007a I criticize the 'determination argument' of Bar-On, Horisk and Lycan 2000. This argument can look similar to what I have just said, but it isn't. Unlike them, I do not maintain that any property of a sentence that determines a truth-condition must be one. My point is merely that sentences have no known systematic properties that could determine truth-conditions other than these truth-conditions themselves. Unlike Bar-On, Horisk and Lycan, I don't rule out the possibility of such an account in principle.

⁹It is because propositional minimalism doesn't face the problems of necessity and paradox on its own, but does require a theory of the expression relation, that I said early on that I am happy to count it among the inflationary theories: the radical nature of deflationism lies in the attempt to tie the notion of truth to particular semantic facts about sentences.

from including T-propositions in the conception of truth, and that the minimalist attempt to avoid these issues bogs down in trouble over the expression relation. If we go this route there are many traditional inflationary theories on offer: correspondence theories ('truth is correspondence to a fact'; these are too numerous to enumerate here, but one could consider the versions of the view in David 1994 or Kirkham 1992), coherence and other epistemic theories ('truth is coherence with a set of beliefs', 'truth is what is accepted at the limit of inquiry', Putnam 1983, xviii being a classic example), pragmatist theories ('truth is what works', as in Whyte 1990, and, on my reading, in Millikan 1995), teleological theories ('truth is the goal of assertion' Dummett 1959, Priest 2006, 61), and so on.

All of these traditional inflationary theories bog down in an apparent dilemma; when we look at how they are to be worked out, they are either clearly circular or clearly intensionally or even extensionally inadequate. For instance, setting aside the many worries about the ontology of facts, if we explain 'correspondence' in a way that isn't clearly circular, appealing, for instance, to what causally covaries with belief or acceptance (see for example the discussion of indication relations in Field 1994, 254-5 as well as the large literature on the 'disjunction problem' for causal theories of reference) we end up with no reason to think that 'correspondence' to a fact is necessary and sufficient for truth: what I accept about chemistry, for instance, causally covaries with what's printed in chemistry textbooks. If we attempt to fix this by talking about representation, on the other hand, we're stuck trying to avoid the conclusion that to represent is to be true exactly under a certain condition. Likewise for epistemic theories: if I understand the limit of inquiry in a way that avoids the claim that the limit of inquiry is where only and all (or at least many) truths are believed, I'm left with the clear possibility that what's accepted at the "limit of inquiry" so understood isn't true. Pragmatic theories, in turn, face the familiar objection that if 'working' is understood in a reasonable way, false beliefs can 'work'. Teleological accounts face the problem of extensional inadequacy in that truth pretty clearly isn't the actual goal of many assertions (that is, much more plausibly, getting someone to believe something or to believe that you, the assertor, believe it), and if they are fixed to avoid that ('you aren't *asserting*

unless you're trying to say something *true*') they are circular, in addition to being subject to the charge of abuse of the word 'assertion'.

These sorts of complaints about inflationary theories are so familiar that I will move on: no such traditional theory looks at all workable as long as we demand that our theory of truth be both true and non-circular. We can finally consider 'Pluralist' theories, which, as commonly developed, tend to be a kind of hybrid. These theories Ramsify on some collection of 'platitudes' about truth (Lynch 2006, Wright 1993, Wright 2005).

Consider this list, taken from Lynch 2006, 65 following Wright 1993:

The proposition that p is true iff p
 To assert is to present as true
 A proposition can be true but unjustified and justified but untrue
 Truth is absolute and does not admit of degrees
 Truth-apt contents have truth-apt negations and can be embedded within conditionals, conjunctions, etc.

The theory of truth is then of this form:

x is true iff $\exists F$ such that _____

where what goes in the blank is the conjunction of the pluralist's platitudes with 'true' replaced by 'F' which thereby gets bound by the second order quantifier. The idea behind pluralism is to treat the conception of truth as constraining but not fully determining what property realizes truth; any property such that something's having it makes it the case that all of the platitudes are true of that thing realizes truth. The attraction is that this allows for a single concept of truth to cover different domains because different properties can realize the 'truth role' specified by the platitudes—e.g. coherence for moral claims and correspondence for physical ones (Lynch 2006).

These theories must confront their troubled relationship to the T-propositions. Extant forms of pluralism all include instances of the them. If these are included, we simply get back the problems faced by deflationism and propositional minimalism. If T-propositions for non-propositions are included among the platitudes, the problems of necessity and paradox must be solved. If it is only the T-propositions for propositions that figure among the platitudes, then a compatible account of the expression relation is

required. If, on the other hand, the platitudes don't include instances of the truth-schemata—though I know of no professed pluralist who holds this view—the remaining platitudes to be found in the pluralist literature are either close relatives of inflationary theories to which we have already objected or they grossly underdetermine the intension of the concept of truth.

Consider the remainder of Lynch's list. Taking them in reverse order, the last fails to rule out being uttered in Topeka as a realizer for truth, the fourth fails to rule out being eighteen letters long and the third fails to rule out being believed by someone who likes peanut butter. The second, 'to assert is to present as true', appears more promising, but unfortunately it is false on any reading the pluralist is entitled to give it, or else it collapses into a relative of the teleological theory. I will pause over this point a bit longer, since the discussion will raise points that will be important to my presentation of my own view. The problem with the second 'platitude' is that the intentionality of 'present' makes conceptual demands on the assertor. In the other platitudes the pluralist quantifies into extensional or at worst modal contexts (since probably the platitudes are all to be read as prefixed with 'necessarily'). Not so with the second platitude: here the pluralist quantifies into the attitude context 'S presents x as'. But even if it is true that to assert is to present as true, it isn't true that to assert is to present *as bearing some property that plays the truth role*. My nephew Jimmy may often present things as true, but he does not present things as bearing some property that realizes the truth role.¹⁰ We might try to get 'realizes the truth role' out of the intentional context by reading the platitude in terms of the particular realizers for truth (e.g. 'to assert something about ethics is to present it as cohering with a moral theory') but this would be simply to give up pluralism: we would hold, as Lynch 2006 convincingly argues the pluralist shouldn't, that there are several actual concepts of truth, one for each kind of truth bearer. Furthermore, the resulting claim is still false anyway: even if truth is realized by coherence for moral claims, committed moral realists present their claims as

¹⁰Since there is a bit of a scope ambiguity in the formulation in the text, let me expand to make my intended reading, and thus my point, clearer: even if it is true that to assert is to present as true, it is not the case that to assert something x is to present x as being such that $(\exists F)((\forall p$ the proposition that p is F iff p & to assert is to present as F & a proposition can be F but unjustified and justified but not F & F -ness is absolute and does not admit of degrees & F -apt contents have F -apt negations and can be embedded within conditionals, conjunctions, etc) & x is F). We can leave Jimmy out of it: *nobody* does that.

corresponding to a fact, but surely they don't fail to assert things about morality because of this. Finally, if someone were to deny that the second platitude involves an intentional context, it would be a relative of the teleological theory we have already rejected; whatever reading of 'present' was presented, the platitude would simply tie truth to the notion of assertion, and the pluralist would be in the teleological theorist's business of trying to avoid both falsehood in circularity in the conception of assertion assumed by the platitude.

The fundamental problem raised by our consideration of the second platitude is that there are plenty of people who believe that things are true who have nothing true and informative to say about truth at all. Most folks, I wager, would say, if asked, that truth is, you know, *truth*, while the more adventurous might hazard that true things are things that 'say how things really are', etc., while lacking anything to say about 'saying how things really are' other than that it is saying things that are true. Since this is so, it shouldn't surprise us that known theories of truth—offered, as they are, as analyses of the ordinary concept—likewise fail to have anything both true and informative to say about truth.

2. This brings us to my suggestion.¹¹ To state the actual conception of truth—the set of claims that anyone who has any beliefs that this or that is true must be at least disposed to accept about truth upon consideration—*isn't* to say anything both true and informative. Since we have already seen that we cannot accept the view that the conception of truth isn't true, we're left with the conclusion that a statement of the actual conception of truth, our conception, that we as theorists of truth try to analyze, fails to say anything informative. My suggestion, then, is that the concept of truth *is* circular, or, as I will sometimes say, primitive, where a primitive concept is one with a circular conception.¹² This is manifest both in the ordinary speaker's lack of any disposition to say anything non-circular about truth, and in the dismal history of philosophical theories of truth.

¹¹It is merely a *suggestion*: I don't take it to follow by disjunctive syllogism from the foregoing, because I've allowed that some of the preceding considerations are inconclusive, because I make no claim exhaustively to have surveyed possible theories of truth, and because I will allow below that some traditional inflationary theories, on their circular readings, are correct partial analyses.

¹²As will become clear, a concept being 'primitive' in my sense doesn't mean that there are *no* conceptually analytic claims involving it; it means that there are none that don't ultimately involve the concept itself.

Most everyone in the philosophical tradition has been trying to avoid the conclusion that the conception of truth is circular.¹³ What, however, is supposed to be so bad about a concept with a circular conception? Here the answer is clear: circular definitions do not settle the extensions of their definienda. The reason ‘x is F iff x is F’ is supposed to be no good as a definition of ‘F’ is that it places no constraints at all on what is F. Adding non-circular material to the definiens, as in ‘x is F iff x is G and x is F’ constrains the extension somewhat, but still leaves the extension of the definiens unsettled. By contrast, a non-circular definition settles the extension of its definiens, leaving us no further choice in the matter, relative to that choice of definiens.¹⁴

The apparent problem with the holding that the conception of truth is circular is that it appears to imply that our conception of truth leaves its intension unsettled to an unacceptable degree. Surely, it will be thought, our concept of truth isn’t as empty as all that—we seem to ourselves to know many things about its intension—but when we consider the only plausible candidates for conceptual truths about truth, they leave the intension almost completely unsettled: ‘x is true iff what x says is the case’ is at the mercy of the account of what it is for something to ‘say what is the case’, and non-false attempts to deliver that account boil down to ‘to say what is the case is to say something true’. Being true might be being square for all this settles. This is why the thought that there *must* be something more to say about truth is perennially tempting.

Saying that the conception of truth is circular doesn’t imply that the concept of truth is somehow brute or inarticulate. One worry about primitivism about truth is that it can look to amount to the idea that we have *nothing at all* to say about what we’re saying about something when we call it true. Not so: we know that on a suitable reading of ‘says’ we’re saying of it that what it says is the case, that on a suitable reading of ‘corresponds to a fact’ that it corresponds to a fact, and that on a suitable reading of

¹³Revision theorists (e.g. Gupta and Belnap 1993) are the exception, but the difference between their view and mine is that the revision theory is a theory about the interpretation of the T-sentences. If they are not part of the conception of truth, as I hold that they are not, the revision theory has nothing in common with the present suggestion beyond the idea that some concepts can be circular. In any case, as mentioned in footnote 5, the revision theory is of no use to the analytic enterprise in which we are engaged here.

¹⁴I set aside as a distraction the obvious point that the definiens in a non-circular definition may exhibit various sorts of semantic indeterminacy.

‘assert’ that it bears the property such that assert is to present something as bearing that property. It’s just that the suitable readings of the just-quoted terms all invoke the notion of truth again when unpacked. The idea that truth is conceptually primitive is no more intellectually dissatisfying than is ‘something is true iff what it says is the case’. It isn’t empty. It is circular.

Circularity in a concept would be a problem if the intension of the concept were left unsettled to an unacceptable degree: it isn’t the case that to be true is to be asserted in Topeka, or to be eighteen letters long, or to be believed by someone who likes peanut butter, though some truths have these properties. But we needn’t accept that the conception for a concept must settle its intension *all by itself*. The conception associated with a concept constrains but need not fully determine its intension. There is nothing amiss with a concept the conception of which leaves its intension unacceptably unsettled if something else settles its intension for it.¹⁵ The reason that the concept of truth doesn’t seem as empty as it is left by the only available conceptual truths about it is that all of us have a wealth of beliefs about its intension. For languages with which we are competent we have a great many beliefs about the extension and the intension of the concept of truth as applied to sentences and utterances of sentences. The same goes for formal languages the truth-conditions of whose sentences we take ourselves to stipulate into existence. An assignment of truth-conditions to the sentences of a language, either as cognized by a speaker of a natural language or as stipulated by a logician, is a rich set of claims about the intension of the concept of truth. Since many things appear to us to be the case about the conditions under which particular sentences or utterances of them in context are true, the intension of the concept of truth isn’t completely unsettled for us, even though it is, in fact, totally unsettled by the set of conceptually analytic claims about truth. This is why, then, though no conceptual analysis of truth is both true and informative, the concept doesn’t lack an intension: its intension isn’t settled by what its analysis states.

Consider the logician’s use of 0 and 1 as ‘truth values’ here. A standard axiomatic treatment of the semantics of a language simply implies specifications of the conditions under which sentences are mapped to 0 and 1. There is nothing special about

¹⁵This is why I said in §1 that the extension of a concept must be a *subset* of the set of things of which its conception is true.

0 and 1; the two ‘truth values’ could be anything, 3 and 568, for instance.¹⁶ A specification of the conditions under which the sentences of a language are mapped to 568 certainly seems unsatisfying, and just as it generally rides along with the use of 0 and 1 that to be mapped to 1 is to be *true*, so we could add as a commentary on the latter semantics that being mapped to 568 is being true. But what does this add? If some form of inflationism were workable it might add a lot, and this can look to speak in favor of inflationism, but we have seen that forms of inflationism that aren’t false are circular. Adding the claim that being mapped to 1 (or 568) is being true does nothing other than to convince us that claims about the conditions under which sentences are mapped to 1 (or 568) contribute to the determination of the intension of the concept of truth we already possess. But the concept itself is no less circular and devoid of a conceptually determined intension for it; the impression of conceptual content is generated entirely by a host of other impressions we already have about the intension of the concept, many of which were acquired in the course of our acquisition of the concept of truth itself, in the learning of our first languages.

We can see the point here in Davidson’s reaction to Etchemendy’s criticism of Tarski’s deflationary use of the T-sentences in his definitions:

Yet surprisingly little needs to be done to reconcile Tarski with Etchemendy. Etchemendy allows, of course, that “Tarski introduced precisely the mathematical techniques needed for an illuminating account of the semantic properties of certain simple languages,” and “[g]etting from a Tarskian definition of truth to a substantive account of the semantic properties of the object language may involve as little as the reintroduction of a primitive notion of truth” (op. cit., pp. 59-60). The trick is just to add to Tarski’s definition of a truth predicate for a language L (say, ‘s is true_L’) the remark that Tarski’s predicate holds for all and only the true sentences of L. Here, of course, the word ‘true’ expresses the real-life, substantive, undefined concept we need for serious semantics. Let us call this remark the *truth axiom* (Davidson 1990, 292).

If we accept that the T-sentences define truth, we have the usual problems of deflationism. If we deny that the T-sentences define truth, Davidson and Etchemendy recognize, we must introduce the ‘truth-axiom’ to draw specifications of the conditions under which sentences bear some formally introduced property into what we accept as

¹⁶Sometimes various ordering relations among numbers are relevant to the semantics, as with the use of values in the interval from 0 and 1 in many logics. The point stands: the choice of *that* interval rather than some other structure with the same ordering properties is still arbitrary.

the intension of the concept of truth. But the determination of intension here runs entirely from the language to the concept of truth. (As Davidson notes, the ‘truth axiom’ is an illustrative device; the point is that we can read the truth theories as using an undefined ‘is true’ that expresses the ordinary concept of truth.)

Those still wondering whether we can live with a concept of truth that is as I have made it out to be may take notice of this: if the concept itself constrained its own intension, it would be possible that arbitrary stipulations of truth conditions for particular sentences, though consistent on their own, would be incompatible with the truth of the ‘truth axiom’, incompatible, that is, with the conception of truth. But this isn’t how it works: if you are stipulating your own artificial language into existence, *anything* can have *any* truth condition, subject only to the requirement that your stipulations be consistent.¹⁷ It would not work this way if truth were coherence with a moral theory: a set of stipulations of the truth-conditions might, in conjunction with conditions that obtain, make for a set of putative ‘truths’ that were incoherent with a moral theory, and the stipulations would thereby fail. It would not work that way if truth were correspondence on some non-circular conception of that in terms of causal or indication relations: attempted stipulations of truth conditions would have to be inspected for whether or not they were consistent with the relevant causal or indication relations. However, on the contrary, it *does* work that way: one may stipulate truth-conditions for sentences of artificial languages as one pleases, consistency being the only constraint. The concept of truth would not be adaptable in this way if its conception placed significant constraints on its intension.

Since a good deal of what I have said here builds upon Davidson 1990 and 1997, I should make clear where I differ from him. With some reservations, I agree with this passage:

I think that Tarski wasn’t trying to define *the* concept of truth—so much is obvious—but that he was *employing* that concept to characterize the semantic structures of specific

¹⁷Treating for present purposes the institution of truth-conditions for sentences of natural languages and idiolects of their speakers by these speakers’ attitudes and use as usefully modeled on stipulation or fiat, following Chihara 1979, we can say that my point in Patterson 2007 is just that the ‘stipulations’ in question *are* inconsistent, and so constrain the meaning of every sentence of natural language out of existence.

languages. But Tarski didn't indicate how we can in general reduce the concept of truth to other more basic concepts, nor how to eliminate the English predicate 'is true' from all contexts in which it is intelligibly applied to sentences. Convention T isn't a rough substitute for a general definition: it is part of a successful attempt to persuade us that his formal definitions apply our single pre-theoretical concept of truth to certain languages... at the same time Tarski solved one problem he emphasized another: that he had not, and could not, given the constraints he accepted, define or fully characterize truth (1997, 26-7).

The reservations are, first, that Davidson here isn't clear enough about how Tarski's 'employment of the pre-theoretical concept' differs from his attempt to offer an explicit definition of a language-relative truth-predicate. I try to clear this up in Patterson 2008. This leads to the second point: Tarski's conception of truth *was* deflationary, as I argue there, since I take it that his view was that an expression of a certain language expresses the pre-theoretic concept of truth if its definition implies the T-sentences. Finally, it isn't clear from this and related passages in Davidson how we could take *Tarski* to have been 'characterizing the semantic structures of specific languages', since, again, he made the T-sentences for his object languages consequences of his definitions of truth, and as Davidson well recognizes elsewhere (1990), the T-sentences can be either partial definitions of truth or substantial claims about truth conditions, but not both.¹⁸ But the general import of Davidson's conception of how a Tarskian truth-theory is *best* understood offered in this passage is quite right, whatever the interpretative issues about Tarski might be, and I share with Davidson the idea that understanding the function of the truth-theory requires something like the 'truth axiom' of Davidson 1990.

Where I differ from Davidson much more substantially is in the understanding offered here of in what the primitiveness of truth consists. The view I have offered is that there is simply no reason to be unsettled by a concept the conception of which is circular. Such concepts fail to determine their own intensions, but if something else does that work for them, nothing is amiss, and it is what is stated by Tarskian truth-theories, understood in Davidson's way, that does this for the concept of truth, for speakers under the impression that those truth-theories are true. The conception of truth itself does not determine its own intension; beliefs about the conditions under which things are true do. Where I part company with Davidson, then, is when he holds that it is not merely the

¹⁸I say more about how we are to understand Tarski's definitions in 2008 and 2008b.

truth-theory, but the overall account of interpretation—familiar from throughout his work—that ‘gives content’ (37) to the ‘undefined concept of truth’. His confusion begins with a passage like this:

The undefined predicate expresses the *general*, intuitive, concept, applicable to any language, the concept against which we have always surreptitiously tested Tarski’s definitions (as he invited us to do, of course) (1997, 36)

By my lights, this passage introduces a basic mistake: the concept has no non-circular content to test anything against. Thinking (somewhat incongruously, given the passage just quoted) that some work needs to be done to ‘give content’ to a concept that would otherwise not have ‘any content at all’ (1997, 36), Davidson then appeals to the role of truth-attributions in an overall theory of interpretation:

We should think of a theory of truth for a speaker in the same way we think of a theory of rational decision: both describe structures we can find, with an allowable degree of fitting and fudging, in the behavior of more or less rational creatures gifted with speech. It is in this fitting and fudging that we give content to the undefined concepts of subjective probability and subjective values—belief and desire, as we briefly call them; and, by way of theories like Tarski’s, to the undefined concept of truth.

But the theory of interpretation plays not the role assigned here, but the one assigned to it in the bulk of Davidson’s other writings, in the overall project of discerning the interpreted subjects beliefs and desires, and the meanings of her words. It isn’t part of an attempt to ‘give content’ to the concept of truth. It is part, rather of discerning what intension the interpreted subject takes it to have.

By allowing that the concept is circular but that its intension is settled by non-analytic beliefs about truth conditions we avoid both the deflationist’s and minimalist’s claim that truth-conditions of particular truth-bearers are conceptually analytic of truth and the inflationist’s futile search for some other sort of non-circular content for the concept. It isn’t, contrary to how Davidson has it in 1997, the idea of definability that is the problem. For ‘conceptual analyses’ or usage reporting definitions (in the sense of Belnap 1993) we have to drop the requirement, sensible as it may be for stipulative definitions, that they be eliminative (and hence non-circular), but we can retain the idea that a usage-reporting definition expresses the meaning of its definiendum. If usage is

circular, an accurate report of it will be a circular definition, and my claim is that our usage of 'is true' is circular. Put in terms of concepts: if the concept is circular, an accurate expression of its content will be circular, and my claim is that the concept is circular. There is no reason to expect that an accurate report of the content of a concept people ordinarily deploy or of the meaning of a term they actually use will be flawless, and, in particular, non-circular according to the standards that govern stipulative formal definitions. The confused attempt *both* to report real usage *and* to say something that respects the rigorous canons of definition, especially eliminativity, is the underlying culprit in the long, sad history of theories of truth.

Let me close by saying that nearly everyone gets to be nearly right here. Some traditional inflationary theorists, in particular correspondence theorists, teleological theorists, and the 'end of inquiry' variety of epistemic theorists, are close to right: their theories bear circular readings, and on these readings the theories are basically accurate as conceptual analyses. The actual conception of truth, our conception, is just the conjunction of the plausible traditional inflationary theories on their circular readings. It is just that, wedded to the idea that the concept cannot be circular, traditional inflationary theorists have sought to avoid these readings. Pluralists are on the right track in thinking that somehow the conception of truth doesn't settle everything about it, but their use of the T-propositions shares many problems of deflationism, and the focus on underdetermination of the property of truth, rather than of the intension of the concept, mis-locates the crucial phenomenon. Deflationists are also close to right: the T-sentences do have a good deal to tell us about the *intension* of the concept of truth. They do not tell us what truth is, they are not part of its conception, but they do express the beliefs about the intension of the concept that guide our application of it in coming to believe that various claims are true.

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