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*Abstract:* Jamin Asay has recently argued that deflationists about the concept of truth cannot satisfactorily account for our alethic desires, i.e. those of our desires that pertain to the truth of our beliefs. In this brief reply, I show how deflationists can draw on well-established psychological findings on framing effects to explain how the concept of truth behaves within the scope of our alethic desires.

*Keywords:* Truth, deflationism, framing effects

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Philosophers tend to get very excited by ‘What is the nature of \_\_\_\_?’ questions. Debates about truth vividly manifest this tendency, with many theories of truth purporting to reveal the nature of the property (or relation) that a belief, proposition, statement, or etc. must exemplify (or stand in) to be true, rather than untrue. However, in the early twentieth century, a philosophical countercurrent developed according to which this to-ing and fro-ing about the metaphysics of truth is really all for naught.

*Deflationists* about truth aim to demystify debates about truth by urging us to focus on truth-related questions which pertain to our actual linguistic and cognitive practices, rather than truth’s underlying essence. In particular, deflationists propose that we substitute two main questions for the age-old metaphysical question ‘What is the nature of truth?’:<sup>1</sup>

The *linguistic question*: What truth-related terms do we use in ordinary contexts, why do we use these terms, and what do they mean?

The *cognitive question*: What are the possession conditions and function of our ordinary concept TRUTH, and how is this concept related to our other concepts?

The deflationary agenda is an iconoclastic one, and as such, it has faced a steady barrage of criticisms. In this short paper, I want to focus on a recent challenge by Jamin Asay (2022) for deflationary theories of TRUTH, which involves what he calls our ‘alethic desires.’ After describing deflationism about TRUTH in a bit more detail and outlining Asay’s challenge, I will show how the challenge can be addressed using well-established findings in psychology on framing effects.

## 2. CONCEPTUAL DEFLATIONISM

Whatever else we want to say about its features, the concept TRUTH is meant to be a mental entity that thinkers deploy whenever they have thoughts involving truth. For instance, if I believe that some of the things that Susan says about Rembrandt are true or doubt that certain

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<sup>1</sup> For overviews, see e.g. Armour-Garb & Woodbridge (2021) and Wyatt (2021). In what follows, I use small caps to denote concepts.

statements in a late-night infomercial are true, then it would be standardly held that I deploy the concept TRUTH in having these thoughts.<sup>2</sup>

We can take deflationism about TRUTH, or *conceptual deflationism*, to be the following view:<sup>3</sup>

(CD) TRUTH's possession conditions are provided by some deflationary account of the word 'true,' and it would not be advantageous for humans to replace TRUTH with a concept TRUTH<sup>+</sup> that is identical to TRUTH except that it has more demanding possession conditions.

It will be helpful to work with a specific development of (CD). Perhaps the most influential variety of (CD) emerges from Paul Horwich's *minimalist conception* of truth. According to the minimalist conception, to know the meaning of the word 'true' is to be disposed to accept every instance of the *Equivalence Schema* in the absence of supporting evidence.<sup>4</sup>

(ES)  $\langle p \rangle$  is true iff  $p$ .

Minimalism also has it that possession of the concept TRUTH goes hand in hand with knowing the meaning of 'true.' This means that a person  $A$  possesses TRUTH iff  $A$  is disposed to accept every instance of (ES) in the absence of supporting evidence.

TRUTH's function, according to Horwich, is to enable us to make certain sorts of *generalisations*.<sup>5</sup> Suppose, for instance, that I know that Philip is a respected authority on horticulture. Maria tells me that Philip has just reported an innovative discovery about soil health, though she's not sure what it was. I'm inclined to believe the relevant proposition  $\langle p \rangle$ , but I face a cognitive predicament: I can only identify  $\langle p \rangle$  indirectly, e.g. as 'Philip's recent claim about soil health.'

Horwich points out that the minimal concept TRUTH provides me with a straightforward solution to this cognitive predicament. Given that I possess TRUTH, I can believe the proposition that is expressed by:

(1) Philip's recent claim about soil health is true.

This proposition is materially equivalent to the infinite disjunctive proposition that is expressed by:

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<sup>2</sup> More can certainly be said about TRUTH's nature, but for present purposes, this basic description of TRUTH will suffice. In what follows, we will examine the minimalist conception of TRUTH, which is focused primarily on TRUTH's possession conditions and function, rather than its nature.

<sup>3</sup> Cp. Bar-On & Simmons (2007, pp. 62, 68).

<sup>4</sup> Horwich (1998, pp. 35-36, 128, 145, 2010, pp. 19, 35, 37, 41, 47, 80, 158-159; ch. 5, nn. 11, 15). Horwich (2010, pp. 42, 47-48; ch. 3, n. 10) later revises this account in a few respects. In what follows, we can safely set the complexities of this revised account aside.

Angle brackets denote propositions.

<sup>5</sup> Horwich (1998, pp. 2-5, 37, 122-125, 141, 145, 2010, pp. 304-305).

(2) If Philip's recent claim about soil health =  $\langle$ applying dandelion petals to soil promotes its health $\rangle$ , then applying dandelion petals to soil promotes its health, and if Philip's recent claim about soil health =  $\langle$ applying orange juice to soil promotes its health $\rangle$ , then applying orange juice to soil promotes its health, and...

Accordingly, if I am eventually able to determine that, say, Philip's recent claim about soil health =  $\langle$ applying dandelion petals to soil promotes its health $\rangle$ , then given my belief in the proposition expressed by (1), I can infer that applying dandelion petals to soil promotes its health.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, the minimalist maintains that humans have no need for a concept  $TRUTH^+$  whose possession conditions are more demanding than those of  $TRUTH$ . For instance, let the possession conditions of  $TRUTH^T$  be the minimalist possession conditions, plus the Tractarian condition that one think of true entities as being propositions that picture facts. The minimalist's contention is that our comparatively stripped-down concept  $TRUTH$  does all of the things that we need a concept of truth to do, so that insofar as its possession conditions go beyond those of  $TRUTH$ ,  $TRUTH^T$  is merely a cognitive bauble.

### 3. THE ALETHIC DESIRE CHALLENGE

#### 3.1. The challenge

Let us turn now to Asay's challenge for conceptual deflationism. Asay's contention is that conceptual deflationists cannot offer a satisfactory account of our *alethic desires*, where  $A$ 's alethic desires are those of  $A$ 's desires that pertain to the truth of  $A$ 's beliefs.<sup>7</sup> He develops this challenge using an interesting case:<sup>8</sup>

Phil and Sophia are historians discussing the 2008 earthquake in Sichuan province. Sophia has extensively studied the earthquake and its effects, and Phil is inquiring into how many people died as a result. Sophia tells Phil that approximately 87,000 people died, and Phil makes a note of it for his own research. Later, Sophia reflects on how important it is to her that she got the facts right; Phil's research on the cultural impacts of natural disasters in East Asia is important, and she would be upset if she had inadvertently misled him. Sophia sincerely believes that approximately 87,000 people died because of the quake, and desires that her belief is true, that she has formed the right opinion about the matter. If her belief weren't true, if she had made a mistake in her own research, then Sophia would be upset[...]

But Sophia is no monster. She rightly believes that the earthquake was a terrible tragedy, and has tremendous empathy for all who suffered as a result. Sophia wishes that the earthquake had never happened. In other words, in no way does Sophia desire that 87,000 people died because of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake. What this case shows is that one can desire that one's belief that  $p$  is true without desiring that  $p$ .

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<sup>6</sup> Other important use cases for the minimal concept  $TRUTH$  include endorsing logical laws and endorsing certain general epistemic policies (see e.g. *ibid.*, pp. 122-125).

<sup>7</sup> Asay (2022, p. 205).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 205, 207. I've replaced Asay's 'tens of thousands of people' with 'approximately 87,000 people,' as this makes the case a bit easier to process and analyse.

Let  $b$  be Sophia's belief that approximately 87,000 people died in the 2008 Sichuan earthquake. Let  $d_1$  be the desire that  $b$  is true, and let  $d_2$  be the desire that approximately 87,000 people died in the 2008 Sichuan earthquake. Asay's *alethic desire challenge* is that while it is possible for Sophia to have  $d_1$  without having  $d_2$ , conceptual deflationism entails that if Sophia has  $d_1$ , then she must have  $d_2$  as well.

To illustrate, consider what minimalism seems to tell us about Sophia's case. According to minimalism,  $A$  possesses TRUTH iff  $A$  is disposed to accept every instance of (ES) in the absence of supporting evidence. As Sophia possesses TRUTH, she will be disposed to accept the following instance of (ES):

(3)  $\langle$ approximately 87,000 people died in the 2008 Sichuan earthquake $\rangle$  is true iff approximately 87,000 people died in the 2008 Sichuan earthquake.

It looks to follow that if Sophia desires that her belief that approximately 87,000 people died in the 2008 Sichuan earthquake is true, then she must also desire that approximately 87,000 people died in the 2008 Sichuan earthquake. For this reason, minimalism appears to entail that it isn't possible for Sophia to have  $d_1$  but not  $d_2$ , which seems implausible. If this challenge holds up, then it follows that minimalism fails to account for the behaviour of TRUTH within the scope of our alethic desires.

### 3.2. A response

To see how the minimalist should address this challenge, we should first recall that according to minimalism, one's possession of TRUTH consists in a *disposition*—namely, the disposition to accept every instance of (ES) in the absence of supporting evidence. As Horwich emphasises, this disposition can be overridden by other factors.<sup>9</sup> This is unsurprising, as the same holds of dispositions generally. A fragile champagne flute is disposed to shatter if it is dropped onto a wooden floor from a height of 1.8 metres. However, this disposition would be overridden if a few seconds before it hit the floor, the flute were sprayed with quick-drying liquified plastic that safeguarded it from shattering.

Sophia's case involves a psychological factor that is likely to override her disposition to accept (3)—namely, *attribute framing*. A *framing effect* occurs when 'different message frames change and even reverse people's judgments and decisions about equivalent choice problems.'<sup>10</sup> Attribute framing is a specific kind of framing effect which occurs when 'some characteristic of an object or event serves as the focus of the framing manipulation.'<sup>11</sup>

A notable example of attribute framing is the finding by Levin & Gaeth (1988) that their participants evaluated samples of ground beef differently, depending on whether they were described as '75% lean' or '25% fat.' Specifically, participants in the '75% lean' condition tended to rate the ground beef as being better tasting, less greasy, higher quality, and leaner than participants in the '25% fat' condition. This finding was surprising, since it seems clear that for a sample of ground beef to be 75% lean just is for it to be 25% fat, and

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<sup>9</sup> Horwich (1998, § 10, p. 136, 2010, p. 47).

<sup>10</sup> Carpenter (2018, p. 1).

<sup>11</sup> Levin, Schneider, & Gaeth (1998, p. 150). See also *ibid.*, p. 181 and Leong, McKenzie, Sher, & Müller-Trede (2017, p. 1147), and cf. Fisher (2022, pp. 967, 969) and Piñon & Gambará (2005, pp. 325-326).

vice versa. The finding illustrates the fact that even in rather ordinary cases, our evaluations of objects can be significantly affected by attribute framing.<sup>12</sup>

The key thing to notice here is that Sophia's desires are likely affected by attribute framing. In this case, we are dealing with a single event. This event  $e$  involves Sophia's belief  $b$  (or more precisely:  $b$ 's propositional content) being true, and it also involves approximately 87,000 people dying in the 2008 Sichuan earthquake.<sup>13</sup> For present purposes, we can take these two predicates to pick out a single attribute  $F$  of  $e$ , given that attribute framing is standardly defined in terms of a single attribute/characteristic of an object or event.<sup>14</sup>

We can think of Sophia as being in either of two conditions, each of which involves a particular way of framing  $F$ . In condition 1, she is asked, 'Do you desire that the belief that you communicated to Phil be true?' This question frames  $F$  positively, as we generally think that it is good for our beliefs to be true, rather than untrue (and Sophia certainly thinks this way about her belief). In condition 2, Sophia is asked 'Do you desire that approximately 87,000 people died in the 2008 Sichuan earthquake?' This question frames  $F$  negatively, as we generally think that it is bad for 87,000 people to die due to an earthquake (and it is clear that Sophia does indeed think this). Given these frames, it wouldn't be surprising if Sophia responded affirmatively in condition 1 and negatively in condition 2.

Since attribute framing is at work in Sophia's case, Asay's diagnosis of this case is no threat to minimalism. The minimalist holds that since she possesses TRUTH, Sophia is disposed to accept (3). They can also hold that this disposition is overridden by the differentially valenced frames of the relevant attribute  $F$  and that these frames lead Sophia to form  $d_1$  but not  $d_2$ . Accordingly, Asay's diagnosis doesn't reveal anything about TRUTH's possession conditions or its function. Rather, it exemplifies the fact that our desires can be affected by differently valenced frames of the same attribute.<sup>15, 16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Levin & Gaeth (ibid., p. 376) found that the effect was weaker, yet still present, when their participants tasted the ground beef.

<sup>13</sup> We might also take the relevant entity to be a state of affairs, in which case we would need to tweak Levin, Schneider, & Gaeth's definition of attribute framing.

<sup>14</sup> If we took the predicates to pick out two, necessarily co-exemplified attributes, then Levin, Schneider, and Gaeth's definition of attribute framing would need to be revised accordingly (note that the same point applies to Levin and Gaeth's ground beef experiment).

<sup>15</sup> An anonymous referee suggested that for this framing effect to arise, there must be a conceptual difference between the desire that  $p$  and the desire that  $\langle p \rangle$  is true, whereas the minimalist must deny that such a difference exists. However, the minimalist can in fact grant that this conceptual difference exists, just as they grant that instances of ' $\langle p \rangle$  is true' and ' $p$ ' express different propositions (see Horwich, 1998, § 9). Regarding TRUTH, the minimalist's key commitments are those outlined in §2.

<sup>16</sup> Lloyd Humberstone has suggested (p.c.) that there is a possible version of Sophia's case in which she *explicitly* accepts (3), has desire  $d_1$ , and lacks desire  $d_2$ . She is aware that that these attitudes are in mutual tension, but still, she has them. Can the minimalist account for this case?

They can, and in much the same way. It remains the case that (3)'s left-hand side is positively framed while its right-hand side is negatively framed. Accordingly, if Sophia has  $d_1$  yet lacks  $d_2$  while explicitly accepting (3), then a natural explanation for this is that her desires have been affected by the differentially valenced frames of the relevant attribute  $F$ . She explicitly accepts that (3)'s left-hand side is (materially, necessarily materially, or etc.) equivalent to its right-hand side, but the strong psychological effects of these frames persist (on this sort of phenomenon, see Fisher (2022, n. 3)). Again, this explanation is clearly compatible with minimalism.

Note that we can plausibly explain Levin and Gaeth's findings along similar lines. Since they possessed the concepts SAMPLE, PERCENTAGE, 75, 25, LEAN, FAT, and GROUND BEEF, Levin and Gaeth's participants were disposed to accept:

(4) A sample *s* of ground beef is 75% lean iff it is 25% fat.

However, the frames that appear in (4) and in the two conditions of Levin and Gaeth's experiment are differently valenced: '75% lean' frames the relevant attribute positively, whereas '25% fat' frames it negatively.<sup>17</sup> These frames likely overrode the participants' disposition to accept (4) and led them to evaluate the samples of ground beef differently. Accordingly, Levin and Gaeth's findings don't (nor are they meant to) reveal anything about the possession conditions or the functions of the relevant concepts. Rather, what they teach us is that human attitudes are fickle insofar as they can be shaped by attribute framing.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

In this brief reply, I've aimed to address Asay's alethic desire challenge for conceptual deflationism. My response underscores a general methodological point: that when philosophers investigate human cognition, it is vital that they draw on relevant findings in fields such as psychology and cognitive science. My response also indicates that the minimalist account of TRUTH provides us with the resources that we need to understand the role that TRUTH plays within the scope of our alethic desires. Minimalists and other advocates of conceptual deflationism must address a host of additional concerns.<sup>18</sup> With the alethic desire challenge out of the way, however, we should be more confident that minimalism provides us with an accurate account of the possession conditions and function of TRUTH.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to the audience at the 2022 Meeting of the Australasian Association of Philosophy, and especially to Lloyd Humberstone, for helpful discussion.

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<sup>17</sup> Of course, there is more to say about the psychological and linguistic mechanisms at work here; see Fisher (2022) and the references therein.

<sup>18</sup> See e.g. Armour-Garb & Woodbridge (2021) and Wyatt (2021).

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