

The Status of Content¹

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INTRODUCTION

An irrealist conception of a given region of discourse is the view that no real properties answer to the central predicates of the region in question. Any such conception emerges, invariably, as the result of the interaction of two forces. An account of the meaning of the central predicates, along with a conception of the sorts of property the world may contain, conspire to show that, if the predicates of the region are taken to express properties, their extensions would have to be deemed uniformly empty. The question then becomes whether the predicates are best understood as expressing properties, and hence as founded on error, or whether they ought to be understood along non-factualist lines.²

Historically, irrealist models were developed primarily in connection with evaluative discourse, although as physicalism has flourished and as reductionist programs have failed, their application has been extended to many other domains. Indeed, it is one of the more influential suggestions in contemporary philosophy of mind that they apply even to ordinary belief/desire psychology. A correct understanding of the semantics and metaphysics of content-based psychology leaves us, so the proponents of the in-

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²In reserving the label "irrealism" for the positions outlined I mean to be making a stipulative claim, not a controversial one. Although it seems to me that the label has traditionally been used chiefly to denominate error and non-factualist theories, it remains true that "realism" and "irrealism" are terms of art which may be, and have been, used in a variety of ways.

fluent suggestion claim, with no option but to embrace an irrealist conception of that region of discourse.³

The influential suggestion has not gone unchallenged. Many philosophers have dissented from it—some by disputing the assumed metaphysics, others by rejecting the assumed account of psychological concepts—with inconclusive results.⁴ In this paper I wish to argue that, at least as things now stand, one or another of these dissidents must be right, for the irrealist conclusion itself is demonstrably unacceptable: at least as traditionally formulated, an irrealism about content is not merely implausible, it is incoherent. The present paper is intended as a challenge, to those who wish to propound such an irrealism, to formulate their view in a way that is not subject to the difficulties it raises.

The basic arguments are fairly straightforward. They require mostly some clear thinking about what irrealist conceptions involve in general; what they involve as applied to content discourse in particular; and what sorts of consideration fuel content skepticism in the first place. Their combined destructive impact, however, is far-reaching and has not been adequately appreciated.

The paper proceeds as follows. Part I explores the two different ways in which one might seek to make sense of the claim that no property answers to a given predicate. Part II outlines and clarifies what such irrealist conceptions look like when applied to contentful psychological idiom. Part III argues that these standard irrealist conceptions are unstable when applied to content discourse. Part IV attempts a redefinition that evades the outlined difficulties. Part V then argues (i) that even if this redefined position were stable, it could not accommodate the standard *motivations* for content irrealism; and (ii) that there is every good reason to doubt its own stability.

I. IRREALIST CONCEPTIONS

Consider a fragment of discourse F, possessing a set of characteristic predicates and a set of declarative sentences involving those

³See, for example, Paul Churchland, *Matter and Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1984) and Daniel Dennett, "Intentional Systems," reprinted in his *Brainstorms: Philosophical Essays on Mind and Psychology* (Montgomery, Vt.: Bradford Books, 1978).

⁴For criticisms of the first sort see J. Searle, *Intentionality* (Cambridge,

predicates. And suppose you come to have a worry of the following form: nothing possesses (or, perhaps, could possess) the sorts of property denoted by the characteristic predicates of F (if the predicates of F denote any sort of property at all). You become convinced, in other words, that if the predicates of F did express properties, their extensions would be uniformly empty: nothing in the world possesses the sorts of property that are the only candidates for being named by such predicates.

A conviction of this sort has traditionally given rise to one of two possible conceptions of F, answering, respectively, to the assumption that the predicates of F express properties and to the assumption that they don't.

The first option leads to an *error* conception of F. An error theorist about a given fragment of discourse takes that fragment's semantical appearances at face value: predicates denote properties and (hence) declarative sentences express genuine predicative judgments, equipped with truth conditions. However, the error theorist continues, because nothing actually exemplifies the properties so denoted, all the fragment's (atomic) declarative sentences are systematically *false*. Most of us are error theorists about witch talk, for example, in something like this sense: we recognize that "is a witch" denotes a property that nothing really has. John Mackie has defended such a view of moral discourse.⁵

An error thesis about some fragment may give rise to one of two recommendations. It can lead to the "eliminativist" suggestion that the systematic falsity of F's sentences constitutes sufficient grounds for its (eventual) elimination and replacement. Or, alternatively, it could result in an "instrumentalism" about F: in the view that, the falsity of its sentences notwithstanding, the continued use of F serves an instrumental purpose that will not easily be discharged in some other way.

An error conception is the milder of the two possible reactions to our original ontological worry. A more radical reaction would be *non-factualism*. According to this view, although F's declarative sentences appear to express genuine predicative judgments, that

England: Cambridge University Press, 1983); for the other see J. Fodor, *Psychosemantics* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1988).

⁵J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (London, England: Penguin, 1977).

appearance is wholly illusory. In actual fact, a non-factualist alleges, F's predicates do not denote properties; nor, as a result, do its declarative sentences express genuine predicative judgments, equipped with truth conditions: seeing as such sentences would be making no claim about the world, so nothing about the world could render them true or false.

A non-factualist conception of F may itself come in one of two versions, depending on whether the attributed reference failure is thought of as "intended." For, on the one hand, a predicate may fail to refer to a property even though it *aspires* so to refer; and, on the other, it may fail to refer to a property because it is no part of its semantic function so to refer. Naturally, the first verdict would lead to the recommendation that F be eliminated; whereas the second would merely prompt an alternative account of what the declarative sentences of F are designed to accomplish. How, if not as providing a vehicle for a statement of fact, should the semantic function of F's sentences be understood? Perhaps as providing a vehicle for the expression of certain sorts of attitude. Such an "expressivist" view, applied to moral discourse, was presented with characteristic brio by A. J. Ayer:

The presence of an ethical symbol in a proposition adds nothing to its factual content. Thus if I say to someone, 'You acted wrongly in stealing that money', I am not stating anything more than if I had said, 'You stole that money'. In adding that this action is wrong I am not making any further statement about it. I am simply evincing my moral disapproval of it. It is as if I had said 'You stole that money', in a peculiar tone of horror, or written it with the addition of some special exclamation marks.⁶

⁶*Language, Truth and Logic* (New York, N.Y.: Dover Publications, 1952), Chapter 6, p. 107.

It is important to note that it is not essential to an expressivist conception of a given sentence that utterances of that sentence express only *non-cognitive* states of mind. (This is why I have chosen not to call the generic view "non-cognitivism," but rather "non-factualism.") It is open to such a non-factualist to hold, in other words, that utterances of the sentence in question express, for instance, *beliefs*, provided that the content of those beliefs may not be understood to provide the content of the sentence.

Hume, for example, is plausibly read as holding that an utterance of a sentence of the form "a caused b" expresses a belief to the effect that a certain sort of regularity has obtained in the past and will persist in the future. What makes Hume nonetheless a non-factualist about causal dis-

Conceptions similar in spirit have been proposed for a wide variety of regions of assertoric discourse, including the aesthetic, the causal, and the counterfactual.

What all non-factualist conceptions have in common—what in effect is constitutive of such a conception of a declarative sentence of the form “x is P”—is

- (1) The claim that the predicate “P” does not denote a property⁷

and (hence)

- (2) The claim that the overall (atomic) declarative sentence in which it appears does not express a truth condition.

Now, the first point I wish to underscore is that there is a perspective within the foundations of semantics—specifically, a conception of truth and of truth conditions—from which any such non-factualist view is bound to appear unintelligible. Curiously, it is again in Ayer that we find an incisive statement of the perspective in question:

[T]here is no problem of truth as it is ordinarily conceived. The traditional conception of truth as a ‘real quality’ or a ‘real relation’ is due, like most philosophical mistakes, to a failure to analyze sentences correctly. There are sentences . . . in which the word ‘truth’ seems to stand for something real . . . [but] our analysis has shown that the word ‘truth’ does not stand for anything.⁸

The conception of truth Ayer is giving voice to here has come to be known as a “deflationary” or “disappearance” view of truth. It is characterized by the claim that there is no such thing as the property of truth, a property that sentences or thoughts may enjoy, and that would be named by the words “true” or “truth.” By

course is his denial that facts about regularity *analyze* facts about causation. It still remains true, consequently, that the presence of a causal symbol in a sentence adds nothing to its factual content.

⁷I shall talk mostly of predicates “denoting” or “referring to” properties, but nothing much depends on this particular choice of semantic terminology. Talk of predicates “expressing” properties or “standing for” them may be substituted without affecting the argument.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 89.

way of probing such a view, let us ask how it understands the significance of “truth attributions”—of sentences of the form “x is true.” There are, in effect, two options. On the one hand, a deflationist may attempt a general account of truth attributions that explains in what their semantic function consists, if it is not to consist in that of attributing a property; or, on the other, he may reject the very idea of such a general account, recommending in its place the much more modest task of specifying truth-in-a-particular-language—“truth-in-L.” In a word, the options are “performative” theories, on the one hand, and “disquotational” theories, on the other.

Performative theories, originally proposed by William James,⁹ and later by Peter Strawson,¹⁰ are in effect analogues of expressivist conceptions of ethical statements. Acts of calling something true (compare acts of calling something good) are assimilated to acts of expressing praise for something, rather than to acts of describing that thing as possessing some specific property. As Rorty has succinctly put it, the proposal is that “true” is simply a compliment we pay sentences we are prepared to assert.¹¹

Disquotational theories, by contrast, forego any attempt at a general account of truth attributions. According to them, the basic deflationary thought that truth is not a real property is correctly elaborated not by an alternative account of what truth in general consists in, but by the rejection of any such account. To the extent that we can talk about a theory of truth at all, this is to consist in no more than a recursive definition of truth-in-L. What sort of notion is that of truth-in-a-language? It is, in Quine’s apt phrase, the idea of a device for semantic ascent—a device for talking about snow or whiteness, by talking about sentences that are about snow or white-

⁹See William James, *Pragmatism* bound with *The Meaning of Truth* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978). For defense of the attribution see R. Brandom, “Pragmatism, Phenomenalism and Truth Talk,” in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, XII (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

¹⁰P. Strawson, “Truth,” reprinted in G. Pitcher, ed., *Truth* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1964).

¹¹See R. Rorty, “Pragmatism, Davidson and Truth,” in *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, ed. E. LePore (Oxford, England: Basil Blackwell, 1986), p. 334. Needless to say, there are significant differences among the theories united under the “performative” label; but they do not matter for present purposes.

ness. To be sure, such a device has a use: it provides a handy way of affirming or rejecting an infinite lot of facts; but it is, for all that, in principle, dispensable.¹²

My concern just now is not with a deflationary conception of truth as such;¹³ it is, rather, with the *tension* between such a conception and a non-factualist thesis about a given region of assertoric discourse.¹⁴

To bring the tension into focus, let us ask what conditions a sentence must satisfy if, on a deflationary construal of truth, it is to so much as be a candidate for truth. What, in other words, certifies a sentence as truth-conditional, on a deflationary construal of truth?

Two minimal requirements suggest themselves: first, the sentence must be significant, and second, it must be declarative in form. Unpacking somewhat, the requirements are that the sentence possess a role within the language: its use must be appropriately disciplined by norms of correct utterance; and that it possess an appropriate syntax: it must admit of coherent embedding within negation, the conditional, and other connectives, and within contexts of propositional attitude.¹⁵

¹²See W. V. Quine, *The Philosophy of Logic* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp. 11–12. See also Hartry Field, “The Deflationary Conception of Truth,” in MacDonald and Wright, eds., *Fact, Science and Morality* (Oxford, England: Basil Blackwell, 1986).

¹³I will, however, be concerned with this question towards the end of the paper. For a sympathetic discussion of deflationary construals of truth talk see Brandom, *op. cit.* Brandom sees deflationism as receiving its finest elaboration to date in a version of the “prosentential” theory of truth proposed in Grover, Camp and Belnap, “A Prosentential Theory of Truth,” *Philosophical Studies* 27 (1975). He writes in conclusion

[that] the pragmatists’ strategy has been vindicated at least this far: It is possible to account for truth talk without invoking a property of truth that such talk must be understood as answering to (p. 90).

¹⁴Since one elaboration of a deflationary construal—the pragmatists’—is an expressivist conception of truth talk, this is tantamount to saying that an expressivist conception of truth talk is inconsistent with an expressivist conception of any other fragment.

Many people have noticed the tension between deflationism and non-factualism. For some recent examples see C. McGinn, *Wittgenstein on Meaning* (Oxford, England: Basil Blackwell, 1984), p. 71 and Simon Blackburn, “The Individual Strikes Back,” *Synthese* 58 (1984), pp. 281–302.

¹⁵Crispin Wright has suggested that these two requirements collapse into each other because “the operation of such [normative] constraint has

The status of these two requirements, as individually necessary conditions for candidacy for deflationary truth, is certified by the deflationary conception itself (which is just as it should be). Thus, it is required by the claim that “true” is a device for semantic ascent, that the sentence to which “true” is predicated be both meaningful and declarative. Since, on such a view, the overall effect of asserting that a sentence is true is just to assert the sentence itself, the requirements on truth predication must include whatever requirements attend candidacy for assertion itself; and, clearly, a sentence must be both meaningful and assertoric in form if it is to be a candidate for assertion. Similarly, a sentence must satisfy both these minimal conditions if it is to be a candidate for “performative” truth, for they are both required by the claim that “true” is a compliment we pay sentences we are prepared to assert.

The tension between a deflationary understanding of truth and a non-factualist thesis stems from the fact that these requirements would seem also to be *jointly sufficient* for truth conditionality, on a deflationary understanding of truth. For if they are jointly sufficient, then there is *no more* to a sentence’s being truth-conditional—genuinely apt for (deflationary) truth and falsity—than its being a significant sentence possessing the appropriate syntactic potentialities. But it is constitutive of non-factualism precisely that it denies, of some targeted significant, declarative sentence that it is truth-conditional. On a deflationary conception of what it is to possess truth conditions, there would be, simply, no space for such a possibility.

But why must the conditions be thought of as jointly sufficient? Isn’t there room for the suggestion that *more* is required for truth conditionality, consistent with subscription to a deflationism about truth? Isn’t it imaginable, that is, that someone might require that a given region of discourse meet certain further conditions—reducibility to the vocabulary of basic science, for example—if it is to be genuinely truth-conditional, and yet remain a deflationist about truth?

It is hard to make sense of the suggestion. The difficulty lies in seeing how any such further requirement would be motivated.

no expression except in such syntactic conditioning of a region of discourse.” See his “Realism: The Contemporary Debate—Whither now?” p. 7 (forthcoming). It would be fine by me if this were so.

Any proposed requirement on candidacy for truth must be grounded in the preferred account of the nature of truth. On a deflationary account of truth, there is no substantive property—truth—that sentences or thoughts may enjoy; on such a view, on the contrary, all truth talk consists either in the evincing of a certain sort of praise (with the pragmatists) or in the deployment of semantic ascent (with the disquotationalists). Both of these articulations of deflationism require the two conditions outlined. But how could they conceivably require more? Any meaningful, declarative sentence would be (at a minimum) a *candidate* for assertion; it would be, thereby, a candidate for the compliment we pay sentences we are prepared to assert, or, as the alternative would have it, a candidate for semantic ascent. Any such sentence would count, therefore, as truth-conditional in a deflationary sense.¹⁶

It would appear to be a point to which Ayer must have paid inadequate attention. A non-factualism about any subject matter presupposes a conception of truth richer than the deflationary: it is committed to holding that the predicate “true” stands for some sort of real, language-independent property, eligibility for which will not be certified solely by the fact that a sentence is declarative and significant. Otherwise, there will be no understanding its claim that a significant sentence, declarative in form, fails to possess truth conditions.¹⁷

¹⁶Compare this with a robust conception—say, a coherence theory—of truth. On such a theory, truth is construed as a particular sort of coherence between meaningful sentences. Here it is easy to imagine that candidacy for truth might require more than the two conditions outlined. Suppose, for example, that on the favored notion of coherence, coherence between regions with highly disparate vocabularies is not an intelligible possibility. On such a view, a sentence would have to satisfy a reductionist requirement before it even made sense to ask whether it was true.

¹⁷Whether truth is robust or deflationary constitutes the biggest decision a theorist of truth must make. But decide he must. It is an assumption of the present paper that the concept of truth is *univocal* as between these two conceptions, that a concurrent commitment to *both* a robust and a deflationary concept of truth would be merely to pun on the word “truth.” We should not confuse the fact that it is now an open question whether truth is robust or deflationary for the claim that it can be both. There is no discernible plausibility in the suggestion that the concept of a correspondence between language and world and the concept of a language-bound operator of semantic ascent might both be versions of the same idea.

It will be important to the argument later on to observe that we could have approached this very conclusion from a somewhat different direction: by beginning with the non-factualist's denial that the predicate in "x is P" refers to a property, rather than with his denial that the sentence as a whole possesses factual content.

Corresponding to the distinction between deflationary and robust conceptions of truth, there is a distinction between deflationary and robust conceptions of reference. A deflationary understanding of "refers" would be this: a term refers to a property provided it has the syntax of a predicate and possesses a role in the language. What is denied is that the expression "refers to a property" expresses some sort of objective relation that may obtain between predicates and language-independent properties, a relation of the sort that causal theories of predicate reference may be understood to be attempting to elucidate.¹⁸ And, again, it is clear that a non-factualist is committed to a conception of predicate reference richer than the deflationary. For what a non-factualist wishes precisely to say is that some expressions—like "wrong" or "cause" or "beautiful" or "funny"—which have the syntax of predicates and which possess perfectly well-defined roles within the language, nevertheless fail to refer to any real property. This claim is intelligible only against the background of a robust conception of reference.

Since, however, it is a platitude that "x is P" is true if and only if the object denoted by "x" has the property expressed by "P," a non-factualist's denial that a particular predicate refers to a property is by itself sufficient to anchor his commitment to a robust conception of truth. For if the predicate in "x is P" might fail to refer to a property, then the overall declarative sentence of which it's a part might fail to possess a truth condition. However, declarative sentences cannot fail to possess truth conditions except against the background of a robust conception of truth. Hence, a commit-

¹⁸For deflationary conceptions of reference see R. Brandom, "Reference Explained Away," *Journal of Philosophy* 81 (1984); S. Schiffer, *Remnants of Meaning* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1987); R. Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

For causal theories of predicate reference see, for example, F. Dretske, *Knowledge and the Flow of Information* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1981); J. Fodor, *Psychosemantics*.

ment to a robust conception of reference would appear to entrain a commitment to a robust conception of truth, just as expected.

Our discussion of error theories can afford to be much briefer. An error thesis about the sentence “x is P” is simply the view that, because nothing has the property avowedly denoted by “P,”

(3) “x is P” is always false.

It is easy to see that an error theory, in contrast with a non-factualist thesis, is not locked into any particular understanding of the central semantic notions. Because an error theory does not rely upon a distinction between apparently referential and genuinely referential devices, or apparently truth-conditional and genuinely truth-conditional sentences, it is intelligible on both robust and deflationary understandings of reference and truth.

What any error theory *is* committed to, however, is simply this: that there *actually* are some sentences that possess truth conditions (on whatever understanding of that notion is favored). The commitment is evident: an error thesis presupposes that the targeted declarative sentences possess truth conditions, otherwise it couldn't call them “false.”

To sum up this general discussion of irrealist conceptions: I have argued that a non-factualist model of a given region of discourse presupposes robust conceptions of truth and reference; and that an error theory of that region presupposes that its sentences are truth-conditional, on whatever construal of truth is favored.

What I am going to argue is that an application of these models to content discourse itself runs afoul of their respective presuppositions.¹⁹

¹⁹It is sometimes suggested that there is a *third* sort of irrealist conception of a given property, one according to which truths about a property are constituted by the judgments that we would make about it under specified circumstances. Some versions of a dispositional analysis of color assume this form. I don't consider such a view in this paper because it does not seem to me to be an irrealist view in the proper sense of the term. After all, on such a view it is neither true that the property is not instantiated nor that it is non-existent. All that follows is that the property in question is *judgment-dependent*; and I don't see why there couldn't be per-

II. THE STATUS OF CONTENT DISCOURSE

Irrealist construals of content-based psychology have been formulated in both error-theoretic and non-factualist versions; and the error alternative, at least, in both eliminative and instrumentalist guises.

Thus, Paul Churchland has defended the thesis that

our common sense psychological framework is a false and radically misleading conception of the causes of human behavior and cognitive activity. On this view, folk psychology is not just an incomplete representation of our inner states; it is an outright misrepresentation of our internal states and activities. Consequently, we cannot expect a truly adequate neuroscientific account of our lives to provide theoretical categories that match up nicely with the categories of our common sense framework. Accordingly, we must expect that the older framework will simply be eliminated, rather than reduced, by a matured neuroscience.²⁰

And Daniel Dennett and Kripke's Wittgenstein have endorsed a conception of psychological discourse that seems best understood along non-factualist lines.

According to Dennett, the "attribution" of beliefs and desires to something consists in nothing over and above the adoption of a certain sort of (predictive) "stance" toward it; it ought not to be understood as an attempt to describe properties of that thing, an attempt that would misfire if the relevant properties were not to obtain. A system counts as having beliefs and desires if it is an intentional system; and it counts as an intentional system if it can be successfully predicted from the intentional stance.

We do quite successfully treat these [chess-playing] computers as intentional systems, and we do this quite independently of any considerations about what substance they are composed of, their origin, their position or lack of position in the community of moral agents, their consciousness or self-consciousness. . . . The decision to adopt the [in-

fectly objective truths about judgment-dependent properties. For discussion of a judgment-dependent conception of content see my "The Rule-Following Considerations," *Mind* 98 (1989).

²⁰Paul Churchland, *Matter and Consciousness*, p. 43. See also his "Eliminative Materialism and the Propositional Attitudes," *Journal of Philosophy* 78 (1987), p. 67.

tentional] strategy is pragmatic, and is not intrinsically right or wrong.²¹

And Kripke has interpreted Wittgenstein as holding that statements involving the notion of meaning or content have no truth conditions, but only conditions of warranted or justified use.

All that is needed to legitimize assertions that someone means something is that there be roughly specified circumstances under which they are legitimately assertable, and that the game of asserting them has a role in our lives. No supposition that 'facts correspond' to those assertions is needed.²²

It is important to emphasize that these conceptions of content-based psychological discourse have been presented as conforming fully to the paradigm examples of irrealism about other domains. The motivations for psychological irrealisms conform to the traditional model: the worry is that nothing in the world answers to our talk of belief and desire. And the irrealist reactions have been formulated in traditional ways: as recommending either that we view content attributions as false, or that we view them as not fact-stating.

In Parts III–V, I shall turn to a discussion of the cogency of such conceptions. But first I want to clear up a couple of questions about how precisely they are to be understood.

²¹*Brainstorms*, p. 7. Dennett has written further on the subject of intentional attributions: see the papers collected in *The Intentional Stance* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1987). I have to confess, however, to not fully understanding in what direction the view has evolved. The exegetical issues don't matter all that much, I take it, so long as non-factualisms and error theories exhaust the available irrealist options.

²²S. Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), pp. 77–78.

See also, Stephen Stich:

What this suggests is that *there is no such thing as the property of believing that p*. The predicate 'is a belief that p' does not express or correspond to a property.

(From *Folk Psychology to Cognitive Science: The Case Against Belief* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1983), pp. 225–226.) See also, Stephen Schiffer, *Remnants of Meaning*, pp. 144–145; and Quine's conception of propositional attitude discourse as a "dramatic idiom," in *Word and Object* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1960).

The first question comes up as follows. Irrealists about content tend to restrict their thesis to our ordinary talk of the *psychological*; missing, usually, is any suggestion that we should also regard it as the correct conception of the idioms we employ in characterizing linguistic behavior.²³ Indeed, not only is such a suggestion typically missing, it is occasionally explicitly denied. (This comes up particularly sharply in some of Churchland's writings, where he goes so far as to call for the creation of a new theory of meaning for natural languages, one that would be consistent with the falsity of ordinary psychological discourse.²⁴)

The suggestion that we treat the notions of linguistic and mental meaning differentially is surprising, however, given the very close affinity between them. Could an irrealism about mental content really be made to cohabit with a realism about linguistic meaning?

One argument for the conclusion that it cannot has been given by Lynne Rudder Baker. She has argued that the claim that public-language expressions derive their content from the content properties of mental states is platitudinous and non-optional:

[L]anguage can be meaningful only if it is possible that someone mean something. This is a platitude, not a theory. It is clearly incumbent upon anyone who wants to deny the platitude to show that there can be meaningful language even if no one has meant anything, even if no one has ever intended anything.²⁵

Unfortunately, the argument doesn't convince. Of course, we may grant Baker that there are platitudes connecting our talk of linguistic meaning with our talk of contentful mental states; so that it is, let us suppose, always permissible to move from "S means something in O's mouth," to "O intends something by the use of S." But such platitudes, by themselves, can do nothing to secure Baker's claim; for they cannot, by themselves, constrain how they are to be understood. In particular, they cannot ensure that the sentence "O intends something by the use of S" has to be under-

²³This is not true of Kripke's Wittgenstein.

²⁴See "Eliminative Materialism and the Propositional Attitudes," p. 89.

²⁵"Cognitive Suicide," forthcoming in *Contents of Thought: Proceedings of the 1985 Oberlin Colloquium in Philosophy*, ed. R. H. Grimm and Daniel D. Merrill (Tucson, Az.: University of Arizona Press, forthcoming), p. 25 (of the manuscript).

stood realistically, as describing a genuine mental fact from which the meaning of S is derived, rather than being understood as a mere notational variant for the sentence—"S means something in O's mouth"—to which it is, by assumption, platitudinously connected. And so, for all that the platitudes show, it remains wide open that the meaning of S is determined by non-mental factors, by facts about "use," for example. None of this, of course, amounts to an endorsement of non-mental theories of linguistic meaning. It amounts simply to the insistence that the question of the truth of such theories is not settled by the availability of platitudes connecting linguistic and mental concepts.

The real difficulty with the suggestion that one may sustain differential attitudes toward mental and linguistic content stems from the fact that the *best* arguments for the claim that nothing mental possesses content would count as *equally* good arguments for the claim that nothing linguistic does. For these arguments have nothing much to do with the items being *mental* and everything to do with their being *contentful*: they are considerations, of a wholly general character, against the existence of items individuated by content. If successful, then, they should tend to undermine the idea of linguistic content just as much as they threaten its mental counterpart.²⁶ The considerations in question are classifiable into

²⁶Not all the content-skeptical considerations that have ever been put forward have this general character; but the ones that don't, tend, in my view, to be toothless. Paul Churchland, for example, seems to find it quite compelling to argue from the fact that ordinary psychology does not provide adequate accounts of such things as "the nature and dynamics of mental illness, the faculty of creative imagination . . . the nature and psychological functions of sleep . . . the common ability to catch an outfield fly ball on the run" (see *op. cit.*, p. 73) to the conclusion that there are no beliefs and desires. This argument is psychology-specific in the sense that the reasons it provides for skepticism about contentful psychological items do not generalize to a similar skepticism about contentful linguistic items. Unfortunately, the argument is a poor one. First, because it is never a good idea to do what the argument in effect does: viz., legislate *a priori* the phenomena that a theory should encompass within its explanatory purview. (I owe this observation to Jerry Fodor.) And, second, because although ordinary psychology may not itself harbor detailed views about the phenomena Churchland mentions, empirical theories employing concepts deriving from folk psychology promise to offer rich and elaborate accounts of them. Contemporary cognitive psychology, for example, is replete with theories about visual perception, memory, and learning that employ constructs recognizably similar to the ordinary concepts of belief,

four kinds: arguments from the indeterminacy of content, arguments from the holistic character of content, arguments from the irreducibility of content and arguments from the “queerness” of content.

It is a famous claim of Quine’s that for any mental state or linguistic expression, a pair of content ascriptions can always be devised which would be such that, although they could not both be true, no rational considerations could decide between them. He took this to show that ascriptions of meaning were not a genuinely factual matter.²⁷ Considerations of the second kind, due to Stephen Stich, attempt to show that attributions of contentful states are governed by holistic and context-sensitive criteria, and that this feature militates against the existence of content properties.²⁸ A third kind of content-skeptical argument, common to many philosophers, proceeds from the presumed failure of naturalistic reductions of content: content properties are not genuine properties because they are not reducible to the only properties that are.²⁹ And, finally, arguments from “queerness”—advocated recently by Kripke’s Wittgenstein—claim that the content properties envisaged by common sense could not be real, because *no* real property could have the sorts of feature that common sense considers constitutive of content.³⁰

I have no interest at the moment in the soundness of these arguments. My only concern is to point out that, if effective at all, they should be as effective against linguistic content as they are against mental content. This is evident from the fact that the arguments construct their skeptical case by exploiting features of content

desire and judgment. (See here J. Woodward and T. Horgan, “Folk Psychology Is Here To Stay,” *The Philosophical Review* 94 (1985).) To argue, then, from the fact that ordinary psychology has no theory of sleep or perception, to the conclusion that there are no beliefs or desires, would seem to be like arguing from the fact that ordinary common-sense physics has no adequate theory of motion, to the conclusion that there are no such properties as mass or length.

²⁷See W. V. O. Quine, *Word and Object*.

²⁸*From Folk Psychology to Cognitive Science: The Case Against Belief*.

²⁹See Schiffer, *op. cit.*, pp. 146–156.

³⁰Kripke has in mind the infinitary and normative character of the ordinary notion of content. See S. Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*. For further discussion see my “The Rule-Following Considerations.” The use of the term “queerness” for arguments of this kind derives from Mackie, *op. cit.*

properties, but without exploiting any facts about the putative *bearers* of those properties. Thus, they would apply to anything said to possess content, whether it was mental or not.

I have been arguing that one ought not to be an irrealist about mental content attributions, unless one is prepared to be an irrealist about all content attributions. But what notion of content is in question, exactly?

It is a question of considerable contemporary controversy whether the ordinary notion of content may be understood to consist simply in the idea of a truth condition, or whether it has to be conceived as consisting in something more fine-grained. Fregean opacity phenomena pull, of course, in the latter, more ambitious, direction; but it remains unclear that they cannot be handled in a way that conserves the more modest, truth-conditional construal.³¹ What is not controversial, however, is that the essential *core* of the ordinary notion of content does consist simply in the idea of a truth condition; so that even if, for whatever reason, we had to forego something more fine-grained, that would still count as a significant commitment to the ordinary notion. And, for all we now know, truth conditions may be all the ordinary notion calls for in any event.

What this suggests is that a skepticism about content, if it is to be *interesting*, must be directed primarily at the idea of a truth condition and not at any more ambitious construal of the ordinary notion. Otherwise, it will be easy to deflect the skepticism by settling for the modest construal, a course of action that may be forced upon us in any case by considerations *internal* to the theory of content. Fortunately for contemporary content skeptics, it seems clear that the standard arguments for content skepticism (reviewed above) do not exploit the complexities that opacity phenomena induce: they would apply even on a modest, truth-conditional construal of content.³² For the remainder of this paper, therefore, I will assume that contents just are truth conditions.

³¹There is a very large literature on this subject. For a recent attempt to get by with the more modest construal, see J. Fodor, *op. cit.*

³²The only argument that may seem to be at risk is Stich's argument from holism, but I think this appearance illusory. The *criteria* for ascriptions of *referential* content seem to me to be just as holistic as the criteria for ascription of meaning—by manipulating the background beliefs, one can raise just as much of a worry about whether Mrs. T. is referring to

III. IRREALIST CONCEPTIONS OF CONTENT

A summary may be useful at this stage. An examination of the standard recipes for constructing irrealist conceptions revealed that *non-factualist* theories presuppose robust conceptions of truth and reference; and that error theories presuppose that the target sentences possess truth conditions (on either a robust or a deflationary construal of truth). I have also argued that one ought not to be an irrealist about psychological content without being an irrealist about all content attributions; and that the relevant notion of content may be assumed to consist simply in the idea of a truth condition. We are finally in a position to assess the cogency of irrealist construals of content.

Consider first an error conception. As the preceding discussion has argued, this amounts finally to the claim that

- (4) All sentences of the form “S has truth condition p” are false,

where S is to be understood as ranging over sentences in the language of thought, or neural structures, as well as over public-language sentences. But, now, (4) would seem to have the immediate consequence that *no sentence* has a truth condition. For whatever one’s conception of “true”—whether robust or deflationary—a sentence of the form “S has truth condition p” will be true if and only if S really does have truth condition p; this is, of course, nothing but a reflection of the truth predicate’s disquotational properties, properties it possesses on any conception of truth. And so, since “S has truth condition p” is true if and only if S has truth condition p, then, since *all* sentences of that form are held to be *false*, for no S and for no p does S have truth condition p. Now, however, a problem would seem immediate. For (4) implies, that is, that no sentence whatever has a truth condition. But what (4) *says* is that all truth-condition-attributing sentences are false. And these sentences cannot be false unless they have truth conditions to begin with. Hence, (4) implies both that truth-condition-

McKinley, as one can about whether she is expressing the concept of assassination. Even if this were false, of course, the problem would be Stich’s, not mine.

attributing sentences have truth conditions and that they don't have them. This is a contradiction.

What about a non-factualist conception of content? Applying the standard recipe for constructing such conceptions—namely, (1) and (2)—to this case, we see that a non-factualism about content comes to the view that content predicates do not express properties and (hence) that content-attributing sentences are not genuinely truth-conditional. That is, the view consists in the pair of claims:

- (5) The predicate “has truth condition p” does not refer to a property,

and

- (6) “S has truth condition p” is not truth-conditional.

Notice, however, that (5) entails

- (7) “true” does not refer to a property.

For the truth value of a sentence is fully determined by its truth condition and the relevant worldly facts. There is no way, then, that a sentence's possessing a truth value could be a thoroughly factual matter (“true” does express a property) if there is non-factuality in one of its determinants (“has truth condition p” does not express a property). A non-factualism about content amounts, therefore, to (6) and (7).³³

But now here too a contradiction seems apparent. For we saw in Part I that the idea of a significant declarative sentence failing to possess truth conditions is an idea that *presupposes* that “true” does refer to a property: it presupposes a robust, as opposed to deflationary, conception of truth. It follows, therefore, that a non-factualism about content is seen to consist in a pair of claims, one of which presupposes the negation of the other. For (6) is the denial that a declarative sentence possesses truth conditions, which presupposes that truth is robust; whereas (7) is the denial that truth is robust.

³³I am indebted here to Crispin Wright.

Now, this seems an extremely curious result, doesn't it?—no irrealist conception of content, modelled on standard formulations of irrealist theses about other subject matters, yields a coherent view. How can this be? Irrealist conceptions of other domains—of ethics, for example, or of mathematics—may not be particularly appealing or plausible; but they're not incoherent. Why should matters stand differently with content discourse?

The source of the asymmetry is not hard to find. It derives from the fact that error and non-factualist theories about *any* subject matter presuppose certain claims about truth and truth conditions, which an error or non-factualist conception directed precisely at truth ends up denying. Not surprisingly, the ensuing result is unstable.

Thus, an error thesis about any subject matter presupposes, by its very nature, that the target sentences are truth-conditional. But an error thesis directed precisely at our talk of truth conditions themselves entails the denial of that presupposition. Thus, also, a non-factualism about any subject matter presupposes a robust conception of truth and reference. But a non-factualism directed precisely at truth entails the denial of that presupposition.

The conclusion, it seems to me, is inescapable: if there is a genuine issue about the status of content discourse, it cannot be formulated in accordance with our standard irrealist models.

IV. A REFORMULATED CONTENT IRREALISM

The question arises whether there is some other, more salutary, way of formulating an irrealism about content and truth.

Well, one set of views we may simply set aside: *no* version of an *error* conception of content can be made to yield anything satisfactory. So long as there is no hope of confining a skepticism about content purely to the psychological domain, an error thesis about content will yield a contradiction. But it might seem that the non-factualist conception could be modified to yield something more promising.

A standard non-factualist conception, applied to content discourse consists, as we saw, of the following pair of claims:

- (7) The predicate "true" does not refer to a property

and

(6) "S has truth condition p" is not truth-conditional.

The difficulty was that (6) presupposes that (7) is false, so they cannot both be true.

Given, however, that the difficulties for this position appear to stem solely from the *joint* assertion of (6) and (7), it is natural to wonder whether an acceptable content irrealism might not be formulable with the aid of only *one* of these propositions. After all, the non-factualist position currently under consideration was generated by a fairly mechanical application of standard non-factualist recipes. It remains conceivable, therefore, that there exists some non-standard way of expressing an irrealism about content properties, one that will not fall prey to the difficulties uncovered above.

One unpromising strategy would be to give up (7) in favor of (6). The idea here is that an irrealism about content could be secured by asserting—with (6)—that truth-condition-attributing sentences are non-factual (non-truth-conditional), without having to say—with (7)—that truth is not robust, that the predicate "true" does not name a genuine property. But the position is unstable, for familiar reasons. The trouble is that since truth-condition-attributing sentences are declarative, denying of them—with (6)—that they are truth-conditional presupposes that truth is robust, that "true" does name a genuine property. But if "true" does name a genuine property, how could sentences which attribute such properties be—as (6) claims—non-factual, not capable of genuine truth and falsehood?

The opposite strategy of giving up (6) but retaining (7) seems much more promising. For a deflationism about truth—the thesis expressed by (7)—would appear to be an impeccably content irrealist position. And although now it will be impossible for the content irrealist to say, given the loss of (6), that truth-condition-attributing sentences are non-truth-conditional, it should also be clear that there is no longer any *need* to say that. He can happily admit that such sentences are fact-stating and even that they are occasionally true. For with the denial that "true" refers to a robust semantical property, the admission is innocuous: it is perfectly

consistent with his irrealism about the central semantic concepts. The proposal that recommends itself would appear to be, then, that content irrealism be reformulated so as to consist *solely* in (7)—in the denial that the predicate “true” expresses a property.

The remainder of this paper will be devoted to an examination of this proposal. I shall first question whether it can accommodate the sorts of *motivation* that have traditionally fueled content irrealism. Then I shall question whether it manages to evade the sorts of problem that beset the earlier formulations.

V. DEFLATIONARY CONCEPTIONS OF TRUTH AND CONTENT IRREALISM

Most proponents of content irrealism came to that view by way of the conviction that neuroscience, or something else similarly physically basic, will ultimately provide the true story about the etiology of human behavior and cognitive activity, and that ordinary content-based psychology will not, for one reason or another, reduce to that story. In short, irrealists about content tend to be realists about physics, and, indeed, the former because the latter.

But there is a serious difficulty seeing how this original motivation for content irrealism can be conserved, on the adjusted understanding of what the view consists in. For how is a realist/irrealist contrast between physics and semantics to be formulated, if content irrealism is expressed as a deflationism about truth?

The arguments against error theories of content bar the irrealist from saying that content-ascribing sentences differ from the sentences of physics in that the former, but not the latter, are systematically false. And the adjusted formulation of content irrealism bars him from saying that the difference consists in their differential capacities for stating facts. For if an irrealism about content is simply a deflationism about truth, then, as the discussion of Part I showed, such a view will entail that all declarative sentences, regardless of subject matter, must be treated on a par: there can be no interesting distinction between sentences that are genuinely in the business of stating facts and those that aren't.

But how now to express the conviction that inspired the whole program in the first place: namely, that there is something specifically suspect about *content*?

If content irrealism is formulated as a deflationism about truth, no latitude is left for expressing invidious distinctions between content discourse and physics. In particular, the suggestion championed by Churchland, that content irrealism might lead to the *elimination* of content discourse, can no longer be coherently motivated, for the basis on which an invidious distinction between our talk of content and our talk about any other subject matter was to be constructed, no longer exists. Content irrealism itself guarantees that.

The difficulties encountered here—in the attempt to preserve a special place for physics while avoiding the pitfalls of the sorts of standard irrealist construals of content lately discussed—are nicely illustrated by Stephen Schiffer's recent book *Remnants of Meaning*.³⁴ Schiffer there argues for an irrealism about content characterized by the following pair of theses: *Ontological Physicalism*, which holds that there are no extra-linguistic, irreducibly psychological entities of any ontological category; and *Sentential Dualism*, which holds that there are true, but irreducible, belief-ascribing sentences.

The attractions of the view are unmistakable: it promises to satisfy simultaneously the conviction that there are no non-physical properties, and the conviction that psychological descriptions play an indispensable role in our self-conception, and all this without relying on an implausible reductionism.³⁵ But can it be brought off? One way to appreciate its difficulties is as follows.

Ontological Physicalism is the view that there are no extra-linguistic psychological properties. But let us ask this: are there any extra-linguistic *physical* properties according to Schiffer?

If he says "yes," then Sentential Dualism—the view that there are *true* belief-ascribing sentences—will have been exposed as a sham. For if there are extra-linguistic physical properties for the sentences of physics to answer to, but no extra-linguistic psychological properties for the sentences of psychology to answer to, then it isn't true, in the strict and literal sense, that there are *true*

³⁴S. Schiffer, *op. cit.*

³⁵This sort of view was probably first proposed by Donald Davidson; see his "Mental Events," reprinted in *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1980).

sentences of psychology, and the overall view is indistinguishable from the sorts of standard irrealism about content that we recently found so problematic.

On the other hand, if Schiffer denies the existence of properties altogether, then the view can hardly be described as a combination of Ontological *Physicalism* and Sentential Dualism: it would be more appropriate to describe it as a combination of Ontological *Nihilism* and Sentential Dualism. Or, if we prefer, and on the assumption that we can now provide a deflationary construal of “ontology,” we may describe it as a combination of *Ontological Dualism* and *Sentential Dualism*. Either way, we would have been unable to preserve a special and privileged place for *physics* to occupy relative to the rest of discourse.³⁶

An irrealism about content can only be a deflationism about truth. And this is a significantly different view from what we had been led to expect. But is it at least stable in this guise?

The suggestion that it isn't is likely to meet with some resistance. Deflationary conceptions of truth, although of relatively recent provenance, have had many distinguished proponents, including many of the Vienna positivists, some of the American pragmatists, Ayer, Quine, Rorty, and others. And although one may be inclined to believe that these philosophers are wrong about truth, it seems hard to believe that their view is not even a coherent option.

Be that as it may, it is actually *implicit* in the foregoing discussion that a deflationism about truth is an inherently unstable position.

A deflationary conception of truth is the view that there really is no such property, that talk about truth and truth conditions must be understood in some way other than as talk about genuine, language-independent properties that sentences or thoughts may enjoy. It is typically expressed, as Ayer and others have expressed it, like this:

- (7) The predicate “true” does not refer to a property.

³⁶It ought to be recorded that Schiffer himself takes this latter course, preferring to say that there are no properties of any kind (see pp. 146–156). He does not explain how, in light of this, he feels entitled to call himself an “ontological physicalist.”

But there is a serious problem seeing how any such view could itself be true. The point to bear in mind, from the discussion in Part I, is that the denial that a given predicate refers to, or expresses, a property, only makes sense on a *robust* construal of *predicate reference*; on a deflationary construal, there is, simply, no space for denying, of a significant, predicative expression, that it expresses a property.

But, then, if this is correct, the denial—expressed in (7)—that the truth predicate refers to a property, must itself be understood as framed in terms of a robust notion of reference. Otherwise, it would amount to the *false* claim that a significant, predicative expression—in this case “true”—fails of deflationary reference. But this result, in conjunction with the platitude connecting reference and truth noted above—namely, that “x is P” is true if and only if the object denoted by “x” has the property expressed by “P”—implies that (7) presupposes that truth is robust. So the denial that truth is robust attempted in (7) can succeed only if it fails.

It is natural to wonder whether the difficulty can be got around like this: first, deny that predicate reference is a robust notion; and then define a deflationary notion of truth in terms of this deflationary notion of reference. Notice that in so doing there is no longer any need to use the offending sentence (7); for granted the deflationism about reference, the concession that “true” does refer to a property would be innocuous: it would be perfectly consistent with a deflationism about the central semantic notions.

The trouble is that an offending sentence is bound to crop up somewhere. For what, after all, is a deflationary conception of reference? Presumably, it is the view that

- (8) The expression “refers to a property” does not itself refer to a property.

And here, it would seem, the same problem simply recurs. For, again, if the notion of “refers to a property” that is used in (8) is a deflationary notion, then (8) amounts to the *false* claim that a significant, predicative expression—in this case, “refers to a property”—fails of deflationary reference. It must, therefore, be understood as expressing a robust conception of reference. On the terms of this understanding, however, what it says is false, too. So

yet again the attempt to state a deflationism about the central semantic notions results in incoherence.

VI. CONCLUDING REMARKS

By way of closing, I would like to recapitulate the principal conclusions and to indicate, however briefly, where we require more understanding than we currently possess.

The history of philosophy has furnished us with two ways of thinking about a region of discourse, once we have become convinced that nothing in the world answers to its characteristic predicates—an error theory and a non-factualist theory. Both these models are constructed with the aid of certain theses about the concepts of truth, truth conditions and reference. Thus, error theories about a given region presuppose that the target sentences possess truth conditions; and non-factualist theories presuppose robust conceptions of truth and reference.

Recently, the suggestion that one or another of these models might apply also to ordinary, content-based psychology has become increasingly influential. The suggestion, however, rightly understood, is tantamount to the proposal that we construe semantic discourse as a whole along irrealist lines. And this proposal is of dubious coherence; for any irrealist conception presupposes certain claims about truth and truth conditions, which an irrealism precisely about truth entails the denial of. Perhaps the right way to express an irrealism about content is through *deflationism*? But this won't help, for a deflationism about truth and reference is just a version of a non-factualist thesis about semantic concepts, and is subject to the same sorts of difficulty.

If these considerations are correct, the upshot is that we have not been shown how to make sense of the question: do any properties answer to our talk about truth, truth conditions and reference? On the face of it, this is a surprising result; for it seems that we should be able to wonder whether anything answers to our semantic discourse, much as we have profitably wondered whether anything answers to our evaluative discourse. But if the argument of the present paper is correct, the whole enterprise of asking such questions is itself based on a realist understanding of semantic discourse; the suggestion, then, that irrealism might turn out to be

the correct model for semantic discourse itself is a suggestion that we cannot coherently entertain.

What recourse might a content irrealist have in the face of these arguments? Two main possibilities suggest themselves. He may seek to deny that it follows inexorably from a deflationary conception of reference, that every significant predicative expression expresses a property. Or, he may attempt to deny that the nature of his worries about content discourse is best expressed in terms of our standard irrealist models.

The first option strikes me as extremely unpromising. I simply cannot see how, if we refuse to think of truth and reference as substantive properties, we can motivate stronger-than-minimal requirements on eligibility for truth and reference. It seems to me—as it has seemed to most deflationists—almost *definitional* of a deflationary conception, that eligibility should in this way be trivial.³⁷

What of the second suggestion? The contrast between realism and irrealism has traditionally served as the contrast of choice between cognitively reputable and cognitively disreputable discourse. It ought to be noted, however, that some philosophers have recently begun to explore the possibility that a cognitively interesting contrast may be drawn in non-truth-theoretic terms.³⁸ It is too early to say whether this project will succeed, or, for that matter, whether it would ultimately be of use in the present context, if it did. But, in light of the difficulties confronting a truth-theoretic formulation of content irrealism, it seems an avenue well worth exploring.

I am inclined to believe, however, that the correct moral of the considerations on offer here is just what it appears to be: that we really cannot make sense of the suggestion that our thoughts and utterances do not possess robust truth conditions. Much as Descartes's *cogito* argument may be understood to have shown that I cannot make sense of the suggestion that I do not exist, by showing that the claim that I do exist is a presupposition of the most refined attempt to deny that I do; so the present argument should be understood as showing that we cannot make sense of the claim that

³⁷See for example Schiffer, *op. cit.*, pp. 146–156.

³⁸See the paper by Crispin Wright cited above.

our thoughts and utterances do not possess robust truth conditions by showing that the claim that they do possess robust truth conditions is a presupposition of the most refined attempt to deny that they do. In either case, whether the argument ultimately succeeds depends upon whether an alternative formulation of the disputed thesis can be found, one which does not carry the self-defeating presupposition.

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