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# Deflating inflationism? Reflections on Douglas Edwards' *The Metaphysics of Truth*

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## ABSTRACT

I assess Edwards' two principal arguments against Deflationary conceptions of Truth and argue that neither is fully successful, then revisit the 'Inflationary' argument of chapter 1 of *Truth and Objectivity*. A case is outlined for a more variegated account of the opposition between realist and anti-realist views of different regions of thought than Edwards' account permits.


**KEYWORDS** Alethic pluralism; deflationism; realism; objectivity; sparse and abundant properties

## 1. Some comparisons between the respective programmes of *The Metaphysics of Truth* and *Truth and Objectivity*

As readers of *Truth and Objectivity*<sup>1</sup> may expect, the general project of *The Metaphysics of Truth* is very congenial to me, and I congratulate Douglas Edwards on a beautifully clear and cogent exposition of an original approach to two great perennial philosophical problems: how, first, we should conceive of the nature of truth and when, second, if ever, we should think of our thought and talk in a certain area as responsive to an objective subject matter, rather than somehow at least partially constitutive of it – and how, indeed, that distinction should be grounded.

Readers familiar with *The Metaphysics of Truth* may wonder whether it is fair to ascribe to Edwards an intention that his treatment of truth should bear on the second question. Certainly, there is comparatively little explicit attention to it in the book. (It's notable, in particular, that neither 'realism' nor 'objectivity' features in the Index). By contrast, a group of interrelated proposals concerning how to understand those notions

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was the primary focus of *Truth and Objectivity*, and the pluralism about truth developed there was intended as one component in a recommended improved understanding of them. In *The Metaphysics of Truth*, on the other hand, it is the opposition between alethic pluralism and Deflationism (and also, though this is relatively understated, alethic primitivism) that is centre stage. Connections between the emergent pluralism and the debates about realism are backgrounded.

Nevertheless, I think it is correct to receive Edwards' ideas about truth as an intended contribution to the debates about realism and anti-realism. In the Introduction, he writes that

Those preoccupied with ... traditional metaphysical questions about truth also often take it that truth has a significant role to play in considering other metaphysical questions. For instance one key issue that has traditionally been associated with truth is the question of how language and thought relate to the world. In particular, truth has been associated with the question of whether reality is independent of our thought and talk ('realism'), or whether reality is somehow dependent on our thought and talk ('anti-realism'). Correspondence theories of truth were traditionally associated with realism, and coherence and pragmatist theories with anti-realism ... For these views, truth plays a significant role in substantial metaphysical debates about how language relates to the world: debates about the nature of truth concern what sort of property truth is, and how we should conceive of the relationship between language and the world as a result. (Edwards 2018, 1)

Edwards is explicit that the recent drift towards Deflationist (and primitivist) conceptions of truth has had the effect of sidelining the whole idea of a metaphysics of truth and his book is emphatically redolent of the ambition to reinstate it. I think it is safe to read him as welcoming a resurrection of the traditional debates about realism and objectivity that should accompany that reinstatement. (If this is a mistake, at any rate, he will have the opportunity to say so in his Replies in the present volume. And even if it is a mistake, we can still usefully enquire how those debates will appear when viewed through the lens of the conception of truth that Edwards argues for.)

When that is the question, there are two principal reasons for which I continue to prefer the relatively elaborate framework outlined in *Truth and Objectivity* to the overarching perspective proposed by *The Metaphysics of Truth*. *Truth and Objectivity* proposed a minimalist view about the *concept* of truth – essentially not very different to the ways that Deflationists think about it – but then emphasised that such a minimalism is consistent with regarding the *property* presented by that concept both as substantial – something with a metaphysical

nature – and as variable across different domains of discourse, with correspondence, coherence with a discourse-specific base, and superassertibility offering three salient possibilities. It was suggested that the appropriateness of a realistic metaphysics for a given discourse, *D*, should turn on the character of *D*'s truth property, with that to be determined by reviewing how the discourse fares in the light of four realism – relevant cruces, to wit:

- *Cognitive Command* – the question whether disagreement within *D* requires, a priori, some kind of cognitive shortcoming, or whether *faultless disagreement* is possible;
- The *Width of the Cosmological Role* of the subject matter of *D* – the question of how versatile are the states of affairs depicted in *D* in the potential explanation of other matters;
- The question an instance of which is central to the discussion of piety in Plato's *Euthyphro* – namely, whether we should think of optimally conceived opinions concerning the subject matter of *D* as *responsive* to the states of affairs concerned or rather as somehow guaranteed a priori to align with them, and finally
- The *Dummettian question*, whether we should regard the states of affairs depicted in *D* as potentially transcending all possibility of assessment.

Each of these cruces connects in an intuitive way with the question whether *D* deals with states of affairs that are somehow constitutively independent of our thought. But the cruces are not – or, at least in some cases, not obviously – equivalent.

Edwards' approach, by contrast is binary: it proceeds entirely under the aegis of a version of the contrast, first introduced by David Armstrong (1978), between *sparse* and *abundant* properties. The distinction has been variously interpreted over the years.<sup>2</sup> In David Lewis' influential version (1986), sparse properties are perfectly natural properties of the sort that a completed physics could uncover. They 'carve [nature] at the joints' (Lewis 1986, 60) and are thus fundamental constituents of reality. Not so for abundant properties. To have an abundant property is simply to comply with the satisfaction condition of a well-defined predicate, or more generally with that of any open sentence of determinate sense.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>See, e.g. Lewis (1983), Swyer (1996) and Schaffer (2004).

<sup>3</sup>Compare the mathematical objects of the Neo-logicians, when are conceived as projections of the singular terms that refer to them. See, e.g. Hale and Wright (2001).

For any but the most committed meta-physicalist, so to speak, Lewis' distinction has no interesting bearing on the issues about realism. For when taken as having such a bearing, it would license us at a stroke to regard as anti-realist all evaluative discourse and indeed any discourse resistant to physicalist reduction, including presumably all mathematical and ethical discourse.<sup>4</sup> However, the handling of the sparse-abundant distinction in *The Metaphysics of Truth* is importantly different. Edwards prioritises an asymmetry of *explanatory direction* between the application of a property and the truth of a corresponding predication. Thus when a property is sparse, it will be because an item falls within its extension that a predicate expressing the property applies to that item. On the other hand, if a property is abundant, the direction of explanation, on Edwards' account, will be reversed: it will be rather the correctness, by the standards of the relevant discourse, of applying the predicate to an item that determines that an item falls within the extension of the associated property.

One immediate effect of this way of drawing the sparse-abundant distinction is that the connection, important to Lewis, between sparseness and natural fundamentality is severed. There is no reason to expect or require that only those properties that reflect the fundamental taxonomical divisions of nature are capable of underwriting and explaining facts about the correct use of predicates that express them. And this is all to the good, assuming that Edwards does indeed harbour the ambition of contributing to the realism and objectivity debates, at least if we assume that the sparse-abundant division is to be comprehensive, since the effect otherwise would be that only fundamental science would be in the market for the objectivity – the responsiveness to matters 'not of our making' – that Edwards, as I am interpreting him, wants the sparseness of the signature predications of a region of discourse to indicate.

But it is here that my first reservation arises. How, once the notion of sparseness is freed from any tie to physical fundamentality, are we to address controversial cases? How do we decide whether a property – *stealthy*, say, or *pear-shaped* – should count as sparse? It won't do just to ask after the verdict of ordinary thought. Ordinary thought doesn't for the most part engage such questions. And *philosophical* thought should recognise that there are potentially differing ways of trying to give sense to the issue – exactly the point made by the distinctions between *Truth and Objectivity's* various cruces – whose verdicts may not coincide.

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<sup>4</sup>Not that one should resist that consequence out of hand, but only when grounded directly in this way.

Edwards' ideas about abundance, sparseness and direction of explanation, have a clear affinity with each of *Truth and Objectivity's* cruces of Width of Cosmological Role and the Euthyphro contrast. But the latter pair, arguably, do not always deliver matching verdicts. Colour properties have a case for being 'Euthyphronic'<sup>5</sup> but in botany, and in animal and insect behaviour studies, play a relatively wide cosmological role. Edwards' overarching distinction between sparse and abundant properties, and the distinction *in tandem* between 'responsive' and 'generative' discourses that he uses it to underwrite, oversimplify the various relevant contrasts.

My second reservation is that Edwards' framework offers no resources to make anything of the distinctions in point of objectivity associated with Cognitive Command, but relegates all discourses whose signature predicates cannot plausibly be reckoned to be sparse to the same 'generative' basket, irrespective of the degree of internal discipline to which they are subject. Whatever contrasts we may want to make, in point of objectivity, among say, arithmetic (non-platonistically regarded), ethics and discourse of personal taste, cannot be accounted for simply by regarding their signature predicates as abundant, but remain to be explained in presumably quite different terms.

What notion of truth applies to such discourses? Superassertibility is Edwards' go-to candidate for discourses about social and institutional matters. I myself have suggested a version of coherence for pure arithmetic when it is conceived non-platonistically, that is, as something other than the 'natural history (mineralogy) of numbers'.<sup>6</sup> But when we consider regions of discourse which concern e.g. basic taste or comedy, – indeed any cases where Cognitive Command is questionable and the notion of an 'improvement in ones state of information', so understood as required to underwrite the idea of superassertibility, begins to falter – it is clear that neither of these candidates is plausible and that something different needs to be said.

It seems to me, accordingly, for both these reasons, that a more fine-grained framework of distinctions is desirable than is offered by Edwards' binary approach. In particular, I have come to think that the best proposal for regions of thought and discourse 'beneath cognitive command' is actually to revert to a deflationary conception of the truth-property concerned! But of course there is a huge obstacle to any such proposal if the arguments mustered by Edwards, and by myself in

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<sup>5</sup>See the Appendix to Ch. 3 of Wright (1992).

<sup>6</sup>Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, IV, 11.

chapter 1 of *Truth and Objectivity*, to the effect that Deflationism is variously internally unstable, are successful.

Let us therefore turn to the (re)-assessment of those arguments.

## 2. Edwards' principal argument against alethic deflationism

Here is a passage towards the conclusion of chapter 3 of *The Metaphysics of Truth* that encapsulates the intended upshot of the Edwards' principal argument:

What this uncovers is an inconsistency with regard to the Insubstantiality feature. Global deflationism involves the rejection of metaphysical investigations, including those into the nature of properties, and how we distinguish substantial from insubstantial properties. However, the Insubstantiality feature of deflationism about truth requires such a metaphysical distinction in order to preserve what is now the only key feature of deflationism about truth left. Given that deflationism about truth entails global deflationism, the only option is to reject the Insubstantiality thesis. The upshot of this is that the deflationist is unable to state the metaphysical aspect of the view about truth: the deflationist cannot claim that truth is different from the other types of properties she wants to contrast truth with, for to do so would be to make metaphysical distinctions the deflationist cannot make. The only option is to hold that the deflationary approach holds for all properties, which means that this is now not simply a thesis about truth, or even about semantic properties in general: it is a global thesis in every sense, as it covers all properties, including those 'scientific' properties that the deflationist originally wished to contrast truth with. (Edwards 2018, 57)

The 'Insubstantiality feature' referred to is of course Deflationism's mast-head contention that truth, while it may be a property in a 'thin' sense conferred merely by its being expressed by a significant predicate, has no *essence*: nothing that can pose a challenge to the metaphysician to further articulate or explain. Edwards is suggesting that this contention 'globalises' – that once truth is regarded as insubstantial, the very distinction between substantial and insubstantial – abundant and sparse – properties is itself a casualty. If truth is insubstantial, all properties are insubstantial, and Deflationism loses the means to make the adverse comparisons which are the stock-in-trade of the view: that whereas *being magnetic*, for instance, is a property with a physical essence which it takes natural science to uncover and describe and, one might suppose, *justice*, for example, is a property – of dealings among moral agents and institutions – whose essence it takes philosophical insight to uncover and describe, nothing of the sort is true of truth.

Now it is true that leading actual Deflationists, as Edwards illustrates, do characteristically welcome something like this result as far as metaphysics is concerned, often writing in ways that are equally disparaging of metaphysical investigations into essences in general. But it certainly seems like a bad result for the Deflationist if they are forced to say the same about the fundamental properties theorised in physical science. How exactly is this consequence supposed to follow?

Edwards' thought is that there are analytic explanatory connections between the notion of truth and other semantic notions such as *reference* and *satisfaction*, notions that are key to the characterisation of the relationships between elements of language – singular terms and predicates – and their correlates in the world – objects and properties. In deflating the notion of truth, we accordingly thereby deflate the materials we need to articulate in detail how the things we say connect with the world, how our thought can represent reality. And

This enforces a *global* deflationism, which severs the connections between language and the world, and rejects the idea that there are interesting things to say about these notions in any contexts. (Edwards 2018, 54)

'But surely', one may protest, 'deflating the concepts we need to use to articulate the semantic relations between language and the world is not the same thing as *severing* those connections'. But let Edwards' reference to severance be overstatement. The result he is aiming for is not that but rather there cannot be, for a Deflationist, any distinction between substantial and insubstantial properties, that to deflate truth is to 'desubstantialise' that very distinction, and thereby to abrogate the means for any kind of disadvantageous comparison between true and being magnetic. How exactly is that meant to follow? I'll quote in full Edwards' key remarks on the point:

In order to draw a contrast between a property like being magnetic and a property like being true, the deflationist needs to be able to say that the property of being magnetic is sparse, in that it grounds genuine similarities and has a causal-explanatory role. These are features of the property that are not captured by the idea that properties are just what predicates refer to, or that properties are the extensions of predicates. *What this suggests is that there is a different relationship in the case of being magnetic between predicate and property: there is a gap between the real, substantive, property and the predicate used to express it. In other words, the property is 'out there', doing work separate from our predications of it, and it cannot simply be explained in terms of being the product of predication. In particular, the fact that we have the predicate 'is magnetic' is because of some significant interactions between the*



property of being magnetic and our language and thought, in that being magnetic is some feature of the world which we come to observe and form words and thoughts to describe.

These ideas lend themselves to the idea that there is a substantive nature to the property of being magnetic, for it is not something that can be fully accounted for by the extension of a predicate. Moreover, *it suggests that there is a more substantial relationship of reference between the property and the predicate: the reason the predicate 'is magnetic' refers to the property of being magnetic is not because the property is a product of the predicate (or the predicate's extension), it is because of some significant relationship between the property of being magnetic and our thought and talk.* (Edwards 2018, 56, my italics)

The crucial thought is voiced by the italicised passages. Sparse properties are by definition 'out there', featuring in the aetiology of our thought and talk. And this 'suggests' that the reference to them that we effect in our thought and talk is 'a more substantial' relation than Deflationism, having deflated truth and thereby reference, can allow.

Edwards use of 'suggests' in that passage indicates, I would venture, a certain uncertainty. For on the face of it, the point is by no means watertight. The following rejoinder is open to the Deflationist. Reference is indeed a metaphysically thin relationship. That it is so is enjoined by its internal relationship to the metaphysically insubstantial property of truth. But there is no general reason why metaphysically insubstantial relations should not obtain between substantial relata. Magnetism can be an aetiologically active element of the world, drawing (if I may be forgiven) our thought and talk towards it, without thereby injecting the real worldly elements of that attraction into the relation of reference itself and thereby making it too worldly and substantial. There is no obvious incoherence in the idea. More generally, deflating the semantic relations need involve no deflation of worldly items in the image of those relations. Tabitha, the cat on the mat, remains a substantial beast even if the converse of the relation of reference that she bears to 'Tabitha' is not. It is no different with properties.

If this is right, then there is no incoherence for Deflationism in maintaining a distinction, very much along the lines that Edwards proposes, between substantial properties – typically, one would expect, those which, like magnetism, are open to scientific analysis – and insubstantial ones. There is no internal pressure on Deflationism to 'globalise' in the fashion Edwards suggests.

### 3. Edwards' second argument against deflationism – the incoherence of abundant monism about truth

Abundant monism about truth, as Edwards conceives it, is the thesis that truth is both a single property, uniform across all truth-apt discourses, and also an abundant property: that is, as he views it, a 'thin' property, a 'shadow' cast by the use of its predicate, devoid of substantial metaphysical essence. Deflationism, in Edwards' view, thus espouses abundant monism about truth. In Chapter 5 of *The Metaphysics of Truth*, he presents a novel argument that abundant monism is incoherent.

The detail of the argument, it merits emphasis, is heavily invested in Edwards' specific way of conceiving the sparse-abundant distinction. While abundant properties, on Edwards' account, are reflections of our linguistic practices – which we may gloss as: properties the details of whose extensions are determined by which sentences involving predication of them are, by the standards of the discourse concerned, correctly described as true, – sparse properties, to the contrary, are real-world constituents – properties the details of whose extensions are fixed by the world itself, which then in turn determines which sentences involving predication of them are correctly described as true. Edwards' argument is that truth cannot coherently be construed as an abundant property on this conception of what an abundant property is.

Here is what he says:

If truth is an abundant property, then to have the property of being true is just to be in the extension of the predicate 'is true' (this is the definition of an abundant property). But, the extension of the predicate 'is true' is determined by the *truth* of sentences involving the predicate 'is true'. The italicized instance of truth in the previous sentence indicates a role for the property of being true in the generation process of the abundant property of being true. This suggests that having the property of being true cannot simply be a matter of being in the extension of 'is true', because what is in that extension is determined by what is true. As a result, truth cannot be an abundant property: there has to be more to it than the extension of 'is true', as the extension of 'is true' is determined by what is true. (Edwards 2018, 95)

What exactly is the train of thought here? Here is one reconstruction. Consider any abundant property F. To suppose that F is an abundant property is, on Edwards' account, to suppose that its extension is determined by our linguistic practice. How exactly? Presumably the intention is that the determination of the extension is effected, more specifically, by our *correct* linguistic practice – correct, that is, by the standards germane to

the relevant discourse. And now, I think Edwards' argument needs to gloss that as: determination, in the light of those standards, as *truthful* linguistic practice.

So now apply that account to truth as a property of sentences. To suppose that truth is an abundant property is, by the lights of this conception of abundance, to suppose that its extension within a given discourse is determined by our linguistic practice, more specifically by our correct – by the standards germane to the relevant discourse – linguistic practice; that is, by our – by those standards – *truthful* linguistic practice.

So we apparently get this upshot:

(\*\*) Which sentences are true is determined by which sentences involving predication of "true" are correctly described as "true", that is: by which sentences of the form "S is true" are true!

And so what? Well, (\*\*) appears to affirm that it is facts about which sentences of the form, 'S is true' are true which determine which sentences, S, are true, so that the extension of 'true' appears to be fixed by certain facts about the extension of the property of being true. But, on Edwards' account of the matter, this is the direction of determination that it is the hallmark of a *sparse* property: the application of the predicate is driven by antecedent facts about the instantiation of the property. Thus we appear to have shown, on the supposition that truth is abundant, that it follows that it is sparse.

So reconstructed, the argument is slippery, and that may of course be a fault of the reconstruction. That acknowledged, we should notice at least two counts on which a Deflationist could object to it as formulated.

One is that the canonical account of the sparseness of F, as Edwards formulates the idea, has it that an object's being F is antecedent to and explains the correctness of predicating 'F' of it. But in the above rendition of Edwards' argument, the object in question *shifts*: it is the truth of the sentence, 'S is true', which supposedly explains the correctness of predicating 'true' of the sentence S. And these are different objects of predication.

Does that matter? Edwards might foreseeably reply that it does not; for we still have (some) facts about truth – the property – apparently explaining facts about the extension of 'true', and that is already enough to assign to truth an explanatory role inconsistent with abundance.

Well, maybe. There is question about what kind of explanation must facts about the behaviour of a property afford of facts about the proper use of an associated predicate in order to count as genuinely upstream

of the latter in a suitably substantial metaphysical sense? Does the upshot of the argument, as expressed in (\*\*), encapsulate an explanation of the relevant kind?

The second objection to the reconstructed argument asserts that it does not, namely, that in (\*\*):

Which sentences are true is determined by which sentences involving predication of “true” are correctly described as “true”, that is, by which sentences of the form “S is true” are true.

the equation of sentences that are correctly described as ‘true’ with sentences that are true is, in this context, thoroughly tendentious, since one cannot legitimately first equate a fact about linguistic practice with a fact about the application of a property – as admittedly the conception of the property in question as abundant in Edwards’ sense licenses one to do – but then proceed to regard facts consequential on the former as if they were consequential on the latter *when that is understood in the mode characteristic of sparseness*. Rather, the facts about truth which are doing the putative explanatory work characteristic of sparseness are, in the first place, simply reconstructions of facts about correct linguistic practice with ‘true’, so may not legitimately be conceived as linguistic-practice independent in the fashion that sparseness, properly understood as Edwards intends, requires.

I suggest this point defeats Edwards’ second argument when it is reconstructed as above. Can it be better reconstructed so as to finesse it? I don’t think so. One way or another the argument needs to insinuate the *property* of truth into the explanans of facts about the extension of ‘true’. The supposition, for *reductio*, that ‘true’ expresses an abundant property gives us only that its extension is determined by our linguistic practice. So, one way or another, the argument needs to parlay those facts – facts about linguistic practice – into facts about truth. If not as indicated in the reconstruction, how else?

That said, I want to conclude this section by canvassing what I see as a more fundamental problem with the argument. Edwards’ key idea is that the substantiality of a property – its sparseness in his terminology – is a matter of world-to-word direction in the explanation of the relevant aspects of linguistic practice. But that was all along an *interpretation* of the notion of substantiality that features in the Deflationist’s characteristic denial that truth is a substantial property, and it is by no means evident that it is the most expedient interpretation for Deflationism’s purposes. Orthogonal to it is the idea of a substantial property as

having – like *being magnetic* or *consisting of water* – some underlying constitutive essence of which a, by normal standards, full understanding of the associated predicate can leave one in ignorance, and thus leave room for further enquiry. Insofar as it is perhaps the most important aspect of Deflationism to offer a platform for a rejection of the traditional metaphysical debates about the nature of truth, it would seem that its central contention should be framed in terms of this latter understanding of the notion. An Edwards-style rejection of the explanatory potential of truth should be a commitment of Deflationism only to the extent that explanations are in view which would indeed call for some kind of underlying essence of truth. There should hence be no implication that truth cannot feature in *any* kind of, by conversational standards, acceptable explanatory contexts. So understood, Deflationism simply has no commitment to the illegitimacy of the kind of explanatory deployment of truth with which Edwards' second argument, whether or not cogently, concludes.

There is in fact a significant problem with foisting Edwards' understanding of the sparse/abundant distinction onto Deflationism. That understanding is intimately tied up with what I earlier proposed are Edwards' implicit concerns with the metaphysics of objectivity – with in effect something like the Euthyphronic contrast between areas of thought and talk which, as in his favoured way of putting it, are responsive to worldly matters and others which are in some sense generative of them. We should surely avoid representing Deflationism about truth as somehow intertwined with commitments concerning that distinction. Deflationism is a global thesis about *all* predications of 'true'. So if truth is abundant in Edward's sense, – that is, if any claim of the form, 'P' is true, falls on the 'generative' side of the responsive/generative distinction, – the same must presumably be true of any conceptual equivalent of such a claim, of which one instance will be the claim that P itself. It thus appears that Edwards' account will commit Deflationism to a kind of global Euthyphronism. Such a thesis, whatever might be said about its coherence, is far from the thinking of most Deflationists.

#### **4. Review of the inflationary argument of chapter 1 of *Truth and Objectivity***

For the reasons reviewed, I think that Deflationism can survive both of Edwards' principal arguments designed to destabilise it. Did I do better in Chapter One of *Truth and Objectivity*?

The argument there purports to disclose an inconsistency between the positive things that Deflationists tend to say about the meaning of 'true' and the negative thesis of the insubstantiality of truth. The former include that 'true', although an adjective and hence – perhaps – expressive of a property in some exiguous sense of the phrase – functions in the language only as an expressive convenience, a resource for endorsement of thoughts and sentences when they are specified by means of noun phrases (whether singular or quantified) and – not obviously equivalent – that the Disquotational Scheme

'P' is true iff. P

and/or the Equivalence Schema for propositions

It is true that P iff. P

may be seen as encoding complete account of the meaning of 'true'.

The *Truth and Objectivity*, chapter One, I argued that a weakened version of the second positive claim, viz. that

DS 'P' is true iff. P

is, whether or not a complete explanation, at least analytically correct of the meaning of 'true', is inconsistent with *conceiving* of truth as only a property in an exiguous sense, requiring no further account.

Here is how the argument proceeded:

Substituting 'Not P' for 'P' in DS provides

(i) 'Not P' is true iff. Not P.

And negating each side of DS provides

(ii) Not 'P' is true iff. Not P.

So from (i) and (ii) by transitivity of the biconditional, we have the negation equivalence:

NE 'Not P' is true iff. Not 'P' is true.

However, in any region of discourse where P and Not P are such that *neutral states of information* may be envisaged – whereby a thinker may be justified neither in the assertion of P nor in that of 'Not P', – the corresponding schema for justified assertibility (henceforward simply assertibility):

(iii) 'Not P' is assertible iff. Not 'P' is assertible

will fail from right to left: for then it can happen that 'P' is not assertible without its negation thereby being assertible. So the DS itself – given only the presumably uncontroversial principle of the equivalence of the negations of equivalents – enforces a potential divergence in extension between 'true' and 'assertible'. Failure of assertibility does not guarantee failure of truth; for if it did one could infer the rhs of NE from the rhs of (iii), then infer the lhs of NE, and then since recognition of truth presumably suffices for assertibility, infer the lhs of (iii), contrary to the neutrality of one's state of information.

If a Deflationist, following Horwich for example, regards the DS as an a priori principle, providing a complete explanation of the concept of truth,<sup>7</sup> this potential divergence must be regarded as of the very essence of the concepts of truth and assertibility. And even if the DS is regarded merely as analytically correct of 'true', it follows that it is essential to the meanings of 'true' and 'assertible' that they potentially diverge in extension: a statement's not being assertible does not entail that it is not true.

So, what's the problem? It emerges as soon as one reflects that the DS itself, conceived as a priori and analytic of 'true', also imposes a certain *normativity* on 'true'. Specifically, it enjoins that reason to assert, or to accept, that 'P' is true is *eo ipso* reason to assert, or to accept P. Hence 'true' is in that sense minimally normative over assertion/acceptance of the members of the relevant substitution class for 'P'. So, of course, is 'assertible'. Indeed, as was observed in Chapter One of *Truth and Objectivity*, a stronger conclusion arguably follows from the status assigned to the DS: viz. the conclusion that 'true' and 'assertible' *coincide* in positive normative force over belief and assertion: reason to regard P as true is *eo ipso* reason to regard it as assertible, and conversely. The potential divergence in extension ensures, nevertheless, that although to pursue the one norm is in this sense to pursue the other, capture of the one need not be capture of the other. And this result, it was suggested, is too big for Deflationism, as naturally understood, to chew. Our concept of truth, if the DS is indeed a priori characteristic of it, is that of a norm over belief and assertion distinct from assertibility (justifiability). That does not, to be sure,

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<sup>7</sup>E.g. Horwich: 'It can be argued that such biconditionals are *epistemologically fundamental* – we do not arrive at them, or seek to justify our acceptance of them, on the basis of anything more obvious or more immediately known. It can be argued, in addition, that our underived inclination to accept these biconditionals is the source of *everything else* we do with the truth predicate' (Horwich 2010, 36).

enforce the idea that there *is* indeed any such norm. But we are committed to thinking that there is if the Deflationist is right about the analytic status of the DS. We are committed to thinking that there is a way an assertion or belief can be in good standing consistently with its not in a present state of information being assertible/justifiable. Surely that is a commitment to 'substance'? Surely it entails that there must be more to say about what truth is?

It's important to stress that the significance of this finding, if it is sustained, is not in its content but its provenance. Richer – for instance representationalist – conceptions of truth will likely regard it as the merest banality that being true is one thing and being assertible (justifiable) something else. What is, perhaps, surprising is that the distinction is apparently enforced merely by an acceptance of the analytic a priority of the DS<sup>8</sup> and the possibility of neutral states of information for claims in the discourse in question. The ways in which 'true' and 'assertible' respectively interact with negation seem to conspire to enforce the idea that 'true', as characterised by the DS marks a dimension in which an assertion can be in good/bad standing that potentially contrasts with warranted assertibility. And that won't marry with the conception of it as a device whose presence in the language is needed only for the purposes of generalisation and indirect endorsement recognised by Deflationism.

For a long time, I thought these considerations were watertight. Even so, they defeat Deflationism only as a thesis about the role that 'true' actually has as characterised by the DS and the orthodox logic of negation. It is open to a *revisionary* Deflationist to insist that this role is metaphysically misconceived – though such a theorist will then face the hard task of explaining how the relevant principles should be modified or replaced. However I have come to think that the Deflationist has no need to go revisionary in order to resist the argument. The foregoing considerations certainly do *allow* of interpretation as enforcing a conception of an assertion's truth as a circumstance of good standing, contrasting with its being warranted in a particular state of information. However there is a case for saying that what the inflationary argument enforces *at a minimum* is nothing so strong but only that, in any discourse dealing in truth-apt contents subject to the DS and standard behaviour by negation, there will be norms operative over the use of its statements additional to simple assertibility – in particular, norms of *restraint*, as required by the

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<sup>8</sup>The thesis that the DS is a *complete* explanation of 'true' is not needed.



possibility of neutral states of information, and – we might add – norms of *retraction*, and *denial*, as required by the possibility of shifting states of information serving to undermine, or override, existing warrants. Any discourse controlled by such a complex pattern of norms will, once ‘true’ is introduced via the DS, throw up the contrasts between ‘true’ and ‘assertible’ that drive the inflationary argument. The Deflationist counter should thus be that while this behaviour by the truth predicate does indeed mark the operation of additional norms over the discourse contrasting with simple assertibility, – that much at least is soundly inferred, – it is a further, and for Deflationism, an unwarranted step to associate the truth-predicate with a ‘circumstance of good standing’ so contrasted. There is an alternative: the enforced contrasts between ‘true’ and ‘assertible’ may be taken merely to reflect, still under the aegis of a fully deflated understanding of the former, the operation of norms – of restraint and denial – that supplement norms of assertibility.

The reader may be unconvinced. How exactly does this rejoinder work? Again, we know that, where neutral states of information are possible, P’s not being assertible is no assurance of the assertibility of its negation. We also know, transitioning right-to-left across the Negation Equivalence, that to be in position to assert its rhs, that

Not ‘P’ is true

– that is, that P isn’t true – *is* to be in position to assert its negation. So we know that ‘true’, as it occurs on the rhs of NE, does not mean ‘assertible’. That much is solid. But does that enforce the idea that it connotes a different norm of good standing? It seems to me that a stubborn Deflationist can insist that it does not. What the Negation Equivalence enforces is that negation and truth commute as prefixes. So all the occurrence of ‘true’ on its right hand side has to mean is something such that the denial that it applies to P is sufficient to ensure the assertibility of the negation of P. Does that have to be an ‘independent norm of good standing’?

I suggest that a positive answer is forced as soon as it is granted that ‘true’ is expressive of a property – meaning by that something more than that it’s meaningful and that its grammatical function is that of an adjective. For then having a property is a *status*, marking a real difference between cases that have it and cases that don’t. And then it is surely irresistible to say the things that the inflationary argument does say: that this property is potentially divergent in extension from assertibility/justifiable believability, but is also normative over belief and assertion. And once

those points are acknowledged, the pertinence of questions like: So how then does truth differ from assertibility? What is its nature? becomes irresistible.

A form of ultra-deflationism can thus survive the *Truth and objectivity* argument. It will be the view not that truth is abundant in Edwards' sense, nor that it is a characteristic of no interesting metaphysical depth, but more radically that, while the grammatical function of 'true' is that of an adjective, correctly applicable to some token sentences and not to others, and while if you must, you can therefore allow that it 'expresses a property', you must beware of over-interpreting what you thereby allow. You had better mean precisely no more and no less than that the word has a range of correct predication. For there is no *status* which its correct application marks. Once it is allowed that there is such a status, the *Truth and Objectivity* argument will engage. Rather, one might say, there is no such thing as the status of *being true*.

As a Philosophy of Truth *in general*, such a view seems to me desperate and unmotivated. But I know of no successful argument that it is actually internally incoherent. And, as intimated earlier, I think it may be useful currency in certain regions of thought.<sup>9</sup>

## 5. Coda

If I am right that Edwards' arguments and mine are ultimately inconclusive, there may seem to be a natural explanation of that. Imagine a community that speaks a language very much like English except that it lacks any truth-predicate or truth operator. It is sometimes suggested that such a language would leave its speakers with certain expressive limitations – that they will have no means to endorse a proposition except by giving it full sentential expression, and they will have no means to quantify over thoughts and sayings and thereby to endorse them collectively but will be constrained to detail the range of the quantifier and endorse the propositions concerned individually – and hence that we can think of 'true' simply as a device that we have for addressing these expressive deficiencies. That however is false. Speakers of the language could say things like, 'I endorse everything the chair said', and 'I affirm Goldbach's conjecture'. But what is true is that speakers of such a language could introduce an adjective whose role was explicitly simply to serve as a device for endorsing propositions and sentences specified in nominal

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<sup>9</sup>See Wright (2021) for more details.

rather than clausal form, or by quantification. Surely there could be a device, explicitly so introduced. And of such a device, it would indeed be a mark of misunderstanding to ask after the character of the property it expressed.

If that is right, then arguments that purport to show that Deflationism is, as it were, incoherent by its own lights – as Edwards’ and my arguments purport to do – face a pretty steep challenge. Surely we *could* have a predicate/operator that functioned for these expressive purposes only, just as Deflationists (sometimes<sup>10</sup>) contend ‘true’ does. Surely there is no incoherence in that bare idea.

The issue about Deflationism, rather, is whether it can possibly do justice to the notion of truth that we actually have throughout its range of application. I am fully in agreement with Edwards in doubting whether it can.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>E.g. Horwich: ‘In fact, the truth predicate exists solely for the sake of a certain logical need’ (Horwich 1998, 2).

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