

# THE ELUSIVE NATURE OF TRUTH

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*Me gentle Deba beckons from the plain,  
Then, hid in shades, eludes her eager swain*

— POPE

## Abstract

*In this essay, I present a new argument for the impossibility of defining truth by specifying the underlying structural property all and only true propositions have in common. The set of considerations I use to support this claim take as their inspiration Alston's recent argument that it is impossible to define truth epistemically—in terms of justification or warrant. According to what Alston calls the "intensional argument", epistemic definitions are inconsistent with the T-schema or the principle that it is true that  $p$  if, and only if,  $p$ . Since the T-schema has great intuitive appeal, this is a powerful indictment of epistemic theories. But the basic argument that Alston employs, and the constellation of considerations which prosecute that argument, work against a much broader range of views than he considers. While this implies that a traditional conceptual analysis of truth may be impossible, it opens the door to a pluralist approach to truth.*

Attempts to define truth have never met with spectacular success. Philosophers offer various explanations for this fact. Traditionalists say that it simply reveals the difficulty of the problem. Work harder, they counsel, and we may yet succeed. Deflationists grumble that any attempt to define truth is misguided from the start. They claim that we can't define truth because there is nothing to define. And a third camp agrees that definitions of truth are unlikely, but stubbornly maintains that there is still something interesting and important about the concept.

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In this essay, I present a new argument for the impossibility of defining truth in the classical sense—we cannot analyze truth in terms of an underlying structural property that all and only true propositions share. The set of considerations I use to support this claim take as their inspiration W. P. Alston's recent argument that it is impossible to define truth epistemically—in terms of justification or warrant. According to what Alston calls the "intensional argument", epistemic definitions are inconsistent with the T-schema, or the principle that it is true that  $p$  if, and only if,  $p$ .<sup>1</sup> Since the T-schema has great intuitive appeal, this is a powerful indictment of epistemic theories. But the basic argument that Alston employs, and the constellation of considerations which prosecute that argument, work against a much broader range of views than he considers. At the very least, they show that a conceptual analysis of truth is even more complex and intractable than previously thought.

Arguments for the indefinability of truth are not unfamiliar. Frege, for instance, once claimed as much.<sup>2</sup> And Donald Davidson has declared that it is "folly" to define truth.<sup>3</sup> So the overall lesson you draw from this essay will probably depend on your prior stance on the issue. An optimistic traditionalist may well decide that I have given a *reductio ad absurdum* of Alston's initial argument. The pessimistic deflationist will take it as another reason to give up on a misguided project. A third reaction, neither traditionalist nor deflationist, opens the door to a functionalist understanding of truth.

## 1 Conceptual Equivalence and the T-schema

If there is one thing that philosophers agree on regarding truth, it is that the following schema tells us something important about the concept:

TS (T-schema) it is true that  $p$  if, and only if,  $p$ .<sup>4</sup>

Specifically, there is general agreement about the necessary truth of its non-pathological, direct instances (what I'll call "T-propositions").<sup>5</sup> A T-proposition's component propositions have the same truth-value in every possible world.

A familiar explanation for the truth of TS is that “*p*” and “it is true that *p*” always express the same proposition, they are *synonymous*. But this deflationary reading isn’t the only one available. William Alston takes TS to exemplify what he calls the “realist conception” of truth, according to which a proposition is true if, and only if, what the proposition is about is as the proposition says that it is (p. 1). According to Alston, T propositions are “conceptually, analytically true, true by virtue of the meanings of the terms involved, in particular the term ‘true’” (p. 27). Nonetheless, the two sides of a T proposition are not synonymous, “the proposition that grass is green is true” says something more than the mere assertion that grass is green. The first is a statement about a proposition, the second is about grass (p. 47).

Alston’s position illustrates that equivalences like TS can be interpreted differently. This is not always recognized. For instance, one shouldn’t confuse TS with Tarski’s Convention T or the related “disquotational schema”

DS “S” is true if, and only if, S

Here, truth is being ascribed to sentences, not propositions. Instances of DS are therefore contingent truths. They display an *extensional equivalence* between certain sentences. Each half of the biconditional supplies necessary and sufficient conditions for the truth of the other half in the actual world. *Conceptual* equivalences, like T propositions, are necessary truths. But not all necessarily true equivalences are conceptual equivalences. For example, there are necessary *a posteriori* equivalences, such as

(1) this is water IFF this is H<sub>2</sub>O

(I’ll use “IFF” as a symbol for a necessary equivalence.) A proposition like (1) is necessarily true but—at least on some accounts—not true in virtue of the intensions or concepts involved. This shows that modal properties alone do not distinguish conceptual equivalences from other equivalences. Neither do epistemic properties—for example, whether the equivalence or its instances are knowable *a priori*. Even if all conceptual equivalences are *a priori*, not all necessary *a priori* equivalences are conceptual. For instance,

$$(2) 5,653 + 847 = 6,500 \text{ IFF } 22 - 3 = 19$$

is a necessary a priori truth<sup>6</sup> Both of its component propositions have the same truth-value in every world because each is true in every world Yet arguably, (2) is not a conceptual equivalence While each *half* of the equivalence may be a conceptual or analytic truth it needn't follow that there is a conceptual or analytic connection *between* the halves Surely it is the conceptual connection between the halves which makes an equivalence worth calling a conceptual equivalence

I shall call a necessarily true biconditional a conceptual equivalence just when one grasps it a priori in virtue of a conceptual connection between its component propositions Being a conceptual equivalence is a matter of degree At one end of the spectrum, understanding the right-hand side of a conceptual equivalence implies an understanding of the left hand side and vice versa The most obvious example are propositions of this sort

$$(3) \text{ John is a bachelor IFF John is an unmarried adult male}$$

Call equivalences like (3) *heavyweight conceptual equivalences* Heavyweight conceptual equivalences are necessary truths that one grasps a priori in virtue of the fact that their component propositions are synonymous, or identical in content There are also weaker conceptual equivalences—equivalences that are necessary and a priori in virtue of the concepts involved, but lack synonymous component propositions For instance, it seems necessary and a priori that

$$(4) \text{ this object has a shape IFF this object has a size}$$

Understanding that something has a size is impossible without understanding (perhaps implicitly) that it also has a shape—even if it is an indefinite shape Yet to talk about shape and size is not to talk about the same thing So (4) is a weaker conceptual equivalence than (3) Call (4) a *middleweight conceptual equivalence* (4) is clearly weaker than (3) but not so weak as

$$(5) \text{ An omniscient being knows that snow is white IFF snow is white}^7$$

The concept of an omniscient being requires that it have knowledge of any state of affairs. However, understanding that snow is white does not require that one understands anything (even implicitly) about omniscience. In the sense in which (4) is weaker than (3), (5) is weaker than (4). Of course, we may have trouble distinguishing very weak conceptual equivalences of this sort from equivalences whose necessity derives from other (i.e. nonconceptual) sources. But let us waive such concerns for the moment and say that (5) is a *lightweight conceptual equivalence*.

Biconditionals are transitive. Thus, two material equivalences that share a component proposition can entail a third  $[(p \equiv q) \& (q \equiv r) \supset (p \equiv r)]$ . But intuitively, a conceptual equivalence cannot pass on more conceptual weight than it has. Compare this to epistemic justification: epistemically speaking, it is permissible to infer a weakly justified belief from one that is strongly justified, but not vice versa. A belief cannot make another belief more justified or probable than it is itself. Thus a chain of such inferences is only as strong as its weakest member. Analogously, one conceptual equivalence cannot make another weightier than it itself. An equivalence cannot be shown to be heavy or middle weight by a chain of equivalences one of whose members is lightweight.<sup>8</sup>

To return to the T-schema, the weight class of T-propositions is a matter of contention. Deflationists typically see them as heavy-weight conceptual equivalences like (3). Thus the deflationist's chief evidence for believing that truth talk is "content-redundant." Alston, on the other hand, believes that T-propositions are lightweights akin to (5). On his view, the two halves of a T-proposition differ in content, but one can grasp that grass is green and "yet lack the concept of truth" (p. 48). The more usual view amongst non-deflationists, however, and in my opinion the most plausible position, is that T-propositions are middleweight equivalences like (4). As Crispin Wright has remarked, it is a platitude that "to assert is to present as true" (1992, p. 34). The concept of truth may not be required to understand any particular proposition, but it is required to grasp the concepts of assertion and something being the case. For how could one know the difference between something being the case and its not being the case, or between assertion and denial, with

out understanding the difference between truth and falsity? As I see it, an implicit understanding of the concept of truth is required to understand any proposition

This essay is concerned with attempts to define our concept of truth, but the word “definition” is notoriously difficult to define. One often hears it said that in the halcyon days of yore, our predecessors attempted to conceptually analyze or define concepts in a very strong sense—by providing heavyweight conceptual equivalences for the concepts in question. I have my doubts about this tall-tale. Even without much reflection, it seems highly doubtful that one could provide *that* sort of analysis for any philosophically interesting concept. In any event, now days philosophers are less interested in reduction and more interested in definitions or analyses which draw illuminating connections between concepts. Of course, such connections are still conceptual and are typically represented by biconditionals—at least they are when the subject is truth, as any survey of the recent literature will attest. Therefore, in this essay, I shall take instances of the following to be conceptual definitions or analyses of truth

(TD) It is true that  $p$  IFF the proposition that  $p$  is  $X$ ,

where “ $X$ ” stands for some property, relational or otherwise, and where the “IFF” denotes a less than heavyweight conceptual equivalence.<sup>9</sup>

## 2. Alston’s Intensional Argument

For Alston, to grasp the concept of truth is to understand that “the content of a proposition determines a (necessarily) necessary and sufficient condition” for its truth (p. 27). In this sense, Alston’s account is *minimalist*. It is also *realist* in that Alston takes the T schema to imply that truth is a genuine non-epistemic property of propositions, he rejects deflationism. Thus, Alston rightly categorizes his view as a *minimal realism* (p. 37). Alston’s positive account of truth deserves serious attention, certainly more than I am able to give it here.<sup>10</sup> But his minimal realism is not my topic. I want to discuss the implications of what Alston calls his *intensional argument* against epistemic accounts of truth.

As we shall see, the “intensional argument” actually denotes a family of considerations aimed at undermining a particular assumption that lies behind epistemic analyses of truth. I should note at the outset I am more interested in the argument itself than in Alstonian interpretation. Thus my way of presenting these considerations differs markedly from Alston’s at certain points.

The “epistemic accounts” Alston has in mind attempt a conceptual definition or analysis of truth in epistemic terms. Such views assert a conceptual equivalence between a proposition’s being true and its having an epistemic property of some sort. Alston takes the strongest epistemic theory of truth to be Putnam’s internal realist view as it was in 1981—roughly, the idea that truth is justifiability in ideal conditions (p. 195). Putnam has subsequently pointed out that he never took the theory as a “reductive” analysis of truth—one which defined truth in terms of more basic epistemic notions (1989, p. 115). Instead, he claims the two concepts are *interconnected* (*ibid.*). This implies that understanding the one concept requires an understanding of the other, which in turn suggests that Putnam’s takes instances of the following as middleweight conceptual truths:

- (E) It is true that  $p$  IFF the proposition that  $p$  would be ideally justified (that is,  $p$  would be justified under ideal epistemic circumstances)

Whether or not this is correct as an interpretation of Putnam, (E) is a reasonable representative of epistemic accounts of truth. Alston’s basic argument against (E) is simple. The point of the T schema is that a proposition specifies the necessary and sufficient conditions under which it is true. But (E) implicitly denies this. The content of the proposition (obtaining) isn’t sufficient or perhaps even necessary according to (E)—it requires something more. The proposition in question must have a certain epistemic status. Snow’s being white is not sufficient in order for it to be true that snow is white, what is necessary and sufficient for the truth of the proposition is that the proposition—or a belief with that proposition as content—be justified in ideal epistemic circumstances.

When first encountering this point, many people react with exasperation. Surely, *that* can’t be right, they say—there is more to be

said. Indeed, as Alston admits, this first remark only establishes a “*prima facie* case for incompatibility of the T-schema with an epistemic conception of truth” (p. 211). The full nature of the intentional argument only becomes apparent when one considers the natural objections to this initial point. The objections that Alston discusses himself he treats as distinct. In fact, they are all variations of a single strategy, one which usefully brings to light a particular assumption implicit in any attempt to analyze truth. The assumption is that there is a bridge-principle which connects the T-schema with the purported definition in question. Specifically, it seems that we could make TS consistent with the epistemic conception of truth by deriving that conception from TS together with the following premise:

(E2) *p* if, and only if, the proposition that *p* would be ideally justified.

If one grants the transitivity of the biconditional, the form of the argument is straightforward. The claim is that one can grant the conceptual truth of TS while holding (E) as the correct definition of truth because TS and (E2) together imply (E).

The success of the point depends on how we interpret (E2).<sup>11</sup> There seem to be four possible interpretations. Interpretation A is that (E2) is a non-conceptual truth of some sort. There are two ways in which a proposition can be non-conceptually true: it can either be a contingently true proposition, or it can be necessarily true but not in virtue of the concepts involved. The first, and less plausible, of these alternatives is the one that Alston considers, but the stronger version fares no better. The more plausible version is that (E2)—like (1) above—is a metaphysical claim. The epistemic theorist is explaining what it is for a certain state of affairs (snow’s being white) to obtain. It is a necessary truth (a *synthetic a priori* truth perhaps) that when *p* obtains it is ideally justifiable and vice versa. But so interpreted, (E2) not only smacks of idealism, the conclusion that the derivation supposedly guarantees becomes unwarranted. A realist can grant the inference and yet deny that this fact implies anything about the *concept* of truth. Specifically, one can grant (E2) without thereby believing that our concept of truth is definable as idealized justifiability. For suppose it could be the case that *p* just when the

proposition that *p* is ideally justifiable—this could merely be a fact about the limits of the universe or the extent of our minds. So interpreted, (E2) need not entail any particular conception of truth at all.

Interpretation **B** of (E2) involves what Alston calls a reinterpretation of content (p. 214). A defender of the epistemic conception of truth might try to get around the intensional argument by claiming that any instance of the right hand side of the T-schema, such as

snow is white

“states” that *that proposition* would be justified under ideal epistemic conditions. In other words, (E2) is a heavyweight conceptual equivalence—even if (E) itself is not. This strategy has the merit of directness, and it certainly allows the epistemic view to use the T-schema. But it faces not only the problems of the more modest interpretations of (E2) (see below), it implies a rather nasty regress. To take (E2) as a heavyweight equivalence amounts to saying that any proposition is a proposition about the epistemic status of some proposition, namely itself. As Alston points out, this implies that it is impossible to specify which proposition it is that I am talking about (p. 216). For if every proposition is a proposition about the epistemic status of itself, then the proposition that *p* is the proposition that *the proposition that p would be ideally justified*. It follows in turn that the proposition that *the proposition that p would be ideally justified* is identical to the proposition that *the proposition that the proposition that p would be ideally justified would be ideally justified*. And so on. The content of our statements is unspecifiable, and so interpretation **B** ends at incoherence.<sup>12 13</sup>

One might wonder if the epistemic theorist couldn't deflect this argument by pointing out that a similar regress obtains in the case of “true” itself. That is, if one takes the T-schema as a heavyweight conceptual equivalence, then asserting that *p* is equivalent to asserting the proposition that *p* is true. And to assert the proposition that *p* is true is equivalent to asserting that the proposition *that the proposition that p is true* is true, and so on. But, someone might argue, this regress clearly isn't vicious, since we take it that the truth values of all these propositions are determined simultaneously—the various

“true’s” cancel out, so to speak.<sup>14</sup> But, the reply to Alston might go, if they cancel out in *this* case, surely the epistemic theorist can make the same claim on behalf of her view.

Several points are relevant in reply. First, recall that Alston does *not* take TS to be a heavyweight conceptual equivalence. And neither does the astute epistemic theorist. Philosophers who regard “it is true that *p*” and “*p*” as strongly content-equivalent mean to say, in effect, that “it is true that” is a mere grammatical operator. It adds nothing to the content of *p* itself. The point is that truth-talk is redundant. But this can’t be the attitude of the epistemic theorist toward either the TS or (E). Her point is not that truth-talk is redundant, it is that “*p* would be ideally justified” reveals the *real content* of “*p*” in some profound and complicated sense of “real content.” The epistemic theorist, in offering a conceptual definition, takes herself to be explaining our concept of truth, not eliminating it. Thus there is an important difference between the regress involving “true” and the regress involving “ideal justifiability.”

The final two strategies argue that (E2) is a lighter weight conceptual equivalence of some sort. The more plausible alternative is C, which takes (E2) as a middleweight conceptual equivalence. As I argued above, TS and (E) are themselves best interpreted in this way, and it seems intuitive that the epistemic theorist would take both (E) and (E2) to have the same status as TS.

A typical way that realists respond to this sort of suggestion is by counter-example. Thus, Alston notes that “it does not violate [the concept of *p*’s being ideally justifiable] to suppose that in some cases a belief that *p* is ideally justifiable without it being the case that *p* or vice versa” (p. 214). For instance, it isn’t incoherent to suppose that the number of stars in the universe at this moment is odd. But that is a claim which surely couldn’t be justified by creatures like us even in ideal epistemic conditions. This is in marked contrast to TS, in that it is a clear violation of our concept of truth to suppose that it could be true that *p* without its being the case that *p*.

Of course, it is always possible for the epistemic theorist to insist on the *metaphysical* necessity of (E2). Indeed, such principles may well be the consequence of an ontology that has it that “the mind and the world jointly make up the mind and world” (Putnam, 1981).

That is, deep metaphysical facts about reference or the reach of human experience could entail that necessarily, a state of affairs can obtain when and only when a certain proposition would be justified in ideal epistemic circumstances. If so, then propositions such as, e.g., *the number of stars in the universe at this moment is odd* may turn out to be neither true nor false and therefore “incoherent” after all.

Yet even if these metaphysical claims are correct, that fact alone cannot prove that (E2) is a *conceptual* equivalence as opposed to a surd metaphysical fact on the order of interpretation **A** above. In order to show that (E2) is a middleweight conceptual equivalence, one must argue additionally that *grasping* that any proposition is the case (or understanding that any state of affairs obtains) necessarily presupposes *grasping* that the proposition in question is ideally justified. Contrapositively, it would have to be shown that if one can't understand how a proposition (e.g. one about the distant past) would be justified even in ideal epistemic circumstances, one can't be said to understand that proposition. But it is precisely this that the above metaphysical arguments do not show. I can grant that (E2) is necessarily true and yet still maintain that in a straightforward, minimal sense of “understand” that I understand that *the number of stars in the universe right now is odd* without having the faintest inclination to think that this proposition would be ideally justified or unjustified. In point of fact, many folks entertain, doubt and wonder about all sorts of propositions about, e.g. God, without having any sort implicit understanding of whether they would be justified in ideal epistemic circumstances. The truth is that most people wouldn't recognize ideal epistemic circumstances if they came up and hit them on the head. Thus, even if the usual counter examples to (E2) don't prove that it is not necessarily true, they do illustrate that its necessity is not conceptual in character.

Furthermore, to say that (E2) is a middleweight conceptual equivalence is to imply that grasping the concept of ideal epistemic circumstances is implicitly necessary for grasping *any* proposition. The range of propositions that we can understand, and the range of concepts we use in understanding them is extremely wide, and due to the ever-changing human situation, indefinitely open-ended. Yet (E2) is meant to apply equally well to any proposition. It is therefore un-

surprising that general equivalences about understanding along the lines of (E2) are not particularly convincing

Interpretation D, thankfully, needs little discussion. It takes (E2) as a lightweight conceptual truth. This would mean that there is a conceptual connection between the halves of (E2) without an understanding of snow's being white implying even an implicit understanding of ideal epistemic circumstances. But as I noted above, a conceptual equivalence cannot pass on more conceptual weight than it has. Therefore, if (E2) is lightweight then (E) must be as well. But most epistemic theorists, I think, would balk at denying that even an implicit grasp of "rational acceptability" or "justifiability" is required for an understanding of truth. The point of epistemic theories, after all, is typically that the concept of truth which we use in our daily practice implicitly involves an appeal to what would be rational or justified to accept. So from the epistemic theorist's point of view there seems to be little motivation for taking (E2) and hence (E) as lightweight equivalences—other than the mere desire to avoid the present argument.

### 3 The Global Intensional Argument

Our Alstonian argument has considerable force—even more force than Alston himself intended. If the intensional argument is sound, then so is the *global intensional argument*.

If epistemic definitions are set aside, there is only one serious contender for a truth-definition: the correspondence account. Proving that the correspondence theory is no better off when it comes to the intensional argument than epistemic accounts will therefore suffice to prove the more general claim.

The essential core of any correspondence theory of truth is that a proposition or statement is true when it corresponds, fits, or matches reality. Theories of this type are distinguished from each other along three principal lines, namely their respective views about the nature of the truth bearers, the truth makers and the relation of truth to itself.<sup>15</sup> Thankfully, the success or failure of the intensional argument does not rest with the specific content of the theory involved. Therefore, I shall take as my target a fairly unassuming statement of the

view

- (C) It is true that  $p$  IFF the proposition that  $p$  corresponds to a fact

One might think that (C) is a tad bit too unassuming, since many assume that it is a platitude that a proposition is true when it fits the facts (e.g. Wright, 1992). That is, deflationists typically take it that they can grant principles like (C) but still deny that truth is a substantive or authentic property (Horwich, 1990). The trick is simply to read “corresponds to the facts” in a metaphysically innocuous way—as not committing one to any substantial metaphysical relationship between propositions and mind independent things called “facts”. So if the correspondence theorist is going to be seen as asserting something distinctive, she can’t simply assert (C) as a mere banality. The correspondence theorist wants more than the right to use the words “correspondence to fact”. Therefore, let us take it that the “correspondence” relationship mentioned in (C) is a metaphysically substantial, complex relationship which obtains between a mind-independent fact and a proposition—without specifying (so as to be neutral between competing views) the exact nature of this complex relation (whether it is a structural relationship between objects and parts of the proposition for instance). Furthermore, “fact” can be taken simply as a placeholder for whatever parts or aspects of the world are on the other side of the correspondence relation with the proposition—that is, as neutral between competing accounts of the nature of facts. Finally, and as we did with (E), let’s take our representative correspondence theory as offering a less than heavyweight conceptual analysis of some sort.

Yet even interpreted in this way, the correspondence theory would seem to be incompatible with our schema. For the T schema does not say anything about “correspondence”, all it says is that if snow is white then it must be true that snow is white, and that if it is true, then snow is white. This is all that is needed, there is nothing said about a proposition corresponding to reality.

Again, the obvious strategy is to show that the correspondence definition of truth is consistent with the T schema because that definition is entailed by TS and the following principle

(C2)  $p$  if, and only if, the proposition that  $p$  corresponds to a fact

Again, interpretation A regards (C2) as a non conceptual claim, according to which the state of affairs of snow's being white can only obtain if a proposition corresponds to reality. That is, the state of affairs of snow's being white depends for its actuality upon there being a proposition, which corresponds to reality, that snow is white. But so understood, version A again does not warrant the desired conclusion. For why would this surd metaphysical fact—if (C2) were a fact—have anything more to do with our concept of truth than any other fact? Suppose God tells us that snow (actually) is white only if the proposition that snow is white corresponds to, e.g. a fact, and so on for every other proposition. Why would this fact necessarily entail that the *concept* that we humble humans presently employ when we predicate “true” to a belief or statement is the one marked out by the correspondence schema?

Things are no better with version B either. The correspondence theorist could also reinterpret the content of all of our statements. That is, the correspondence theorist could take it that the proposition that grass is green is identical to the proposition that *the proposition that grass is green corresponds to some fact*. And so on. The infinite regress is exactly the same here as it was for the epistemic theorist. As is the consequence: if every proposition is about the correspondence of some proposition to fact, then there will be no way to specify which proposition is being discussed.

Interpretation C, however, may seem more plausible in the present case. Under this interpretation, (C2) is a middleweight conceptual equivalence. As I noted above in the case of the epistemic theorist, the defender of the correspondence account might see this as the most natural reading, since as we've argued above, TS is best interpreted as a middleweight conceptual equivalence itself.

To say that (C2) has this status is to take it that an understanding of correspondence relationships is implicitly necessary for grasping any proposition. On such a view, understanding correspondence relationships is a *conceptual* presupposition of understanding period. Remember that the correspondence theorist, in advocating both (C) and (C2), is not simply pushing platitudes. She takes herself to be of

fering a substantive conceptual analysis of truth. Hence the concept of correspondence being assumed here must be robust and complex in nature. This is perhaps unremarkable as long as we are only dealing with (C) itself. In any event, whether (C) is a plausible conceptual truth in its own right is not the present concern. The question is the status of (C2). Once we recall that the correspondence being spoken of is a metaphysically complex relationship, how plausible is it that there is even an implicit conceptual connection between understanding *simpliciter* and understanding the philosophical notion of a "correspondence" relation between a mind independent fact and a proposition? Consider, for instance, the proposition that Smith is selfish. It seems quite plausible that one could understand this proposition perfectly well, and even take it to be true, without having any sort of grasp, implicit or otherwise, of a metaphysically thick relationship between that thought and an objective entity, the fact of Smith's selfishness. As we noted when discussing (E2) above, the range of propositions we assert in everyday life is incredibly wide. Perhaps it is true that we must have the concept of a complex correspondence relationship between proposition and fact in order to understand *some* propositions. But having a concept of correspondence can hardly be a presupposition of understanding across the board. To think otherwise would place an undue burden on those who know much about the real world but little about philosophy.

So we arrive at interpretation **D**, where we take (C2) as a light weight conceptual equivalence. On this reading, (C2) is conceptually necessary even though one can understand any proposition without knowing (even implicitly and indirectly) anything about correspondence. Again (because a conceptual equivalence cannot pass on more conceptual weight than it has itself) this makes (C) a light weight conceptual truth as well.

As was the case when we considered this alternative under the auspices of the epistemic theory, one wonders what the motivation would be for such a position. Given that TS is a middleweight conceptual equivalence, why think that (C2) and (C) have lightweight status? But perhaps the correspondence theorist can supply an answer. Perhaps (C2) is a conceptual equivalence not because of direct connections between its component propositions and their con-

cepts, but indirectly, because (C2) is itself derivable from some further equivalences. One suggestion, for example, would be to derive (C2) from the following

F schema (FS) It is a fact that  $p$  IFF  $p$

(C3) It is a fact that  $p$  IFF the proposition that  $p$  corresponds to a fact

(C2)  $p$  IFF the proposition that  $p$  corresponds to a fact

Having deduced (C2) from FS and (C3), we can then (together with TS) infer (C) as a lightweight conceptual equivalence.

Yet little real ground has been gained by this maneuver. For we are now faced with deciding how to interpret these additional premises. Again, either could be read in a deflationary way—as non-metaphysical platitudes. But this won't do for the correspondence theorist, who sees facts as real entities out in the world. That aside, let us grant that the FS will have the same conceptual status (the same "weight class") as TS—whatever that turns out to be. The real issue is (C3). Once we read (C3) in the intended metaphysically serious sense, it turns out to be as poor a candidate for a conceptual equivalence as (C2). Why should we think that in order for anyone (not just philosophers) to even *understand* what a fact is that she must understand—in every case—complex metaphysical relationships between facts (seen as real things out in the world) and propositions (seen, e.g. as abstract objects)? Without an additional argument, this seems to be an unwarranted assumption. So we are left with taking (C3) as a lightweight conceptual equivalence. Which is exactly where we were with (C2) to begin with. There is not more motivation for holding (C3) as lightweight conceptual equivalence than (C2).

Further, the correspondence theorist must face a serious question we have so far avoided. As we asked when we were concerned with their epistemic counterparts, what makes (C2) or (C3) lightweight conceptual equivalences as opposed to straight non-conceptual equivalences of either the "mathematical" kind of example (3) or the "metaphysical" kind employed in interpretation A above? For familiar Quinean reasons, being unable to make out sharp border between

non conceptual and conceptual truths is perhaps what we should expect. But that fact will hardly help the traditional correspondence theorist. The question we are interested in is precisely whether it is possible to give even a "weak" conceptual definition of truth in terms of correspondence. The correspondence theorist, in so far as she believes that such an analysis is possible, is committed to believing that one can sensibly call some equivalences conceptual and others non-conceptual, and furthermore, that we can do so with certainty in this very case. For instance, even if we grant the truth of (C3), in other words, why should we take it that it is true in virtue of its component concepts (e.g. the concept of a fact) as opposed to the way the world is? One way to make the point, of course, would be to appeal to still further equivalences, and attempt to show that what little conceptual strength (C3) has derives from them. But the prospects of finding such equivalences seem dim to say the least, even if we waive the obvious fact that the same questions could be raised again at that point. The upshot is that, as we saw with (E2), taking (C2) as a lightweight conceptual equivalence is poorly motivated or *ad hoc*.

But even if we put the question of motivation aside, (C2) seems to me a poor candidate for being a conceptual equivalence of any sort. At a minimum, to take an instance of (C2) as a conceptual equivalence is to hold that we grasp it in virtue of a conceptual connection which obtains between its component propositions. Yet (C2) is not meant as a simple deflationary platitude. Whatever theory of correspondence we have in mind, the alleged conceptual connection in question is going to be of a very fine grained and specific nature. This means that it should be a priori that snow cannot be white unless a *particular* proposition is in a *particular* metaphysically substantial and complex relationship to reality. But it hardly seems a conceptual truth that *snow can be as it is* only if there are relations of correspondence between it and propositions. The world does not require—by definition!—that there be correspondence relations at all.

I have found that some philosophers who are inclined to favor these sorts of considerations when they are directed against epistemic theories react with something akin to outrage when they are applied to the correspondence account. Two points need underlining. First, I am not disputing (C)'s intuitive plausibility, nor indeed (except in

directly) have I been concerned with (C) at all. The target has been (C2)—and again, not with regard to its truth, but with regard to its status as an (alleged) conceptual equivalence. Second, there is a tendency among some to slide back and forth between seeing the correspondence view as an innocent platitude and regarding it as a distinctive philosophical theory of truth opposed to other such theories. Unnoticed, such sliding can make it seem insane to doubt the conceptual necessity of (C2). Yet once we become aware of such waffling, and regard (C2) in its proper light, there is a serious question as to what sort of conceptual equivalence it could be.<sup>16</sup>

#### 4 Implications

There are many reasons, over and above those just presented, for thinking that neither the correspondence theory nor the epistemic theory of truth is plausible. So it is not surprising that these definitions of truth do not succeed. The surprising fact is that they ultimately fail for structurally similar reasons. In order to be consistent with the T schema, both accounts require it to be conceptual truth that a state of affairs obtains when and only when a proposition has a certain robust property. This means that there must be a conceptual connection between understanding any proposition and understanding that it has that property. Yet on examination we find that any interpretation of (E2) or (C2) is either too weak or too strong to do the job. Interpreted strongly, neither principle applies to every proposition, interpreted weakly, they become indistinguishable from strictly metaphysical truths. Therefore neither (E2) nor (C2) can transfer the proper conceptual weight to either (C) or (E).

Since the global intensional argument works against realist accounts of truth, and Alston is a realist, one might conclude that the monster has eaten its maker. This is too hasty. Alston does hold that our concept of truth implies that truth is a property of propositions. But he stops short of presenting a definition of truth in terms of that property. To grasp that T propositions are necessarily, conceptually true, *just is* to grasp the concept of truth on Alston's view. The T schema, understood as a light or middleweight conceptual equivalence, gives us a recipe of sorts for constructing T-propositions. To

understand this recipe is to have the concept, no definition is needed

What the global intensional argument does reveal is that any position, including Alston's, which takes truth as a property must also take truth as conceptually primitive in a certain sense. For in order to be a realist *and* avoid the global intensional argument, one must (at a minimum) hold that (a) our concept of truth is a concept of a property of propositions, but (b) that concept is not definable as the concept of an underlying robust property all and only true propositions share. To deny (a) would be embrace deflationism, to deny (b) would mean facing the global intensional argument. Truth turns out to be a basic concept.

As a consequence, our discussion may seem to encourage deflationism. As Paul Horwich remarks, the deflationary perspective in general is

that the search for an analysis [of the form “‘p’ is true IFF ‘p’ has property ‘F’”] is misguided, that our concept is exhausted by the uncontroversial schema, and that there is no reason at all to expect that truth has any sort of underlying nature (1995, p. 358)

If the global intensional argument is sound, then not only is the attempt to define truth misguided or not needed, it is impossible. For according to the argument, the concept of propositional truth (the term “true”) cannot be defined as a certain type of property. If one is already tempted by deflationism, the inference from “the term ‘true’ cannot be defined as a particular property of propositions” to “there is no property of truth” will no doubt prove irresistible.

We seem stuck between saying that truth has an undefinable nature and holding that truth has no nature at all. This is not a comfortable position. We need a third alternative. In the remaining pages, I'll try to provide a quick sketch of what I think that alternative could be. The global intensional argument shows that we cannot analyze our concept of truth by defining it in terms of a single underlying property shared by all true propositions. This does not entail that truth has no nature, but it does suggest that there is no single nature of truth. Thus a third alternative is that truth has more than one nature. Crispin Wright has called this position alethic pluralism (1992, 2001).

If the only essential properties of a truth predicate are *formal*—a matter of its use complying with certain very general axioms (platitudes)—then such predicates may or may not, in different areas of discourse, have a varying *substance* (1992, p 23)

According to Wright, our concept of truth may be quite minimal, but this leaves open the possibility that the underlying nature of truth may take on distinct forms in different domains of discourse. Similarly, Terence Horgan has suggested (1986, 1991, 1996) that while truth in every discourse is “correct assertibility”, what correct assertibility amounts to may differ depending on the context. On a pluralist account, principles like (E) or (C) may fit some discourses but not others. Thus, the correspondence theory may apply to propositions about the middle-sized dry goods of the physical world but not to propositions of an intuitively more contextual sort. Accordingly, a principle like (E) could be applied to e.g. moral truth or the truth of propositions about psychological attitudes. Recall the proposition that Smith is selfish. We take such propositions to be capable of being true but the fact of Smith’s selfishness seems quite different in kind than the fact that there is a book on the desk. I can’t knock up against Smith’s selfishness in the same way I can bump into the desk and the book. Accordingly, perhaps Smith is selfish just when the belief that he is selfish is a member of an internally coherent system of propositions about human action in general and Smith’s actions in particular. The truth of Smith’s selfishness may be radically human-dependent in a way that the truth that there is a book on my desk is not. The pluralist’s point, which our global intensional argument seems to support, is that while (E) and (C) work well in certain domains, they fail when applied globally.

A particularly clear way of understanding how truth might be plural in nature, and one that I’ve defended at length elsewhere (see Lynch 2000, 2001) takes truth as a functional concept. On this account, we don’t interpret the T schema as something that needs to be explained by some other more fundamental equivalence, but as revealing a fundamental aspect of what true propositions do, their functional role. We can understand it as telling us that our concept of truth is the concept of *whatever* property a proposition has when

the world is at that proposition says that it is. Roughly speaking, "saying it like it is" is part of the functional role of true propositions and propositions that do so (and also fulfill various other conditions) have the property of truth.

A function is a type of job. And a *functional concept* is the concept of that job or functional role. Thus being a mousetrap is a functional property in this sense, and our concept of a mousetrap is the concept of a device that does the job of catching mice. But of course, this single job can be done or realized in quite different ways. To define this job, we write a *job-description* specifying how that job relates to others in the immediate economic vicinity. We define the job in terms of its place in a larger network of jobs, all of which are understood in relation to each other. According to what is often called "commonsense" functionalism, mental concepts such as belief and desire can be understood in precisely this way. Such concepts are "package deal" concepts in that they are not individuated one by one but by their place in the network of implicit and explicit psychological platitudes that make up our common-sense psychology. The totality of platitudes makes up the job descriptions for these mental states.

In my view, we also have a *folk theory of truth*, or a network of platitudes, principles, concepts and generalizations a grasp of which constitutes having a sense of the true and the real. These platitudes and principles needn't be explicitly believed of course. Like the analogous psychological principles, it is enough that a grasp of them is implicit in our reasoning and behavior. Some of these platitudes will concern the interconnections between alethic concepts, including e.g. "true propositions correspond to facts", "facts are what make propositions true" and "the proposition that  $p$  is true if and only if  $p$ " and "a proposition is true just when its negation is false". Some relate truth to other sorts of concepts. Some of these, such as "If a belief is caused by a reliable process, it is probably true", will be analogous to *input clauses* they take us from concepts on the outside or near the edge of our alethic network to an application of "true". Others (the *output clauses*) will take us in the reverse direction, for example "If a proposition is true, you ought to believe it". While still others ("a proposition can be justified but not true and true but not justified") may not fall determinately into one group or another. Unlike our folk

psychological theory, our folk theory of truth is not primarily a causal theory. In the case of human psychology, most of the platitudes will be causal in nature (e.g. pain causes worry). But not all will be. Others, like “toothache is a type of pain”, will be quasi-logical. With regard to our folk theory of truth, this order is reversed: one expects that most of the principles will be quasi-logical, although there is nothing to rule out the possibility that some may also be causal.

So truth functionalism does not define truth as an underlying property shared by all true propositions. It defines our concept of truth holistically—by its role in this network formed by the conjunction of the common-sense platitudes involving truth. In short, to be true is to play the truth role.

Much more needs to be said in order to explain the functionalist theory. But even our short description points to a way in which that theory’s pluralist credentials allows it to bypass the threat of the global intensional argument. The hallmark of a function is that it can be multiply realized without our concept of the function changing in any essential way. Yet we can allow that the role does take on a more or less robust character from domain to domain. We may take it that the platitudes comprising our folk theory of truth are ranked, and it is the higher-ranked platitudes, such as the T-schema, that comprise the essential truth role. Nonetheless, we allow on this view that in some domains certain additional platitudes could be added to our folk theory of truth, and thus the concept of truth in those domains takes on a more robust character. The truth role, therefore, has a minimal core that is subject to more or less robust enrichment in different domains. In our discussion of the global intensional argument, we found that both the correspondence and epistemic accounts foundered on finding a conceptual bridge to the T-schema. Neither (C2) nor (E2) is a plausible candidate for the status of conceptual equivalence when applied across the board to every proposition. Yet unlike more traditional theories of truth, the functionalist theory—by allowing for differing realizations in differing domains—is consistent with this conclusion. While it is implausible that either principle is a necessary presupposition of understanding in general, both principles may be conceptual presuppositions of certain types of understanding. There may be certain norms or principles that op

erate over some types of propositions such that the grasping them presupposes grasping that they correspond to reality (in the case of propositions of some domains) or are ideally justifiable (as may be the case with propositions of other domains). If so, then we might allow that *relative to these specific domains*, (E2) or (C2) act as middleweight conceptual equivalences. They do so by helping to constitute the set of platitudes that, relative to that domain, mark out the truth-role. Thus a functionalist account of truth allows that the nature of truth may vary by allowing more than one property to play the role marked out by the concept. But it also allows for the possibility that our minimalist, functional concept of truth may be expanded and enriched in distinct domains.

Numerous questions about any pluralist effort remain, but I think pluralism about truth, especially in its functionalist form, is promising. At the very least it suggests a new explanation for our apparent inability to define truth as a single underlying property that all true propositions share. Perhaps the nature of truth has eluded us, not because it has no nature, but because it has more than one.<sup>17</sup>

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In his 1996, p 208ff Unless otherwise noted, all parenthetical references are to this text

<sup>2</sup> Frege, 1967 Frege's argument is a distinct point from Alston's, despite the fact that both arguments do share a common premise—namely, the T-schema Frege's point revolves around what we might call the transparency of truth, see Dummett 1981, ch 13 and Blackburn, 1984, Sc 7.2 The best recent discussion of Frege's point is Kalderon, 1997

<sup>3</sup> Davidson has been committed to this position for some time I refer here to his 1996

<sup>4</sup> I will take this formulation of TS as equivalent to "the proposition that  $p$  is true if, and only if,  $p$ " It is a matter of contention whether one can meaningfully quantify over equivalences like TS In this paper, I will just assume that one can do so by employing substitutional quantification But I don't think that much hangs on this assumption, since I think that the problems that generate the intensional argument (in either its local or global forms) would remain even if we could only assert T-propositions individually

<sup>5</sup> *Pathological* instances generate the liar or related paradoxes *Indirect* instances would involve so-called blind ascriptions of truth, such as "everything John said was true"

<sup>6</sup> It may also be knowable a posteriori, of course By calling a truth "a priori" I only mean that it is knowable independent of experience

<sup>7</sup> One might object that (5) must assume that an omniscient being exists For those with such quibbles, there is (5\*) An omniscient being *would* know that  $p$  IFF  $p$  Of course, as I say in the text, various considerations of this sort may cause one to suspect that with regard to any very weak equivalence of this sort, we aren't really dealing with a conceptual necessity here at all This is an important question, but I am here only pointing out that it looks like lightweight conceptual equivalences are possible

<sup>8</sup> Many thanks to Robert Barnard for suggesting the labels 'heavyweight' etc., as well as the analogy with epistemic justification

<sup>9</sup> Of course, this isn't the only use of the word "definition", and thus other types of definitions of truth may escape the argument But I think it is clear that traditional attempts to say what truth is have either explicitly or implicitly been couched in terms of such biconditionals Some readers have suggested to me that we do not need to appeal to *necessary* equivalences, however Perhaps instead of TS, for instance, all one really needs are instances of DS understood as contingent a priori truths Perhaps, but note that we are inclined to take "snow is white" is true iff snow is white" as a

priori only if we take “snow is white” to mean *that snow is white*. Only interpreted sentences—sentences that can be taken as expressing a proposition, are true or false. Thus, in order to take an instance of DS as an a priori truth, we must be considering its component sentences not as contentless scribbles but as meaning something. And given that “snow is white” means what it does, then it is necessarily true that “snow is white” is true just when snow is white.

<sup>10</sup> For a more detailed summary and analysis of Alston’s position, see Lynch (1997).

<sup>11</sup> Of course, to demonstrate the consistency of TS and (E) one needn’t run the derivation in just this way. Any of the three equivalences could be the conclusion. I simply put the point this way because it seems the most intuitive. None of the arguments in this section, or the next, rest on the order of the equivalences.

<sup>12</sup> This particular point (in a somewhat different form) can also be found in Alston’s APA Presidential Address, 1979, p. 795. Arthur Fine later made a similar argument in his 1989. For an illuminating discussion of the latter, see Adam Kovach, 1997, p. 60–61.

<sup>13</sup> It is worth noting that as Alston makes clear, this infinite regress needn’t threaten Dummett’s verificationist theory of meaning and content, providing that theory is interpreted in a particular way (Alston, 1996, p. 220). If, for example, we take the theory to be that the content of an assertion is identical to a statement of that assertion’s verification conditions (e.g. the proposition that roses are red is the proposition that roses look a certain way to observers in normal conditions) then reference to the original proposition is avoided in the analysis of the proposition and the regress is avoided. (See, e.g. Dummett, 1973, p. 586 for a statement of his view that is similar to this.)

<sup>14</sup> This is the so-called transparency property of truth, which leads to Frege’s argument mentioned above. See Kalderon, 1997.

<sup>15</sup> For discussions of different types of correspondence theories, see Pitcher 1964, pp. 9–11, and Kirkham, 1992, pp. 119–49. For an excellent discussion of a particular type of correspondence theory (one which takes the truth-bearers as sentences) see David, 1994.

<sup>16</sup> It is worth briefly considering whether the global intensional argument works against one last theory—namely, Tarski’s semantic theory of truth. Just what that theory is, (and whether or not it should be considered an example of a correspondence account) is disputed. Furthermore, Tarski was concerned with linguistic, or sentential truth, while we are necessarily concerned with propositional truth. But Joel Friedman has suggested to me

that we might cut through these problems by simply considering whether the argument applies to the following Tarskian definition

- (F) the proposition that  $p$  is true IFF every sentence that expresses the proposition that  $p$  is satisfied by every infinite sequence of objects

Here, we assume a powerful enough meta-theory and that "satisfaction" is defined recursively in the usual way. Perhaps (F) could be made consistent with the T-schema if we add

- (F2)  $p$  IFF every sentence that expresses the proposition that  $p$  is satisfied by every infinite sequence of objects

But (F2), I suggest, is no better a candidate for the status of conceptual truth of any sort than were (E2) or (C2). Its two component propositions are certainly not synonymous, and it is difficult to see how understanding that snow is white could somehow imply that one understands anything about sequences, infinite or otherwise.

<sup>17</sup> Earlier versions of this paper were read at the Pacific Division of the American Philosophical Association and The Wheaton Conference on Truth and Realism. I thank the audiences at those readings for helpful discussion and especially my commentators, Zlatan Damjanovic and Richard Purtill respectively. Alvin Plantinga, Joel Friedman, David Anderson, Michael Rea and Adam Kovach deserve special mention. An earlier version was also read and discussed by a reading group composed of members of the University of Memphis Philosophy Department, including Jennifer Case, Bob Barnard, Terry Horgan, David Shoemaker, John Tienson and Mark Timmons. Paul Bloomfield also provided helpful commentary. Finally, special thanks to William Alston for helpful criticism and support.