Does Moral Discourse Require Robust Truth?

Fritz J. McDonald
Assistant Professor
Oakland University

Abstract

It has been argued by several philosophers that a deflationary conception of truth,
unlike more robust conceptions of truth, cannot properly account for the nature of moral
discourse. This is due to what I will call the "quick route problem": There is a quick
route from any deflationary theory of truth and certain obvious features of moral practice
to the attribution of truth to moral utterances. The standard responses to the quick route
problem are either to urge accepting a conception of truth more robust than deflationism
(Boghossian 1990), or to revise deflationary accounts in order to block straightforward
attribution of truth to moral utterances (Field 1994). I contend that neither of these
standard responses is well-motivated, for it is a merit of deflationary accounts rather than
a defect that such accounts present a quick route to moral truth.

Keywords: Deflationism, Truth, Realism, Antirealism, Metaethics, Expressivism

It has been argued by several philosophers that a deflationary conception of truth,
unlike more robust conceptions of truth, cannot properly account for the nature of moral
discourse. This is due to what I will call the "quick route problem": There is a quick
route from any deflationary theory of truth and certain obvious features of moral practice
to the attribution of truth to moral utterances. Due to this quick route from deflationism
to moral truth, any such deflationary conception is supposed to preclude the possibility of

1

formulating an "anti-realist," "expressivist," "projectivist," or "non-factualist" account of ethics. Whether any one of these meta-ethical "isms" is a correct or incorrect view should, these philosophers contend, be a matter for serious debate, not a matter settled in a trivial manner by a theory of truth.

Focus on the question of whether or not deflationary accounts of truth rule out certain meta-ethical theories has resulted in insufficient attention being given to the question of how coherent the account of moral truth purportedly essential to these "isms" actually is, and whether this account of moral truth could be accepted without doing a great deal of harm to our commonsense approach to moral talk as well as our philosophical theories of morality.

In this paper, I will briefly review the features and advantages of three prominent deflationary theories of truth: disquotationalism, prosententialism, and the minimalist theory. Then I will show how each of these theories is open to the quick route problem. Much of the attention in the recent literature has been focused on the minimalist theory, but it ought to be noted that the quick route problem is not only the minimalist's burden. The standard responses to the quick route problem are either to urge accepting a conception of truth more robust than deflationism (Boghossian 1990), or to revise deflationary accounts in order to block straightforward attribution of truth to moral utterances (Field 1994). I contend that neither of these standard responses is well-motivated, for it is a merit of deflationary accounts rather than a defect that such accounts present a quick route to moral truth.

Inflationism and Correspondence

It is worth noting that there are quite good reasons to accept a deflationary conception of truth that stand apart from the considerations related to moral discourse raised in this paper. An inflationary theory is a theory that identifies truth with a property, and then provides an analysis of the underlying nature of that property. On the paradigmatic inflationary account, the correspondence theory of truth, the property of being true is identified with the property of being a proposition that corresponds to the facts. This rough characterization obviously requires further characterization itself. Spelling out what a fact is, and what it would be for a proposition to correspond to such a thing, is a major task of the correspondence theory. Exactly what a fact is and what it would mean for a proposition to correspond to a fact is obscure. Is a fact some sort of sentence-shaped object in the world? Is the correspondence some kind of resemblance? What are the criteria of identity for facts? Can a correspondence theorist avoid the notorious slingshot argument (Davidson 1984)? Is it the case that if a sentence corresponds to any fact at all, it corresponds to all facts?

In order to clarify some of these obscurities, philosophers influenced by Hartry Field's classic paper "Tarski's Theory of Truth" have attempted to spell out the nature of this correspondence not in terms of facts but in terms of the reference of subsentential units. These referential relations are then, in turn, explained in terms of a causal theory of reference. The philosophers carrying out this project have run into serious difficulties. How does one assure that the causal links between a term such as 'Earth' and the Earth itself are specified in the proper way to explain reference? How does a causal theorist of reference distinguish appropriate causal chains from inappropriate causal chains?

Complex theories presented by philosophers such as Fred Dretske (1988) and Jerry Fodor (1990) attempting to specify the proper causal link between words and the world have been found lacking[1].

The case of moral truth raises a particular worry for the correspondence theorist, especially the correspondence theorist who appeals to a causal theory of reference. If such a philosopher were inclined to think moral utterances are capable of being true or false, that philosopher would be forced into accepting what would be widely regarded to be an implausible account of the metaphysics of morality. Only a certain group of philosophers, the naturalistic "moral realists," think that moral properties are properties that figure into causal relations (Boyd 1988, Railton 1986). Philosophers who hold "expressivist" and "constructivist" views, as well as many others impressed by arguments dating back to Hume (2000) and Moore (1903), are skeptical of the claim that moral properties such as goodness, virtue, and justice are invoked in causal explanations and laws. Any correspondence theorist inclined to accept that moral utterances can be true or false would have to answer the Humean, Moorean arguments against naturalism, a major burden. Thus it is worth noting here that it is the inflationary, correspondence account that would be in conflict with a range of meta-ethical views that follow Hume and Moore in rejecting naturalistic moral realism.

Deflationary Theories

Philosophers who have been skeptical of the analyses given by inflationary theories such as the correspondence theory have asked whether it is a mistake to assume

---

[1] Barry Loewer (1987) details the problems presented by misrepresentation for Dretske's theory, and Fred Adams and Ken Aizawa (1994) raise serious problems for Fodor's attempted resolution of the misrepresentation problem.

that there is a property of truth with a substantial underlying nature. Is it necessary to give such an account of the property of truth in order to explain the function of the predicate 'true'? Or is there a different account that fully explains the function of this predicate? If one can give a full account of the function of the truth term without reference to one of these vexed, incomplete theories of the underlying nature of truth, why would any further theorizing be required?

The summaries I will present below will, I hope, make it clear that regardless of the application of the label 'deflationist' to these theories, there are significant differences among these theories of truth. Each of these theories takes a different position on the role of the truth predicate. These theories differ on the issue of whether or not truth is a property. Some of these theories involve complexities such as appeals to substitutional quantification, whereas others do not. It is not uncommon to find objections raised against particular deflationary theories that involve ignorance of the difference between one deflationary theory and another. For instance, the minimalist theory is sometimes criticized for denying that there is a property of truth, even though Horwich (1998b) quite clearly claims that minimalism holds that there is a property of truth.

While these theories may differ in important respects, there are certain features these theories have in common that give rise to the issues I will discuss in this paper. As I will explain in detail in the sections following the summaries, all of these theories share the feature of trivializing the distinction between asserting that p and asserting that p is true. This shared feature, as noted above, plays a significant role in the debates over truth and its relation to meta-ethical controversies.

The Disquotational Theory of Truth

Unlike a Tarskian account of truth, the disquotational theory of truth proposed by W.V. Quine (1970, 1992) and Field (1986) does not require that truth be accounted for in terms of satisfaction, denotation, and recursive rules for sentence construction. Rather, this account claims, as Quine puts it, that "truth is disquotation" (Quine 1992, 80). For any sentence in a language, 'p' is true iff p. One can appeal to truth in order to disquote the sentence mentioned on the left-hand side of this biconditional. This fact, also noted by the Tarskian theory, is regarded as basic on the disquotational account, requiring no further explanation. Anyone with a grasp of the notion of truth will understand that D1 and similar instances of the disquotational schema are acceptable:

D1: 'The Earth moves' is true iff the Earth moves.

The disquotational theory, unlike the minimalist account (discussed below), does not appeal to propositions as the vehicle of truth. The vehicle of truth on the disquotational account is a class of sentences, the eternal sentences. Eternal sentences are context-independent sentences. This requirement is a significant one for this account. For instance, it would be troublesome if the left side of the following schema instance were read relative to one context (say, July 21, 2004) and the right side of the biconditional were read relative to another (July 20, 2004):

D2: 'It is Tuesday today' is true iff it is Tuesday today.

Thus the only proper candidate sentences for instances of the disquotational schema are eternal sentences, sentences with truth values not dependent upon context, such as 'July 20, 2004 is a Tuesday.' The attribution of truth to sentences only, and not to propositions, is appealing to philosophers who are dubious of the existence of propositions.

Unlike a redundancy theory of truth, the disquotational account does not assume that the notion of truth plays no significant role in the language. On this account, it is correctly noted that truth plays the important role of allowing one to formulate generalizations about true sentences. For instance, it would be impossible for a redundancy theorist to account for the fact that all sentences with the logical form $p \lor \sim p$ are true. One can only assert particular instances of this schema, $p \lor \sim p$, and attribution of truth to particular instances of this schema are eliminable redundancies. The disquotational account allows one to semantically ascend from each instance of the schema $p \lor \sim p$ to the metalinguistic level. Take particular instances such as: 'the Yankees will win the World Series $\lor$ the Yankees will not win the World Series' and 'the Red Sox will win the World Series $\lor$ the Red Sox will not win the World Series'. We can then ascend, via the disquotational schema, to the metalinguistic level to assert that 'The Yankees will win the World Series $\lor$ the Yankees will lose the World Series' is true, along with all of the other instances of this schema. Such semantic ascent allows one to assert that the conjunction of all instances of this schema $p \lor \sim p$ are true. By allowing for the construction of such infinite conjunctions, the disquotational account explains the important role played by attributions of truth.

The disquotational account only explains one class of attributions of truth, namely attribution of truth to sentences. How are we to explain other attributions of truth, such as attribution of truth to beliefs? One possible way to do so is to claim that truth is attributed to the propositions expressed by these beliefs. However, if a disquotational theorist appeals to propositions, then there is no significant difference between this account and the minimalist theory discussed below.

A merit of minimalism that is not shared by the disquotational theory is that the disquotational theory cannot explain how we can apply the notion of truth to sentences that we do not understand. A speaker can only comprehend instances of the schema spelled out in her own language; A monolingual English speaker would not know why it is that 'Schnee ist weiss' is true iff *schnee ist weiss*. For this reason, Field restricts the theory of truth to a specific set of utterances, "only…utterances a person understands" (Field 1994, 405). This limitation in the ability of the disquotational theory to explain the concept of truth—limiting the concept to one that only applies to the utterances one understands—is a consequence of the disquotational theorist's refusal to countenance propositions. Without such restrictions, other theories such as minimalism can avoid this limitation of the disquotational theory.

The Prosentential Theory of Truth

The prosentential theorist, like the disquotational theorist, provides an account of the role of the truth predicate in a language. The most significant difference between the prosentential theory and all of the other deflationary theories of truth is the distinctive account the prosentential theorist gives of the role played by the truth predicate. The prosentential theory claims that assertions such as 'That is true' have a function analogous to pronouns.

On one reading of sentence AP, the pronoun 'he' is an anaphoric pronoun:

AP: Derek knew that he needed to hit a home run.

The pronoun 'he' has the same referent as its antecedent, the name 'Derek.' It obtains this referent by being anaphorically dependent upon the antecedent. In addition to anaphoric pronouns, as Grover, Camp, and Belnap (1975) point out, there are anaphoric

proadjectives, such as 'so' in the following quotation from Alexander Pope: "To make men happy and to keep them so" (Grover, Camp, and Belnap 1975, 84). The expression 'so' essentially plays the same role in this sentence as a second occurrence of 'happy' would play, describing how the men being discussed by Pope are kept. The word 'so' inherits its meaning from its antecedent, 'happy.' In the following discourse, DIS1, 'That is true' is, according to the prosentential theory, a prosentence:

DIS1:

Galileo: The Earth moves.

Castelli: That is true.

The prosentence 'That is true,' asserted by Castelli, is anaphorically dependent upon its antecedent, Galileo's assertion 'The Earth moves.' Just as the pronoun 'he' in AP inherits its content from its antecedent and the proadjective 'so' in the Pope quotation inherits its content from the adjective 'happy,' according to prosententialism the prosentence 'That is true' has the same content as its antecedent. Thus, in this context, 'That is true' means that the Earth moves.

The prosentential theory has to contend with one of the difficulties that plagued the redundancy theory of truth. The bare-bones prosentential theory summarized above does not have the resources to explain the meaning of sentences such as K1:

K1: What Kerry said about the Iraq war is true.

In order to explain such occurrences of the truth term, Grover, Camp, and Belnap (1975) claim that the English sentence K1 is equivalent to the sentence K2:

K2: For each proposition regarding the Iraq war if Kerry said that it is true then it is true.

9

As Paul Horwich has pointed out, in order to explain why K1 and K2 are equivalent, one would appeal to the fact that 'true,' *pace* the prosentential theory, is a genuine logical predicate. For K1 is equivalent to saying:

If Kerry said, regarding Iraq, that p, then p.

We can then use the minimalist theory (detailed below) to expand this into:

If Kerry said, regarding Iraq, that <p> is true, then <p> is true.

This expansion is equivalent to K2, but the explanation of how we derived K2 from K1 relies on the resources of the minimalist theory, and, as noted above, relies on considering 'true' a genuine predicate.

The Minimalist Theory of Truth

Minimalism is the view that the meaning of the term 'true' in English (and the meanings of similar terms in other languages) is best analyzed in terms of a fact regarding the use of the term by speakers of the English language. The meaning of 'true' is explained fundamentally by the acceptance of a trivial schema T:

T: <p> is true iff p.

In the schema, '<p>' is short for 'the proposition that p.'

Speakers of English are inclined to accept, for any given proposition, <p>, that the proposition that p is true iff p. According to minimalism, the fact that speakers accept instances of such a schema explains the purpose of the notion of truth, which is to allow one to form generalizations such as 'Everything the president said in his speech was true' and 'All instances of 'if p, then p' are true.' The generalizing role of truth is the sole purpose of the notion of truth. No further facts, beyond acceptance of the schema, are required in order to specify the meaning of the term 'true.'

For reasons that I have discussed above in the sections on the competing deflationary theories of truth, minimalism has a number of advantages over its competitors. Regardless of these differences, as I have noted, there is one key similarity between all deflationary theories. Each deflationary theory makes trivial the distinction between asserting that p and asserting that it is true that p. Whether or not this trivialization of this distinction is troubling will be considered below.

Attribution, Denial, Anomaly

An extensively discussed question in the philosophical field of meta-ethics, primarily in the 20th and early 21st century, is whether utterances pertaining to normative matters generally and moral matters specifically are capable of being either straightforwardly true or straightforwardly false. This question has been raised due to the view, held by many philosophers, that there a significant difference between the class of nonnormative and nonmoral utterances, such as 'The Earth moves' and 'Albany is the capital of New York State' and the class of normative and moral utterances such as 'Rape is wrong,' 'Great inequalities in the distribution of wealth are unjust,' and 'One should be polite in the company of strangers.' This view is due to the wide-spread belief that a characterization of the semantic difference between moral/normative discourse and nonmoral/nonnormative discourse is required in order to characterize the difference between moral/normative matters and nonmoral/nonnormative matters.

One could take one of several positions in response to aforementioned question regarding the truth or falsehood of moral and normative utterances. One could hold that such utterances are either true or false, and therefore in this respect do not differ from the nonmoral and nonnormative utterances. One could hold that such utterances are neither

11

true nor false, and thus differ from the nonmoral and nonnormative utterances in this respect. Or, one could hold that such sentences are capable of being true or false, but are true or false in some distinctive way that indicates the difference between normative/moral utterances and nonnormative/ nonmoral utterances.

One way to spell out this third option, to offer a distinctive kind of truth attribution to these utterances, would be to hold a relativist view. Such a view holds that normative and moral utterances are true or false only relative to a particular individual or social perspective. Another way to spell out such a view would be to claim that the theory of truth for normative and moral utterances differs from the theory one would give for other utterances, as Wright (1992) claims.

In order to simplify the subsequent discussion of this issue and avoid repetition, I will use the following terms to refer to the theses discussed in the previous paragraph. I will call the approach that allows for the straightforward attribution of truth and falsehood to normative and moral utterances the Attribution Thesis. The view denying that truth and falsehood can be attributed to normative and moral utterances will henceforth be called the Denial Thesis. Finally, the theories calling for truth and falsehood of a distinct kind to be attributed to normative and moral utterances will be called instances of the Anomaly Thesis.

The Quick Route to Attribution

On a deflationary theory of truth, including any of the three deflationary theories discussed above, it would seem that there is a fairly quick route from the fact that people make sincere moral assertions to the Attribution Thesis. Using the resources of any of these theories, one can show that the inference from an assertion that p to the assertion

that p is true is a trivial one. Thus as soon as one commits oneself to holding that rape is wrong, one would also commit oneself to hold (if one has a grasp of the notion of truth) that it is true that rape is wrong.

I will show that there is such a quick route on any deflationary theory of truth, and I will offer several arguments for regarding this as a merit of these deflationary theories rather than a defect.

The Quick Route: The Disquotational Theory

The disquotational theory, as I mentioned above, accounts for truth without making appeal, as a Tarskian theories does, to principles regarding predicate satisfaction, denotation, and the role of connectives. It does, however, regard T schema instances along the lines of TR as basic:

TR: 'Rape is wrong' is true if and only if rape is wrong.

Thus, given that 'Rape is a wrong' is a meaningful sentence, the disquotational schema can be applied to a sincere assertion of 'Rape is wrong' to show that truth ought to be attributed by that person to the sentence 'Rape is wrong.'

The Quick Route: The Prosentential Theory

For the prosentential theorist, the quick route from sincere moral assertion to the Attribution Thesis is illustrated by the fact that purported prosentences can be and often are used in contexts where moral assertions are the antecedents of such prosentences. Thus if Larry asserts that 'Great inequalities in the distribution of wealth are unjust,' and Barry responds 'That is true,' what does Barry's assertion mean? On the prosentential account, as noted above, Barry's utterance is anaphorically dependent upon Larry's utterance, and thus his assertion 'That is true' has the same meaning as 'Great

inequalities in the distribution of wealth are unjust.' There is no reason to think that we cannot use the resources of the prosentential theory to form prosentences anaphorically dependent upon moral and normative utterances in just the same way we use these resources to form prosentences anaphorically dependent upon nonmoral and nonnormative utterances.

The Quick Route: The Minimalist Theory

On the minimalist theory, unlike some theories such as disquotationalism and prosententialism, truth is attributed not directly to sentences, but rather to propositions. So, in order to establish that there is a quick route from sincere assertions to the Attribution Thesis on the minimalist theory, we first have to ask whether we should regard moral utterances as assertions that involve the expression of propositions.

On the assumption that an utterance such as 'Rape is wrong' expresses a mental state with propositional content, we would take the utterance to express the proposition that rape is wrong. Is there a reason to reject the claim that the mental state expressed in this situation does express such a proposition? Are such utterances not meaningful? Do we not use them in all of the ordinary contexts in which we also use meaningful utterances? The *prima facie* correct view is that moral utterances do in fact express propositions.

There is some historical precedent for rejecting the *prima facie* view that moral utterances express propositions. A.J. Ayer, in his account of moral language in *Language, Truth, and Logic*, claims that moral utterances do not express propositions for they are unverifiable. Given that there are no propositions expressed by such utterances, and truth is a property of propositions, then moral utterances are not capable of being true

or false[2]. The contemporary deflationist need not accept the verificationist commitments of Ayer's account, hence the deflationist ought not to claim that moral utterances fail to express propositions.

If an utterance of 'Rape is wrong' does express the proposition that rape is wrong, then the following would be an instance of the minimalist truth schema:

TR: <Rape is wrong> is true iff rape is wrong.

Thus, any speaker with an understanding of the notion of truth, according to the minimalist theory, would be able to recognize that the claim that it is true that rape is wrong is a consequence of the truth schema and that rape is wrong. Thus, on the minimalist theory, there is a quick route from asserting that p to asserting that p is true.

Should We Avoid the Quick Route?

If these deflationary theories, along with our practice of moral discussion and argument, give us good reason to affirm the Attribution Thesis, should we regard this as a bad thing? Without delving into the complex details of specific meta-ethical theories, there are several arguments that can be put forward for regarding this quick route to the Attribution Thesis as the appropriate road to take.

First, normative and moral assertions have all of the same surface features as nonnormative and nonmoral assertions. 'Killing is wrong' appears to attribute wrongness to killing in just the same way that 'The Earth is round' attributes roundness to the Earth. Taking this surface structure into consideration provides a *prima facie* reason for regarding this moral utterance as similar in other respects to nonmoral utterances.

---

[2] Boghossian claims that Ayer fails to notice a tension between an emotivist account of ethics and a redundancy theory of truth. This argument of Boghossian's—a quite influential argument—overlooks Ayer's verificationist account of meaning and the role it plays in blocking attribution of truth to moral utterances.

As I will discuss below, some philosophical theories offer reasons to believe that this surface appearance is misleading. These theories claim that apparent moral predications are not genuine predications. On these theories, moral predicates are like "sakes," a well known example discussed in Quine 1960. If I were to say that "I am doing this for Susan's sake," it would be a mistake to think that this sentence involves reference to some strange kind of entity, a sake. An analysis of the meaning of this sentence will show that no reference to sakes is required—what the sentence really means is that I am doing this in order to help Susan.

A question that must be asked about any theory of the meaning of moral terms that attempts to explain away the surface appearance that predicates such as 'right,' 'wrong,' and 'just' are genuine predicates is whether it is reasonable to attribute such a theory to ordinary speakers of a language. One would suspect that no speaker of English takes seriously the apparent reference to sakes in the examples discussed above, and this fact is reflected in our use of the term. Is this really the case with the moral predicates? Is a semantics for moral predicates that regards them as something other than genuine predicates really implicit in ordinary practice?

It is quite clear that moral predicates, unlike 'sake,' do not fit Quine's description of a defective noun. Defective nouns, nouns that function as 'sake' does, have the following features according to Quine:

> …we never use 'sake' as antecedent of 'it,' nor do we predicate 'sake' of anything. 'Sake' figures in effect as an invariable fragment of a proposition 'for the sake of,' or 'for 's sake' (Quine 1960, 236).

Moral terms and predicates do not fit this description. They do not appear only in a restricted sort of context, or within certain idiomatic constructions. Nouns that purportedly denote moral properties can serve as the antecedent to pronouns:

> AN: Lester cares a great deal about economic justice, but his brother Chester
> could care less about it.

And, as has been discussed in this section, it is quite common to find 'good' or 'just' or other normative and moral terms predicated of things and acts.

The opponent of the Attribution Thesis may attempt to defend her view by holding that the ordinary speaker of the language is mistaken to regard apparent moral predicates as genuine. One could do this by offering an account that is not a descriptive account of our ordinary practice, but rather a revisionary one, one that tells us what sort of linguistic practice we ought to have. It is important to note here that any motivation to take such a revisionary route would, for reasons given above, have to be derived from a variety of considerations not related to our actual linguistic practice, such as metaphysical and psychological qualms.

In addition to sharing surface features with nonmoral discourse, attribution of truth to moral utterances is required to account for the role such utterances play in arguments. Take an argument such as:

> P1: If murdering innocent people is always wrong, then murdering a small group
> of innocent people to save the lives of a larger number of innocent people is
> wrong.

> P2: Murdering innocent people is always wrong.

C: Murdering a small group of innocent people to save the lives of a larger

number of innocent people is wrong.

Such an argument certainly appears to have the form of a valid argument, an instance of *modus ponens*. However, if we reject the Attribution Thesis and hold the Denial Thesis, one could not appeal to the truth of these claims and the form of the argument to explain why the truth of these premises would lead, necessarily, to the truth of the conclusion. Acceptance of the Denial Thesis would be tantamount to claiming that there is no possibility of valid moral argument.

If some form of the Anomaly Thesis is held, there will also be serious difficulties in accounting for the validity of moral arguments. For, if the moral statements contained in moral arguments are true in some different way from the nonmoral statements contained in nonmoral arguments, then we need to appeal to a distinct notion of validity that will reflect this distinct kind of truth. Perhaps arguments containing moral statements are valid in some different way from arguments that contain only nonmoral statements. This raises further perplexities. Are arguments containing both moral and nonmoral statements valid in one way, the other, or both? A merit of the Attribution Thesis is that, by attributing truth to normative and moral utterances of the same variety as the truth that is attributed to nonnormative and nonmoral utterances, this thesis requires no revision of our ordinary notion of validity.

That this is so would be a very important result for the philosophers who have offered substantive solutions to the Frege-Geach embedding problem. The very basis for this problem is the worry that one cannot account for the validity of arguments containing moral statements. As G.F. Schueler (1988) points out in his criticism of Blackburn's

response to the embedding Problem, validity is a matter of the truth of the premises necessitating the truth of the conclusion. What purpose would account for validity be without the attribution of truth to moral statements? What would the purpose of the accounts offered by expressivists such as Blackburn (1984, 1988) and Gibbard (1990) be if moral arguments were not in fact genuinely valid ones? Isn't a solution to the Frege-Geach problem intended to show why a moral argument is in fact valid and not an instance of the fallacy of equivocation?

An analogous difficulty for the Denial Thesis is that in order to have a notion of moral knowledge that accords well with our ordinary practice, we need to attribute truth to moral utterances. As Matthew Chrisman notes in his review of Gibbard's *Thinking How to Live*, 'know' is a factive verb—One cannot claim to know a proposition unless that proposition is true. The Denial Thesis

> says that normative sentences are neither true nor false, so if that's true, we cannot
> have normative knowledge. Yet in a Moorean vein, one might reasonably think:
> "Whatever I may or may not know about the semantics of normative language, I
> damn well know that torturing children is wrong." (Chrisman 2005, 408).

Thus the Denial Thesis creates a tension with our commonsense conception of moral knowledge, whereas the Attribution Thesis does not.

Two further reasons for deflationists to assert the Attribution Thesis concern the nature of the deflationary theories themselves, and some theoretical considerations regarding the formulation of deflationism. The deflationist is attempting to give a theory that will capture the ordinary speaker's notion of truth. Also, the deflationary theories are simple and elegant as originally stated. I will discuss each of these considerations in turn.

One of the central aims of deflationary theories is to avoid the difficulties that have plagued previous attempts to define truth by offering an account that is based not on an analysis of the underlying nature of the property of truth, but rather on the use of the truth term by ordinary speakers of a language. These characterizations of the use of the truth term are clearly different on the various deflationary theories, but each theory essentially has the same goal: to give a correct description of the use of the truth term. In giving such a description, these theories are not attempting (as noted above) to give a revisionary account of the practice of attribution of truth to sentences or propositions. The deflationists are not trying to explain a notion of truth that is only grasped by philosophers after consideration of a wide range of metaphysical and epistemological issues.

The philosophers who have advocated the Denial and Anomaly Theses, on the other hand, have different goals and different approaches to characterizing the notion of truth. The central reasons for holding Denial and Anomaly Theses regarding truth in some area of discourse are typically complex philosophical ones. It would be implausible, of course, to attribute an implicit grasp of such philosophical doctrines to the ordinary speaker of the language. Yet, if the proponents of the Denial and Anomaly Theses are correct, the only proper notion of truth is a notion of the sort that can be grasped only after consideration of such doctrines.

Also, as I stated above, among the theoretical merits of the deflationary theories is (to a varying degree among the theories) simplicity and elegance. If the deflationist is moved by the kinds of arguments that have been used to motivate the Denial and Anomaly Theses, then a revision in the deflationist theory will be required. The

deflationist will be forced either to concede that the deflationary theory is only partially correct, and another theory of the truth of normative and moral discourse is required to fully characterize truth. Or perhaps the deflationist will add qualifications to the original theory in order to either block attribution of truth to moral and normative utterances or indicate that truth of a different sort is being attributed to these utterances. To do so would require reducing the simplicity of such theories, hence removing one of the appeals of such theory. The deflationist would be better off affirming the Attribution Thesis. In light of the arguments presented above, there are a number of consideration from outside the deflationary theories themselves that would give the deflationist good reason to accept the Attribution Thesis.

The Purported Conflict with Expressivism

Perhaps it may still be thought that there is a conflict between deflationist theories and prominent meta-ethical theories such as expressivism[3]. A philosopher who would insist this would miss the fact that the central commitments of expressivists, historically, have been to points quite distinct from the matter of truth. Expressivists have been motivated by a metaphysical view, the view that there are no robust moral facts and properties in the world, no properties of goodness, rightness, and justice that would figure into our fundamental causal-explanatory story. They are also motivated by a view of motivation, according to which a desire or desire-like mental event is required in order to explain motivation. In light of this account of motivation, they present an account of meaning according to which the meaning of moral terms is explained in terms of the

---

[3] The arguments to the effect that there is such a conflict are in Boghossian 1990 and Wright 1992. These arguments have been criticized by Horwich 1993 and Hawthorne and Price 1996.

expression of a mental event such as a desire, an emotion, or what Gibbard calls

"expressing a norm." None of these points has anything essentially to do with truth, and

any deflationary conception will not require a philosopher to accept or reject any of these

essential commitments of expressivism. It is important to reiterate, however, that there

would be a tension between the expressivist account of moral facts and properties and a

robust conception of truth. For on an expressivist account, there would be no robust facts

to which moral utterances would correspond, hence the expressivist correspondence

theorist would be forced to reject a commonsense account of moral talk and practice.

That there is no conflict between expressivism and deflationism has been

recognized in a recent book by the prominent expressivist philosopher Allan Gibbard.

Gibbard suggests that the option is open to the expressivist to accept minimalism, and

attribute truth to moral utterances:

> Suppose instead that minimalists are right for truth, and for facts, and for beliefs:
>
> there is no more to claiming "It's true that pain is bad" than to claim that pain is
>
> bad; the fact that pain is bad just consists in pain's being bad; to believe that pain
>
> is bad is just to accept that it is. Then it's true that pain is bad and it's a fact that
>
> pain is bad—so long as, indeed, pain is bad. I genuinely believe that pain is bad,
>
> and my expressivistic theory, filled out, explains what believing this consists in
>
> (Gibbard 2003, 182-183).

If the arguments in this paper for attributing truth to moral utterances are correct, then

expressivists ought not only consider the possibility that a deflationist account of truth is

correct: it would be compulsory for such philosophers to reject any robust account of

truth that would require them to reject common sense regarding moral practice and

argument. Rather than being a problem for deflationism, as is widely thought, it is one of the many benefits of a deflationist account that it allows us to present such an account of morality.

References Cited

Adams, Fred and Ken Aizawa. 1994. "Fodorian Semantics." In Stich, Stephen P. and Ted A. Warfield 1994.

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

Blackburn, Simon. 1984. *Spreading the Word*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

___. 1988. "Attitudes and Contents." *Ethics* 98: 501-17.

Boghossian, Paul. 1990. "The Status of Content." *Philosophical Review* 99: 157-84.

Boyd, Richard. 1988. "How to be a Moral Realist" in Darwall, Gibbard, and Railton 1997.

Chrisman, Matthew. "*Thinking How to Live*." *Ethics* 115: 406-411.

Darwall, Stephen, Allan Gibbard, and Peter Railton. 1997. *Moral Discourse and Practice: Some Philosophical Approaches*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Davidson, Donald. 1984. *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Dretske, Fred. 1988. *Explaining Behavior*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

Field, Hartry. 1972. "Tarski's Theory of Truth." In Field 2001: 3-29.

___. 1986. "Correspondence Truth, Disquotational Truth, and Deflationism." In Lynch 2001: 483-503.

___. 1994. "Disquotational Truth and Factually Defective Discourse." *Philosophical Review* 103: 405-52.

___. 2001. *Truth and the Absence of Fact*. Oxford: Clarendon.

Fodor, Jerry. 1990. *A Theory of Content and Other Essays*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

Gibbard, Allan. 1990. *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

___. 2003. *Thinking How to Live*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Grover, Dorothy. 1992. *A Prosentential Theory of Truth*. Princeton: Princeton University

Press.

Grover, Dorothy, Joseph Camp, and Nuel Belnap. 1975. "A Prosentential Theory of Truth." In Grover 1992: 70-120.

Horwich, Paul. 1993. "Gibbard's Theory of Norms." *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 22: 67-78.

___. 1998a. *Meaning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

___. 1998b. *Truth*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hume, David. 2000. *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Edited by David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Loewer, Barry. 1987. "From Information to Intentionality." *Synthese* 70: pp. 287-317.

Lynch, Michael P., ed. 2001. *The Nature of Truth*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

Moore, G.E. 1903. *Principia Ethica*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press.

O'Leary-Hawthorne, John, and Huw Price. 1996. "How to Stand up for Non-Cognitivists." *The Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 74: 275-92.

Quine, W.V. 1960. *Word and Object*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

___. 1970. *Philosophy of Logic*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

___. 1992. *Pursuit of Truth*. Revised Edition. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Railton, Peter. 1986. "Moral Realism" in Darwall, Gibbard and Railton 1997.

Schueler, G.F. "Modus Ponens and Moral Realism." *Ethics* 98: 492-500.

Wright, Crispin. 1992. *Truth and Objectivity*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.