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Three questions for minimalism

Keith Simmons

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Abstract In this paper, I raise some interconnected concerns for Paul Horwich’s minimal theory of truth, framed by these three questions: How should the minimal theory be formulated? How does the minimal theory address the liar paradox? What is the explanatory role of the concept of truth? I conclude that we cannot be linguistic or conceptual deflationists about truth.

Keywords TRUTH · The minimal theory of truth · Deflationism about truth · Linguistic deflationism · Conceptual deflationism · Metaphysical deflationism · Propositions · Truth-bearers · Disquotationalism · The liar paradox · Grounded and ungrounded sentences · Grounded and ungrounded propositions · The property of truth · The concept of truth · Assertion

Paul Horwich’s *Truth*, published twenty five years ago, is arguably the principal reason that the deflationary view of truth occupies center-stage today. It provided the first full-length systematic presentation and defense of the minimal theory of truth.

The minimal theory is essentially a thesis about the predicate ‘true’, and its application to propositions, which Horwich takes to be the truth-bearers. In a nutshell, the theory is this: Given a sentence ‘p’, the truth predicate provides us with an equivalent sentence, ‘The proposition that p is true’. So ‘true’ acts as a de-nominalizer—applied to the noun phrase ‘the proposition that p’, the truth predicate restores the structure of

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a sentence. In Horwich’s words: “The entire conceptual and theoretical role of truth may be explained on this basis”.¹

In this paper, I want to raise three concerns for the minimal theory, framed by these three questions: How should the minimal theory be formulated? How does the minimal theory address the liar paradox? What is the explanatory role of the concept of truth?

I’ll conclude that the word ‘true’ is more than a de-nominalizer, and the concept of truth has important explanatory work to do. We cannot be linguistic or conceptual deflationists about truth.

1 Formulating the theory

The minimal theory of truth seems very simple—if very long. The infinitely many axioms of the theory are just propositions such as

- The proposition that snow is white is true if and only if snow is white and
- The proposition that lying is wrong is true if and only if lying is wrong.

But the minimal theory is not as simple as it looks.

According to Horwich, the structure of these axioms is given by the “propositional structure”

(E*) \(<p> \) is true iff p).²

Here Horwich employs the following convention: “surrounding any expression, e, with angled brackets, ‘<’ and ‘>’, produces an expression referring to the propositional constituent expressed by e.”³ So, for example, ‘<snow is white>’ refers to the proposition expressed by the English sentence ‘snow is white’. Horwich claims that E* “is a function from propositions to propositions”.⁴ For example, E* takes as input the proposition <snow is white>, and yields as output the axiom the proposition

(1) \(<\text{snow is white}> \) is true iff snow is white>.

Given any proposition as input, the function E* will yield the corresponding axiom of the minimal theory MT. These axioms, according to Horwich, are given by the formal principle

“For any object x: x is an axiom of the minimal theory if and only if, for some y, when the function E* is applied to y, its value is x.”⁵

In logical notation:

“(x)(x is an axiom of MT ↔ (\exists y)(x = E*(y))).”⁶

⁴ Horwich (1990, p. 19).
This formulation of the minimal theory suggests that the axioms can be identified directly in terms of propositions: $E^*$ is a function from propositions to propositions, and the formal principle that specifies the axioms quantifies over propositions. It might seem that once we’re on board with propositions as the truth-bearers, we can formulate the minimal theory just in terms of propositions, together with a certain function from propositions to propositions, and quantificational logic.

But this is misleading. $E^*$ cannot be regarded as a function from propositions to propositions. If we are told that $f(x)$ is a function from integers to integers, we expect to replace the variable $x$ in the expression $'f(x)'$ by the name of an integer, and thereby obtain an expression that denotes an integer. If, for example, $f(x) = x + x$, ‘$f(2)$’ denotes the number 4. Here we replace ‘$x$’ in each of its occurrences by the name ‘2’, and obtained a denoting expression ‘$2 + 2$’ that denotes 4. Similarly, if $E^*(y)$ is a function from propositions to propositions, we expect to replace the variable $y$, in each of its occurrences, by the name of a proposition. Now $E^*(y) = <<y>>$ is true iff $y$.

Suppose we put the name of a proposition—say, the name <snow is white>—for each occurrence of $y$. We will obtain:

$$<<<<\text{snow is white}>>\text{ is true iff }<<\text{snow is white}>>.$$  

This is not well-formed. On the left hand side of the biconditional, the expression ‘$<<\text{snow is white}>>$’ reads: “the proposition that the proposition that snow is white”—but this fails to refer to a proposition (or anything else). And on the right hand side, the name ‘$<<\text{snow is white}>>$’ appears—but a name cannot serve as the right hand side of a biconditional.

In Horwich (1998) (though not in 1990), Horwich seems to suggest that $E^*$ is a function because its application to, say, the proposition $<<\text{snow is white}>>$ yields the proposition $<<\text{snow is white}>>$ is true iff snow is white. Horwich unpacks this claim in terms of the sentence schema (E) $<p>$ is true iff $p$. According to Horwich, the application of (E) to the sentence ‘Snow is white’ yields the sentence

$$(1^*) <\text{snow is white}>\text{ is true iff snow is white}.$$  

Now, moving from the level of the linguistic items (E), ‘Snow is white’ and (1*) to the level of their meanings or what they express, Horwich concludes that the application of what (E) expresses (namely, $E^*$) to what ‘Snow is white’ expresses (the proposition $<<\text{snow is white}>>$) yields what (1*) expresses (the proposition (1)). But this does not establish that (E*) is a function from propositions to propositions. (E*) is no more a function than (E) is. (E) is not a function from sentences to sentences: (E) does not apply to sentences in the way that a function applies to its arguments. (Contrast, for example, a function that takes a sentence to its negation.) (E) is a schema, and we obtain (1*) by replacing occurrences of ‘$p$’ in (E) by tokens of the sentence ‘snow is white’; similarly (E*) is a schema, and we obtain (1) from (E*) by replacing occurrences of ‘$p$’ in (E*) by tokens of the sentence ‘snow is white’.

So we should regard (E*) as a schema, not a function. We can move from (E*) to an axiom of the minimal theory if we replace each occurrence of $p$ by tokens of the same interpreted sentence-type. For example, if we replace each occurrence of $p$
by tokens of the interpreted English sentence ‘Snow is white’ we obtain the axiom

\(<\text{snow is white}> \) is true iff \text{snow is white}\>. But there is no avoiding this detour
through sentences.

Horwich does consider an alternative formulation of the minimal theory which
explicitly brings in sentences:

“One alternative is to characterize the axioms of the minimal theory as anything
that is expressed by instances of the sentence schema

\((E) \ ‘<p> \text{ is true iff } p’.’\)\(^7\)

Presumably the idea is that if we replace each occurrence of \(p\) by tokens of the same
interpreted sentence, we obtain the name of a sentence that expresses a proposition,
and this proposition is an axiom of the theory.

Now Horwich prefers not to formulate the theory in these terms, because he wants
to avoid such an indirect way of identifying the axioms. Rather than identifying the
axioms indirectly, Horwich prefers to proceed “by directly specifying the propositional
structure which all and only the axioms have in common”.\(^8\) However, the identification
of the axioms via \((E^*)\) is just as indirect as it is via \((E)\). The minimal theory cannot
be formulated solely in terms of propositions. The axioms can be identified only
indirectly, in terms of sentences that express them. And, as Horwich points out, there
is a complication with this indirect identification of the axioms via sentences.\(^9\)

The minimal theory is supposed to be a comprehensive theory of truth, a theory of
truth encompassing all propositions. But there are propositions not expressible by the
sentences of current English, and their associated axioms will be unformulatable at
present. Still, Horwich writes: “Although we cannot now articulate these extra axioms
(any more than we can articulate the propositions they are about) we can nevertheless
identify them.” Since these instantiations of \((E)\) go beyond actual English, and beyond
all actual languages, we need to supplement our actual language English (in which
\((E)\) is expressed) by all possible extensions of it. By appeal to all possible sentences
of English, as well as all actual ones, Horwich suggests we can identify the axioms
of the minimal theory via the sentences that express them. It would be a problem if
we had no way of characterizing all the axioms of the minimal theory. According to
Horwich, even though some axioms are inexpressible, “it is none the less possible to
indicate what they are”.\(^10\)

It is far from clear what can count as a possible extension of English. What are
the constraints here? Who are the possible speakers? So this way of identifying the
axioms is correspondingly unclear. And anyway, as it stands, the appeal to possible
sentences will not guarantee the comprehensiveness of the minimal theory. According
to Horwich, the commitment of the minimal theory to propositions “presupposes very
little about the nature of propositions”.\(^11\)

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\(^7\) Horwich \(1998\), p. 19, n. 3). In Horwich \(1990\), \((E)\) is presented without the single quotes (p. 19, fn. 4).

\(^8\) Horwich \(1998\), p. 19, n. 3).

\(^9\) Horwich \(1998\), pp. 18–19, n. 3).

\(^10\) Horwich \(1998\), p. 20).

\(^11\) Horwich \(1998\), p. 16).
“As far as the minimal theory of truth is concerned, propositions could be composed of abstract Fregean senses, or of concrete objects and properties…”\textsuperscript{12}

But if the theory is to be comprehensive, and the axioms are to be identifiable (even if not presently formulatable), then there cannot be absolutely inexpressible propositions. And this will be so only on certain conceptions of the nature of propositions. One way to see this is through cardinality considerations. It is natural to suppose that there are only denumerably many possible sentences of English (or of any natural language)—but on some conceptions of propositions, there are non-denumerably many propositions.\textsuperscript{13} For example, take propositions to be abstract, structured entities composed of objects (including, say, the real numbers, or ZF sets, or all points of space-time) and properties; or, supposing there are non-denumerably many sets of possible worlds, take propositions to be sets of possible worlds. Then in any possible world, there will be denumerably many sentences of English or extended English, and so only denumerably many propositions expressed. Every possible extension of English will fail to identify (infinitely many) axioms of MT. And it will not help to claim that for each axiom, there is some possible world in which it is identified via an (extended) English sentence. That would require non-denumerably many distinct possible extensions of English, which in turn would require non-denumerably many distinct possible English sentences—contradicting the assumption that there are only denumerably many possible English sentences. The upshot is this: the minimal theory can be properly formulated only under certain conceptions of propositions, those according to which propositions do not outrun sentences.

How then should the minimal theory be formulated, given that sentences cannot be bypassed? Consider again (E\textsuperscript{*}).

(E\textsuperscript{*}) \textless p\textgreater is true iff p.

We want to instantiate (E\textsuperscript{*}) to obtain axioms of the theory—for example, to obtain the proposition expressed by the sentence ‘The proposition that snow is white is true if and only if snow is white’. Certain conditions must be imposed on such an instantiation, as follows:

(i) each ‘p’ is replaced with tokens of an actual or possible English sentence,
(ii) these tokens are given the same interpretation,
(iii) under that interpretation they express a proposition,
(iv) the expression ‘\textless p\textgreater’ refers to the proposition expressed by the sentence p,
and
(v) the meaning of ‘proposition’, whatever that may be, precludes absolutely inexpressible propositions.

\textsuperscript{12} Horwich (1998, p. 17).

\textsuperscript{13} While it is natural to suppose that there are denumerably many possible sentences of English, the minimalist might nevertheless claim that there are non-denumerably many. But the burden is on the minimalist to make out this claim. Moreover, as an anonymous referee points out, it could be argued that even if there are non-denumerably many possible sentences of English, there are still more possible propositions. Consider a Cantorian argument: there are more sets of sentences than there are sentences, and on certain conceptions of propositions, there will be a distinct proposition for each such set (for example, if propositions are taken to be entities composed of objects—including sets—and properties). There are delicate issues here, not least because paradox is lurking. For further discussion see Simmons (1993a, b).
With these conditions in place, we can formulate the minimal theory as follows: the axioms of the theory are all the instantiations of $E^*$ that meet the conditions (i)–(v).

So how minimal is the minimal theory? It’s not just the notion of proposition that enters into this formulation, but other concepts too: language (specifically English), possible language, sentences, sentence-tokens, possible sentences, interpretation, the expressing relation, the reference relation. And the notion of proposition itself must be constrained in some suitable way. The core claim of deflationism, and of Horwich’s minimalism in particular, is that “the truth predicate exists solely for the sake of a certain logical need”. The truth predicate serves merely as a de-nominalizer, and this role turns on no more than the equivalence between ‘$\langle p \rangle$ is true’ and ‘$p$’. Put this way, it seems that the minimal theory is suitably impoverished. But closer inspection shows that the very formulation of the minimal theory of truth requires an array of basic semantic and linguistic concepts. It’s not as simple as it looks.

It follows that we cannot even formulate the minimal theory without taking on a significant burden—all these semantic and linguistic concepts must be explicated without bringing in truth. Horwich points out that the minimalist must reject the idea that our conception of propositions presupposes the notion of truth, and find another account of propositions. A theory of truth must, of course, explain truth in terms that do not themselves involve truth. At first glance, it might seem that in the case of the minimal theory, it is only the notion of proposition that might let truth back in, and all that is required is to explain the notion of proposition in terms independent of truth. But the minimal theory is richer than it might have first appeared, and there are other ways in which truth might get in by the back door. Of course, the minimalist will face the challenge of explaining concepts such as proposition, possible sentence, interpretation, expressing, reference, and meaning independently of truth. But it might have been hoped that one could first formulate the theory, and then take on this substantial challenge as a separate matter. But these notions are part of the

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14 In the Postscript to Horwich (1998), Horwich writes that “the explanatorily basic fact about our use of the truth predicate is our tendency to infer instances of ‘The proposition that $p$ is true’ from corresponding instances of ‘$p$’, and vice versa”. According to Horwich, this tendency governs our use of the truth predicate, and it is present whenever certain conditions hold. These conditions are a version of (i) without any mention of possible sentences (“each ‘$p$’ is replaced with tokens of an English sentence”), conditions (ii) and (iii), and the condition that the terms ‘that’ and ‘proposition’ have their usual meaning (Horwich 1998, p. 126). We should note that there are important differences of scope and function between Horwich’s conditions and the ones I have laid out. Horwich’s conditions apply only to those sentences that a given speaker can understand, since we can only make inferences between instances of ‘The proposition that $p$ is true’ and ‘$p$’ if we understand the sentence that replaces ‘$p$’. And Horwich’s conditions are part of a story about our linguistic practice with the word ‘true’. In contrast, I am concerned with the very statement of the minimal theory—I’m arguing that we cannot even formulate the minimal theory without explicitly bringing in conditions (i)–(iv) and (v). And the scope of the conditions I’ve laid out is different too: they apply not only to sentences that a given speaker understands but also to sentences of actual English that the speaker may not understand, and, beyond that, to all possible, non-actual sentences of English. A formulation of the theory must find a way of identifying every proposition. In contrast, Horwich’s account of our use of ‘true’ involves only propositions we are capable of understanding and the relevant inferences we are capable of making.


16 See for example Horwich (1998, p. 103).
formulation itself. So the formulation of the minimal theory thus far is promissory—it cannot be regarded as complete until the challenge has been met.

At this point, it might seem tempting to abandon propositions, and present a deflationary theory in terms of sentences—if sentences cannot be avoided anyway, then deal only in sentences. The theory would run parallel to the minimal theory: its axioms would be all instances of the disquotational schema

\[ \text{‘p’ is true if and only if } p, \]

where p is to be replaced by sentences. Now it seems that the challenge of formulating the theory is less severe. It seems that notions such as proposition and expressing a proposition no longer stand in need of explanation—and so do not stand in need of explanation in terms independent of truth. But new problems emerge. To illustrate, let me consider two.

First, sentences may contain context-sensitive terms, and, as it stands, an instantiation such as

\[ \text{‘I am hungry’ is true if and only if I am hungry.} \]

is unacceptable. Horwich’s response is to introduce a new kind of quote-name, where, given an expression ‘p’, \(*p*\) picks out an expression not only in terms of its syntactic form but also in terms of the propositional constituent it expresses.\(^{17}\) So for example, \(*I am hungry*\) is multiply ambiguous, designating a separate sentence-type for each of the different propositions it can be used to express. Suppose I utter ‘I am hungry’ at time t—call this utterance u. Then u is of the type \(*I am hungry*\)—written ‘*u *I am hungry*’—if the proposition indicated by the *-quotes concerns my hunger at time t. Now, says Horwich, we can accept the instantiation

\[ (u \in *I am hungry*) \rightarrow (u is true if and only if I am hungry) \]

as long as the two tokens of “I am hungry” express the same proposition. This generalizes to

\[ (S) \ (u \in *p*) \rightarrow (u is true if and only if p) \]

where the replacements for p express the same proposition. It’s clear that Horwich’s treatment of context-sensitivity and indexicality does not yield a simplified minimal theory for sentences and utterances; propositions and the expressing relation are still essential to the theory.

In contrast to Horwich’s minimalism, Field’s disquotational theory of truth takes sentences and utterances to be the truth bearers, not propositions.\(^{18}\) So we might expect this deflationary theory to be formulatable in simpler terms than Horwich’s minimal theory. The core notion of Field’s disquotationalism is pure disquotational

\(^{17}\) Horwich (1998), p. 100.

\(^{18}\) See for example Field (1994), in Blackburn and Simmons (1999), p. 386.)
truth. Given a sentence of my idiolect, say, “Snow is white”, there is a strong equivalence, a “cognitive equivalence”\(^{19}\), between “Snow is white” and my attribution of truth to the sentence: “‘Snow is white’ is true”. As a heuristic, Field suggests that ‘true’ is to be understood as ‘true-as-I-understand-it’. Pure disquotational truth is restricted to the sentences of a speaker’s idiolect, the sentences that the speaker understands. Now suppose I say “I am hungry”. Field suggests that this sentence is disquotationally true (for me, as I understand it) if and only if it is true relative to the value of ‘I’ that I associate with the indexical.\(^{20}\) And similarly for my other uses of indexicals and context-sensitive terms. Field’s treatment here might remind us of Quine’s, where the truth value of a sentence with indexicals is derived from the truth value of the corresponding ‘eternal’ sentence—except that Field’s account is tightly restricted to a speaker’s idiolect. Field’s account has no need of propositions or the expressing relation. It appears conceptually simpler, more ‘minimal’, than Horwich’s account.

But now there is a second new problem generated by the move to sentences. How can disquotationalism account for attributions of truth to foreign sentences—and, in general, to sentences beyond the scope of a speaker’s idiolect? According to the pure disquotational theory, I can understand a truth attribution only so far as I can understand the original sentence. If I know no Finnish, then I cannot understand my attribution of truth to a Finnish sentence any more than I can understand the Finnish sentence. I can intelligibly apply the truth predicate only to sentences of my idiolect. But this seems wrong: I may trust my Finnish friend, and declare that the sentence he just produced is true (or even that everything he says is true). Field offers three ways of extending pure disquotational truth so as to accommodate foreign sentences. We can introduce a notion of interlinguistic synonymy, so that I can call a foreign sentence true if it is synonymous with a sentence of my idiolect that true in the purely disquotational sense. Or we might introduce a vaguer notion of interlinguistic correlation, tied to a notion of good translation that might not require a notion of synonymy. A third option is more limited: if I already understand some foreign sentences, I can include them in my idiolect and apply pure disquotational truth to them directly. Given that the third option is so restricted, we are left with the first two.\(^{21}\) So if the disquotational theory is to escape the straitjacket of a speaker’s idiolect, we will need to introduce notions such as interlinguistic synonymy, or interlinguistic correlation, or good translation. Disquotationalism, like minimalism, is not as simple as it looks.

Horwich’s own solution to the problem of foreign sentences requires a notion of interpretation together with the new kind of quote-name. Suppose Pierre produces an utterance \(u\) of “J’ai faim” at noon on 7/1/1994—then a correct interpretation of \(u\) will be expressed by the English sentence \(v\): “Pierre is hungry at noon on 7/1/1994”. In general, let \(\text{Int}(u)\) be the correct interpretation of an utterance \(u\) in a foreign language—or, more generally, an utterance not exemplified in current discourse. Correctness is captured by this conditional:


\(^{21}\) It is however worth noting that neither of these options provide an account of my application of ‘true’ to foreign sentences not translatable into my idiolect.
Now Horwich’s schema (S) above is adjusted so as to cover all utterances, whether or not in current discourse:

\[(S') \ (\text{Int}(u) \epsilon p) \rightarrow (u \text{ is true if and only if } p).\]

The instances of this schema are the axioms of the minimal theory for utterances. But since the notions of interpretation, expressing, and proposition are essential to its formulation, this theory is no more ‘minimal’ than the minimal theory for propositions.

2 Minimalism and the liar

The liar is usually presented in terms of sentences such as

(1) (1) is false

or

(2) (2) is not true,

or ‘empirical’ versions, such as

(3) The sentence written on the board in room 101 is not true,

where (3) is the only sentence written on the board in room 101. Consider the schema

\[(S) \ s \text{ is true if and only if } p,\]

where ‘p’ is replaced by a sentence, and ‘s’ by an expression that denotes this sentence. If we instantiate this schema to any of these liar sentences, we’re quickly led to contradiction. For example, from the instance

‘(2) is not true’ is true if and only if (2) is not true

together with

\[(2) = \text{‘(2) is not true’}\]

we obtain

(2) is true if and only if (2) is not true.

And obviously this biconditional generates a contradiction.

As we’ve seen, the minimal theory takes propositions to be the bearers of truth, and the truth-schema is given by

\[(P) <p> \text{ is true if and only if } p.\]

Suppose we now replace each occurrence of ‘p’ by a liar sentence, say (2). We obtain:

The proposition that (2) is not true is true if and only if (2) is not true.
How should we understand this biconditional? If no restrictions are placed on (P), then this instantiation will be an axiom of MT. Should it be admitted as an axiom, or should it be rejected, perhaps because it produces a contradiction, or perhaps because (2) fails to express a proposition? The status of this instantiation of (P) is quite unclear, for two reasons. First, it is not clear what the proposition is that (2) expresses, or whether it expresses a proposition at all—so the denotation of the referring expression on the left-hand-side is unclear. Second, while the truth predicate applies to a proposition on the left-hand-side (if the proposition exists), on the right-hand-side the truth predicate is applied to a sentence—namely, the sentence (2). It is unclear how the minimal theory engages with self-referential sentences such as (1), (2) and (3).

It’s a somewhat delicate matter to present the liar in terms of propositions, as Horwich’s problematic version in Horwich (1998) indicates:

“let ‘#’ abbreviate ‘THE PROPOSITION FORMULATED IN CAPITAL LETTERS IS NOT TRUE’.”

It’s not clear how a proposition can be formulated in capital letters. A sentence token can be—a sentence token can be composed of capital letters, or bold letters, or italicized letters. So we could construct the liar sentence:

(†) The sentence formulated in bold letters is not true.

And then we could let ‘#’ abbreviate ‘the proposition expressed by †’. Now let’s try instantiating (P). We could replace ‘p’ by the sentence * in the following way:

Now we’re in even worse shape than we were with (2), because the way the sentence is picked out is by a physical feature of the sentence-token (*), but the instance of the schema introduces more tokens of the same type with the same physical feature. At least with (2) we had a stable name of a particular sentence-token.

In both Horwich (1990, 1998), Horwich uses locutions such as ‘What Oscar said’ and ‘Oscar’s claim’ to refer to propositions. And then one might formulate Liar sentences such as:

(4) What Oscar is saying now is not true

where (4) is said by Oscar, or

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23 We might try working instead with this instance:

The proposition that the sentence formulated in bold letters is not true is true if and only if the sentence formulated in bold letter is not true.

But now we’re back where we were with (2)—it’s not clear what proposition, if any, is referred to on the left-hand-side, and on the right-hand-side, the truth predicate is applied to a sentence. In Horwich (1990), the following version is suggested: ‘This proposition is not true’. We have here a sentence, so it is not clear what the referent of “this proposition” is. And this problem is magnified when we consider the corresponding instance of (P):

The proposition that this proposition is not true is true if and only if this proposition is not true.

We need a non-indexical way of referring to the relevant proposition.
(5) Oscar’s claim is not true

where (5) is the only claim that Oscar ever makes. Here the problem is that there
is no guarantee that ‘What Oscar said’ and ‘Oscar’s claim’ refer to propositions. In
sentences like ‘What Oscar said was in English’ or ‘Oscar’s claim was made under
oath’, it is natural to take the referents to be sentences or utterances. So (4) and (5)
cannot as I can see, the only way to formulate an unproblematic propositional liar is
to employ the *expressing* relation between sentences and propositions. 24 For example,
suppose Oscar says

(6) The proposition expressed by the person in 333 Manchester Hall on 2/9/2016 is
not true

where Oscar happens to be the only person situated at that place and time. Or consider
the more compact Liar sentence: (7) The proposition expressed by (7) is not true.
If we instantiate (P) to (7), for example, we obtain

The proposition that the proposition expressed by (7) is not true if and only if the proposition expressed by (7) is not true.

Now the truth predicate on the right-hand-side applies to a proposition, as it should,
according to the minimal theory. Still, the status of this biconditional will remain
unclear until it is determined what proposition, if any, (7) expresses.

So there are three points to make about the move from sentential versions of the
liar to propositional versions. First, the propositional versions of semantic paradox
turn not just on truth, but on the semantic relation of *expressing* as well—unlike the
‘pure’ versions of the liar, generated by (1), (2), and (3), which turn only on truth.
We investigate paradoxes because we hope to learn more about the paradox-producing
concept—and the pure sentential versions promise to tell us more about truth itself than
the more complex propositional versions, where an additional semantic notion figures
in. Second, and relatedly, the minimal theory—couched in terms of propositions—
does not engage with the familiar sentential versions of the paradox. Third, the status
of well-formed instances of the schema (P)—for example, instantiations of (P) to (6)
or (7)—is unclear, because it is unclear what proposition is referred to on the left-hand
side.

With this third point in mind, we can press the question: What is the proposition
expressed by, say, the sentence (7)? Different accounts of the liar will yield different
answers. For example, a hierarchical account might say that (7) is to be represented
as

The proposition expressed by (7) is not true_{\alpha},

where \alpha indicates a level of language. The predicate ‘true_{\alpha}’ will apply to propositions
such as <snow is white>, which is a true proposition of level 0, ‘true_{\alpha}’ will apply to
propositions such as <<snow is white” is true_{0}>, which is a true proposition of level

24 This is supported by an example Horwich provides in Horwich (2010, p. 88, fn. 9), where he constructs
the liar sentence “The proposition expressed by the second quoted sentence in n. 9 of Paul Horwich’s ‘A
Minimalist Critique of Tarski’ is not true”.

24
1, and so on. Given that ‘true\_α’ occurs in (7), the proposition expressed by (7) will be of level α + 1. But then the proposition expressed by (7) will be true\_α+1 because the proposition expressed by (7) is indeed not a true\_α proposition—since it is not a proposition of level α, and so not a true proposition of level α. So on this hierarchical approach, (7) does express a true (i.e. true\_α+1) proposition. And the instantiation to (7) of the truth\_α+1 schema is itself true (true\_α+2):

The proposition that the proposition expressed by (7) is not true\_α is true\_α+1 if and only if the proposition expressed by (7) is not true\_α.

Some contextual views of truth will come to the same conclusion: (7) expresses a true proposition when assessed from a suitably reflective context of evaluation, and so a correspondingly reflective instance of the truth-schema will be true too.25

Other accounts of the liar will come to different conclusions. It might be claimed that the English predicate ‘true’ is univocal and unstratified, and that there are well-formed, declarative sentences that are neither true nor false, and which fail to express propositions. In particular, (7) fails to express a proposition, on pain of contradiction. And now the instantiation of (P) to (7) breaks down, because of a failure of denotation. Or the dialetheist might claim that the proposition expressed by (7) is both true and false, the contradiction generated is a true contradiction, and the instantiation of (P) to (7) is true (and false).

The upshot is this: the minimal theory has to deal with propositional liar sentences like (6) and (7). But that requires first identifying the proposition, if any, that a liar sentence expresses. And that in turn requires a prior theory of truth and the liar—perhaps a hierarchical theory, or a contextual theory, or a gappy theory, or a dialetheic theory, or some other. And so the status of the instantiations of (P) to liar sentences will vary with the prior theory. We should, then, be wary of an axiom schema for a theory of truth that is couched in terms of the schematic phrase ‘the proposition that p’. It takes a theory of truth to determine the reference of ‘the proposition that p’ when we put a liar sentence for ‘p’.26 And so it takes a theory of truth to determine whether certain instances of (P) are true or not. But then we cannot in general regard instances of Horwich’s schema (P) as axioms of a theory of truth, since there may be instances whose truth is established by a prior theory of truth. Such instances will be theorems of the prior theory—they will not have the axiomatic status that Horwich’s minimal

25 Some contextual theories are hierarchical (see for example Burge 1979), others are not (for example, the singularity theory in Simmons 1993a,b). But either way, there’s an intuition that drives contextual views: a sentence that says of itself that it’s not true is semantically pathological in some way, and because it is pathological, it isn’t true, just as it says. So, on reflection, in the light of its pathologicality, the sentence is indeed true.

26 Davidson (1996) raises the following question for Horwich’s theory: “How are we to understand phrases like ‘the proposition that Socrates is wise’? In giving a standard account of the semantics of the sentence ‘Socrates is wise’, we make use of what the name ‘Socrates’ names, and of the entities of which the predicate ‘is wise’ is true. But how can we use these semantic features of the sentence ‘Socrates is wise’ to yield the reference of ‘the proposition that Socrates is wise’. Horwich does not give us any guidance here.” (p. 318)

Horwich replies to Davidson’s concerns in Horwich (1998, p. 133), and in Horwich (1999). Whether or not there is general problem for Horwich concerning the reference of ‘the proposition that p’, there is at least a pressing problem when we put a Liar sentence for ‘p’.
theory accords them. And these instances will contain ineliminable occurrences of ‘true’, occurrences that cannot be denominalized away.

Horwich for his part assumes without argument that liar-related instantiations of (P) must be restricted:

“we must conclude that permissible instantiations of the equivalence schema are restricted in some way so as to avoid paradoxical results.”

Now these restrictions can be motivated in two ways. The first way is to argue that liar sentences such as (6) or (7) cannot intelligibly replace the variable ‘p’ in (P). The second way is the way Horwich takes: permit the replacement but then argue that the resulting biconditional is unacceptable. I will argue that either way poses problems for the minimal theory.

According to the first way, liar sentences are ruled out as legitimate replacements for ‘p’ in (P). Clearly there are illegitimate replacements for ‘p’—Julius Caesar, for example. Julius Caesar is not apt to express a proposition, and the expression ‘<Julius Caesar>’ has no referent. So here we need to argue that sentences like (6) and (7) are also not apt to express propositions. The question for the minimalist is whether this can be done without letting truth back in. The case of Julius Caesar presents no problem for the minimalist because Julius Caesar can be excluded on purely syntactical grounds—only declarative sentences can be legitimate replacements for ‘p’ in (P). But (6) and (7) are declarative in form, so this condition is not strong enough. We could strengthen the condition along lines suggested by Crispin Wright in his discussion of truth-aptness. The sentence must not only be declarative, but it must also be part of a discourse that is disciplined, a discourse where “there are firmly acknowledged standards of proper and improper use of its ingredient sentences”. This would take care of tongue twisters like ‘She sells sea shells by the sea shore’, or the case where I write on the board ‘Fred has flat feet’ in a logic class to illustrate the logical form Fa. But this stronger condition is clearly met by empirical cases of the liar, where paradox is produced because of the empirical circumstances, and not because of any intrinsic syntactic or semantic features of the sentence.

To take things further, we might consider a proposal already mentioned above, that liar sentences, even if declarative and disciplined, are gappy. Now this is to say that certain sentences are neither true nor false—this is to apply the truth and falsity predicates to sentences, not to propositions. This will require the minimalist to accommodate sentence-truth, but presumably this can be done. The minimalist can allow that sentences are true or false in a derivative sense: if a sentence S expresses a true (false) proposition, then S is a true (false) sentence. Now, according to Horwich, propositions are true or false—“…we cannot claim of some proposition that it has

29 Wright (1992, p. 29). Boghossian puts it this way: the sentence must be “significant”, or, more fully, must “possess a role within the language: its use must be appropriately disciplined by norms of correct utterance” (Boghossian 1990, p. 163).
30 See Jackson et al. (1994, p. 293).
So if a sentence S expresses a proposition, then S expresses a true proposition or a false proposition, and so S is true or false. It follows that if S is neither true nor false, S does not express a proposition. So we have a way of excluding liar sentences as replacements for ‘p’ in (P): they are excluded because they are gappy.

The problem for the minimal theory is that this condition is semantic—the condition is explicitly couched in terms of truth and falsity. The specification of the axioms that constitute the minimal theory of truth cannot rely on the notion of truth itself. So now the challenge is to explicate the notion of a gappy sentence in terms that don’t implicate truth. Since we’re now dealing with sentences, the challenge can be put this way: explain the notion of a truth value gap in a way that is acceptable to the disquotationalist as well as the minimalist. The minimalist will need to extend their deflationary account of truth to sentence-truth: just as truth’s role with respect to propositions is simply its denominalizing role, so its role with respect to sentences is simply its disquotational role.

The aim is to explain why sentences like (6) and (7) are gappy in a way compatible with disquotationalism and minimalism. Elsewhere, I’ve suggested that the most promising way for the disquotationalist to accommodate gaps is via the notion of groundedness. This idea can be extended to cases like (6) and (7) where we are dealing with both sentences and propositions. Consider first a simple case of a grounded sentence:

(8) The proposition expressed by ‘Snow is white’ is true.

The instance of the truth schema for the sentence (8) is:

(8) is true iff the proposition expressed by ‘Snow is white’ is true.

To determine a truth value for (8), we have to determine the truth value of proposition referred to on the right hand side. Since that is the proposition \(<\text{snow is white}>\), which is true, the right hand side is true, and so (8) is true. Now consider the sentence

(9) The proposition expressed by (8) is true and its associated biconditional is:

(9) is true iff the proposition expressed by (8) is true.

We can determine a truth value for (9) by tracing back through the proposition expressed by (8), to the proposition expressed by ‘Snow is white’. And so on for further iterations. Sentences like (8) and (9) are grounded, because we can repeatedly employ truth in its denominalizing role to trace our way back to ‘Snow is white’, which is a sentence free of the truth predicate.

In contrast, the sentence (7) is ungrounded. Its associated biconditional is:

(7) is true iff the proposition expressed by (7) is not true.

So the truth value of (7) depends on the truth value of the proposition expressed by (7). But the proposition expressed by (7) is the proposition that the proposition expressed

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by (7) is not true—so the semantic status of the proposition expressed by (7) depends on the semantic status of the proposition expressed by (7). We’re launched on an infinite regress—the denominalizing role of truth never leads beyond the proposition expressed by (7). So the sentence (7) is ungrounded. Similarly with the sentence (6) and other propositional liar sentences. Such sentences are neither true nor false—for these sentences, the processes of disquotation and denominalization processes fail to establish a truth value.

Since we can explain groundedness and ungroundedness in terms of truth’s disquotation and denominalizing roles, it is plausible that we can explain ungroundedness in terms that do not go beyond the minimal theory. And given that ungroundedness explains gappiness, we have explicated truth gaps in terms congenial to the minimal theory.

So according to the present proposal, gappy sentences are not permissible replacements for ‘p’ in (P), where gappiness is explained in terms compatible with the minimal theory. However, this proposal comes with concessions. The minimalist must give up the idea that ‘true’ can in principle be eliminated via denominalization and disquotation. A second related concession is that there are uses of ‘true’ in English that are beyond the scope of the minimal theory. Ungrounded sentences, including those sentences that are ungrounded because of the empirical circumstances, are simply set aside. And so the occurrences of ‘true’ in ungrounded sentences are not touched by the minimal theory—only grounded uses of ‘true’ can figure in the axioms of the theory.

There is a still more serious problem for this proposal. Consider the sentence:

(10) (10) does not express a true proposition.

This is a liar sentence: we are landed in contradiction if we suppose it is true, or if we suppose it is false; and if we suppose it does not express a proposition, then it follows that it doesn’t express a true propositions, and so it is true. The present suggestion is to treat an instantiation of (P) to (10) as impermissible because (10) is ungrounded, and so fails to express a proposition. That is, it is a consequence of the minimal theory under the present proposal that (10) does not express a true proposition. But we have just derived (10). A liar sentence is a consequence of the theory.

The problem raised by (10) goes beyond the present proposal—it extends to any attempt to restrict the replacements for ‘p’ in (P). For according to any such attempt, liar sentences will fail to express propositions, for some reason or other. We’ve considered one suggestion: liar sentences are ungrounded, hence gappy, hence fail to express propositions. But whatever the proposal, (10) produces a kind of ‘revenge’ paradox. It will be a consequence of the proposed theory that (10) does not express a true proposition—that is, (10) is a consequence of the theory.

We’ve been considering one way in which the minimalist might restrict permissible instantiations of (P)—by limiting in some principled way the sentences that can replace ‘p’ in (P). Horwich himself takes a second way: permit the replacement, even in cases of the liar, but argue that the resulting biconditional is unacceptable as an axiom. According to Horwich, there is a proposition expressed by liar sentences like (7), and, moreover, the proposition is either true or false. Even in the case of liar propositions “we can and should preserve the full generality of the Law of Excluded Middle and
the Principle of Bivalence”. 33 Now consider again the biconditional associated with (7):

The proposition that the proposition expressed by (7) is not true is true iff the proposition expressed by (7) is not true.

Horwich suggests that this biconditional is unacceptable not because it fails to be an instance of the schema (it is a genuine instance), but because the proposition it concerns—the proposition expressed by (7)—is ungrounded. In parallel with the ungrounded sentence (7), the proposition expressed by (7) is ungrounded: the denominalizing role of truth never leads beyond the proposition expressed by (7). Only grounded propositions can figure in the axioms of the minimal theory: “the acceptable instances are those that concern grounded propositions” 34 And now paradox is avoided—there will be no equivalence axiom governing the proposition expressed by (7), and without that, no contradiction can be derived. And it will follow that, though a liar proposition is true or false, we can never know which value it has:

For confidence one way or the other is precluded by the meaning of the word “true”—more specifically, by the fact that its use is governed by the equivalence schema…. Then, just as it is ‘indeterminate’ whether a certain vague predicate applies, or does not apply, to a certain borderline case (although certainly it does or it doesn’t), so (and for the same reason) it is indeterminate whether [a liar proposition] is true or whether it is false. 35

Let me raise three concerns about Horwich’s way out. First, according to Horwich, liar propositions are both ungrounded and either true or false. This is an odd combination. As we saw above, it is natural to take ungroundedness as a way of explaining why a sentence or a proposition is gappy—ungrounded sentences or propositions never receive a truth value. 36

Second, Horwich’s criterion of groundedness for the acceptability of an instance of the truth schema is ad hoc. Following Jamin Asay, 37 consider a truth-teller proposition, for example, the proposition expressed by the following sentence:

(11) The proposition expressed by (11) is true.

This proposition is ungrounded, and, according to Horwich, true or false. Consider the associated biconditional:

(P11) <the proposition expressed by (11) is true> is true iff the proposition expressed by (11) is true.

We have the identity

<the proposition expressed by (11) is true> = the proposition expressed by (11).

33 Horwich (2010, p. 91, fn. 11).
34 Horwich (2010, p. 91).
35 Horwich (2010, p. 91, n. 11).
36 In Kripke’s theory of truth, the ungrounded sentences fail to receive a truth value in the minimal fixed point—see Kripke (1975).
37 Asay (2015)
So by the substitutivity of identicals, \((P_{11})\) is equivalent to the proposition expressed by (11) is true iff the proposition expressed by (11) is true.

Now the two sides are exactly the same, and there is a proposition expressed by (11), and according to Horwich, it is true or false. So the two sides have a truth value (true if the truth-teller proposition is true, false if it is false), and, since the two sides are the same, the two sides must have the same truth value. So the biconditional is provably true—even though it concerns an ungrounded proposition. \((P_{11})\) is an unproblematic tautology—and it is ad hoc to reject \((P_{11})\) just because the grounding constraint gets us out of the problematic liar cases. As Asay puts it, if the biconditionals associated with liar propositions are unacceptable, “the notion of grounding is not useful in accounting for why”.

Third, a liar proposition is a case of a truth or falsity which is beyond the reach of any axiom, and hence beyond the reach of the minimal theory. As we’ve seen, Horwich asserts that a liar proposition is true or false. How are we to explain this use of ‘true’ (and of ‘false’)? To use a phrase of Horwich’s, this is one of the “facts about truth” that needs to be accounted for. The explanation cannot go forward in terms of the denominalizing role of truth, since here no equivalence axiom is available to underwrite this role. But these are the only terms that the minimal theory offers.

Suppose I say “What Oscar said is true or false”, without knowing what Oscar said (perhaps I am confident that he wouldn’t say anything nonsensical). Then what I said is a compact way of expressing the following infinite conjunction: “If Oscar said that snow is white, then snow is white or snow is not white, and if Oscar said that lying is wrong, then lying is wrong or lying is not wrong, and…” where truth’s denominalizing role is effected by the appropriate biconditional axiom—for example

- \(<\text{snow is white}>\) is true iff snow is white,

- \(<\text{snow is white}>\) is false iff snow is not white.

And if Oscar in fact said that snow is white, then this infinite conjunction boils down to “Snow is white or snow is not white”. Now suppose instead that Oscar said that the proposition expressed by (7) is not true. According to Horwich, I have said something true, since liar propositions are true or false. But here the same ‘denominalizing’ story cannot be told, because only grounded propositions can figure in the axioms. My claim is true, but the minimal theory is silent about it. When we considered restricting the sentences that can replace ‘p’ in (P), we saw that the minimal theory was silent about uses of ‘true’ in ungrounded sentences. Now the silence seems all the more troubling—the minimal theory is silent about uses of ‘true’ in theoretical claims that Horwich makes about liar propositions.

It is natural to ask: in virtue of what are liar propositions true if they’re true, or false if they’re false? Liar propositions aside, the minimalist will say that this kind of

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40 For Horwich’s treatment of falsity, see Horwich (1998, pp. 71–73).
question is misguided—in general, it is a philosophical mistake to look for anything substantive in virtue of which propositions are true. And the minimalist will deflate the question by pointing to the denominalizing role of truth. But in the present case the minimalist cannot do this—so the question has genuine force.

3 Minimalism and the concept of truth

Horwich says of the minimal theory that

its immediate concern is with the word ‘true’ rather than with truth itself. It purports to specify which particular non-semantic fact about the word is responsible for its meaning what it does; and the fact it so specifies, roughly speaking, [is] the role of that word in the equivalence schema.41

This summarizes Horwich’s deflationary treatment of the word ‘true’. We can call Horwich a linguistic deflationist about truth. What about the property of truth and the concept of truth? The minimalist deflates these as well. And the minimalist treatment of both property and concept flows from the treatment of ‘true’.

Horwich allows that truth is a property of some sort because “‘is true’ is a perfectly good English predicate”.42 But being true is not a complex or naturalistic property—in contrast to properties such as being turquoise, being a tree, or being made of tin. We should not look for truth’s constitutive structure or its causal behavior. In this sense, Horwich is a metaphysical deflationist about truth.

The minimalist treatment of the concept of truth is also a consequence of the minimalist account of the word ‘true’. Horwich’s discussion of the concept of truth is focused on its explanatory role.43 A minimalist about truth cannot allow that truth has substantive conceptual work to do in explaining other concepts. For example, minimalism must reject the idea that meaning is to be explained in terms of truth conditions. Whenever truth seems to play a substantive conceptual role, the appearance is illusory. A closer look will reveal that truth’s contribution amounts to no more than the word ‘true’ playing its denominalizing and renominalizing role, as laid out by instances of the equivalence schema.

A good example of this is provided by Horwich’s discussion of the claim: True beliefs engender successful actions.44 Here it may seem that the concept of truth is required as part of an explanation of the relation between beliefs and successful action. But consider a particular case:

If all Bill wants is to have a beer, and he thinks that merely by nodding he will get then, if his belief is true, he will get what he wants.

Horwich presents a derivation of this conditional. One of the premises is this:

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41 Horwich (2010, p. 38).
43 See the title of Chap. 3 of Horwich (1998).
(Bill wants $<\text{Bill has a beer}> \& \text{Bill believes}<\text{Bill nods} \rightarrow \text{Bill has a beer}>) \rightarrow \text{Bill nods}.

This premise assumes a substantive connection between belief, desire and action—but truth has no part to play here. The only role that truth plays is provided by the equivalence schema. In the course of the derivation we move from

$<\text{Bill nods} \rightarrow \text{Bill has a beer}>$ is true

to

$\text{Bill nods} \rightarrow \text{Bill has a beer}$.

And at a later point in the derivation we move in the reverse direction. Truth is required at only these two steps in the derivation; all that truth contributes is its denominalizing and renominalizing role.

Horwich argues that this sort of explanation can be readily generalized. And beyond that, it extends to all other facts involving the word “true”. The explanation of all these facts will appeal to no more about truth than is given by the instances of the T-schema. In explaining these facts, we will not improve our grasp of truth, or deepen our understanding of it. We presumably learn more about, for example, the concepts of belief, desire and action by an improved understanding of their inter-relations. But there will be no such improvement in the case of truth; the equivalence schema tells us all there is to know about truth, and it exhausts all that the notion of truth can contribute to our understanding of any other concept. In this sense, truth is isolated from other concepts. Horwich is a conceptual deflationist about truth.

The question arises as to whether truth’s explanatory role can always be deflated in this way. I want to suggest that it cannot, and I’ll focus on one particular example—the case of the speech act of assertion. Consider what Frege says about assertion:

When we inwardly recognize that a thought is true, we are making a judgment: when we communicate this recognition, we are making an assertion.

Frege emphasizes that judgments must be sharply distinguished from the mere entertaining of a thought. And, in parallel, assertion must be sharply distinguished from the mere expression or articulation of a thought. Sometimes the mere expression of a thought is all that matters: the thought might be the antecedent of a conditional, or what Frege calls a “mock thought” of fiction. But sometimes we are concerned not

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46 Frege (1979, p. 139). The emphasis is Frege’s.
47 This is reflected in Frege’s judgement sign $|—$ from the Begriffsschrift. The horizontal stroke—the so-called “content-stroke”—combines the symbols following it into a whole thought; the vertical stroke—the “judgement-stroke”—expresses the recognition or affirmation that this thought is true. If we omit the little vertical stroke at the left end of the horizontal stroke, then the judgement is to be transformed into a mere complex of ideas; the author is not expressing his recognition or non-recognition of the truth of this. Frege (1879), in Geach and Black (1960, pp. 1–2).
48 Frege (1979, p. 130).
with the mere presentation of thoughts—sometimes we are concerned to affirm the truth of the thought. And to express this affirmation, we utter a sentence with assertoric force. According to Frege, assertoric force is to be understood in terms of truth: to assert that \( p \) is to present \( p \) as true—or, as Frege sometimes puts it, to express one’s affirmation of \( p \) as true,\(^{49}\) to declare our recognition of \( p \) as true,\(^ {50}\) to put forward \( p \) as true.\(^{51}\)

Frege’s view of assertion is a natural one. When I assert that snow is white, I am not merely predicating whiteness of snow (where, for Frege, ‘merely predicating whiteness of snow’ is that component common to stating that snow is white, asking or wondering whether snow is white, promising to make it so that snow is white, and so on). Nor am I merely presenting the thought that snow is white for consideration. There are many speech-acts I can perform that involve a given thought: I can suppose it, propose it, float it, question it. I can also express a thought in the course of asserting (or questioning, or supposing, etc) a compound proposition, such as a conditional or disjunction. Frege plausibly claims that the distinguishing mark of assertion—what sets it apart from other speech-acts—is the fact that when I assert something, I present or put forward a certain thought as true. The concept of truth appears to have an explanatory role here, and this presents a challenge to the minimalist.\(^ {52}\)

The claim that to assert is to present as true is a claim about what one is doing when one asserts—one is presenting or putting forward a thought or proposition in a certain way. The claim is not an identity claim—rather, it provides a necessary condition for a speech act to count as an assertion. There are related but separate claims regarding the norms of assertion—perhaps one cannot assert \( p \) unless \( p \) is true, or unless one believes that \( p \). But we should be careful to distinguish these claims from the claim that to assert is to present as true. I can express a true proposition \( p \), and believe it, but my act will have assertoric force only if I present \( p \) in the appropriate way—as true.\(^ {53}\) If truth is a norm of assertion—in the sense that we may assert \( p \) only if \( p \) is true—then this presents the minimalist with a new and different challenge, since here too truth appears to have an explanatory role. And the minimalist might well say that the challenge is easily met: given the denominalizing role of truth, the norm is equivalent to we may assert \( p \) only if \( p \), and truth simply drops out.\(^ {54}\) My question is whether the minimalist can meet the challenge posed by the claim that to assert is to present as true.

\(^{49}\) Frege (1879), in Van Heijenoort (1967, p. 11, fn. 6).

\(^{50}\) Frege (1979, pp. 168, 185, 198).

\(^{51}\) Frege (1979, pp. 177, 198).

\(^{52}\) If we follow Frege, this challenge extends to the mental act of judgment, not just the speech-act of assertion—but in this paper, I shall focus on assertion.

\(^{53}\) And in the other direction, it might be argued that I can present \( p \) as true but fail to assert \( p \)—perhaps because \( p \) isn’t true, or because I don’t believe \( p \). This raises delicate questions about the norms of assertion. But my focus in this paper is on the claim that to assert is to present as true, and I set aside issues about the norms of assertion.

\(^{54}\) I am grateful to an anonymous referee for making this point, and for prompting the discussion in this paragraph.
How might the minimalist respond? With the denominalizing role of ‘true’ in mind, a minimalist might claim that the thesis that to assert that $p$ is to present $p$ as true is equivalent to the thesis that to assert that $p$ is to present $p$. This commits us to the claim that to present $p$ as true is just to present $p$; for example, to present as true the proposition that snow is white is just to present the proposition that snow is white. But this claim is false, for there are many ways to present or put forward a proposition. I can present a proposition as worthy of your consideration, or as a conjecture, or as a remote possibility, or as outrageous—and I can also present it as true. Presenting as true is just one way of presenting. So this cannot be the right way to denominalize away “true” in the locution “present as true”.

It might be suggested that the correct denominalizing move is a wholesale ‘semantic descent’: to present the proposition that snow is white as true is just to present snow as white. Here not only truth drops out, but so does the proposition (or thought, or sentence) that is said to be presented as true. The claim “to assert that snow is white is to present the proposition that snow is white as true” is just a roundabout way of saying “to assert that snow is white is to present snow as white”. But what is it to present snow as white? One way of understanding this claim is as saying that we present the worldly stuff, snow, as exhibiting the property of whiteness, as when I gesture towards the recent snowfall. But this will clearly not do as an explanation of assertion. (Asserting that snow is white does not require the presence of snow; that is part of the point of assertion.)

A more plausible way of understanding the present suggestion is as saying that presenting snow as white is a matter of representing snow a certain way—as white. But not any old form of representing would do the trick of capturing what is distinctive about asserting that snow is white, as opposed to, say, merely pointing to or painting a picture of white snow. The kind of representing that is relevant to assertion is surely ‘factual’ representation: representing things as being so, or describing things as they are. But it seems that the very same task will face the deflationist, this time with respect to representation: how to understand what it is to represent as being so, which is a special kind of representing, just as presenting as true is a special kind of presenting.

So the minimalist cannot denominalize away “true” as it appears in “present as true”. Why is this so? The minimalist focuses on uses of ‘true’ in locutions such as “What Oscar said is true” or “Every proposition of the form: <everything is F or not F> is true”. In these cases, ‘true’ is applied to a particular proposition or a domain of propositions. Even in the claim true beliefs engender successful action, at least as Horwich analyzes it, ‘true’ applies to the domain of propositions which serve as the contents of wants and beliefs. But when we say that to assert is to present as true, we are not pointing—directly or obliquely—to any particular proposition or domain of propositions. We are not calling anything true. Our use of the word ‘true’ is what we may call an explanatory use; it is made in the course of offering a general explanation of what speakers are doing when they use language in certain ways. We are trying to identify a distinguishing feature of a class of acts—assertions.

There is a sharp contrast between

(i) presenting the thought that $p$ as true

and
(ii) presenting the thought that $p$ is true.

Suppose that, with the minimalist, we accept the equivalence between $p$ and $p \text{ is true}$. Then we can claim that (ii) is equivalent to

(ii') presenting the thought that $p$

since in (ii) “true” is applied to a particular thought. But we cannot claim that (i) is equivalent with (ii'), for the familiar reason that presenting as true is just one way of presenting. In (i), “true” qualifies the kind of presenting at issue, not the thought presented.

If we accept the equivalence thesis, then presenting the thought $p$ is true will be equivalent to presenting that thought that $p$, conjecturing that $p$ is true will be equivalent to conjecturing that $p$, supposing that $p$ is true will be equivalent to supposing that $p$, and so on for a variety of speech acts. But it is a mistake to conclude from this that truth has no distinctive role to play in explaining assertion. To assert is to present $as$ true—but to conjecture or suppose that $p$ are different speech acts from presenting $p$ as true. What is distinctive of assertion is that when we assert, we present or put forward a thought as true.

We should also be careful to distinguish the claim that to assert is to present as true from the claim that when we predicate ‘true’ of a sentence we are asserting it. According to this latter claim, when I say “‘Snow is white’ is true”, I am asserting that snow is white. Ayer writes: “to say that a proposition is true is just to assert it…”.

This is what we may call an *illocutionary* form of minimalism. We use ‘true’ not to describe sentences or propositions, but rather to perform the speech act of assertion. The illocutionary minimalist will take on board the equivalence thesis, and agree that the content of “The proposition that snow is white is true” is no different from that of “Snow is white”. But though ‘true’ does not add content, it does introduce assertoric force: to say “The proposition that snow is white is true” is to produce an assertion with the content that snow is white.

However, if we accept the equivalence thesis, we should reject illocutionary minimalism. As Frege puts it:

If I assert “it is true that sea-water is salt”, I assert the same thing as if I assert “sea-water is salt”. This enables us to recognize that the assertion is not to be found in the word “true” …

Further, the locution “$p$ is true” can occur as the antecedent of a conditional, where it cannot be produced with assertoric force. Further still, I can say “It is true that snow is white” with a variety of different illocutionary forces—I can be supposing, conjecturing, pretending, or acting. We should agree with Frege when he says that “there is no word or sign in language whose function is simply to assert something”.

What makes a speech-act an assertion is the force with which it is expressed, not

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55 Ayer (1936, pp. 88–89). Strawson’s variant of the redundancy theory identifies a performative role for “true”: we use “true” to perform speech-acts such as endorsing, agreeing, and conceding, as well as asserting. See Strawson (1950), in Blackburn and Simmons (1999, pp. 162–182).

56 Frege (1979, p. 251).

57 Frege (1979, p. 185).
the presence of the word ‘true’. Again, Frege: “In order to put something forward as true, we do not need a special predicate: we need only the assertoric force with which the sentence is uttered.” 58 We do not need the word ‘true’ in order to assert—but we do need the concept of truth to explain what is distinctive of the speech act of assertion.

We can get at the same point by imagining a language which has no semantic vocabulary at all. Speakers of the language, we may suppose, will make assertions, and we will want to explain what distinguishes a speaker’s assertion that $p$ from other speech acts—wondering whether $p$, assuming that $p$, and the rest. If to assert is to present as true, then as long as we have assertoric force, we have truth. So even if speakers of the language have no linguistic means to express the concept of truth, we will need the concept to explain what they do with their words. Or, setting aside explanatory uses of ‘true’, suppose that the minimalist is right, and we could eliminate ‘true’ from our vocabulary if only we could handle infinite conjunctions and disjunctions. Still the concept of truth would be needed to explain what we’re doing when we assert. Minimalism about the word ‘true’ does not entail minimalism about the concept of truth.

I’ve argued that the case of assertion shows that truth is not an isolated concept. 59 A parallel argument can be made in the case of meaning. 60 Another case is provided by truth-aptness: I argued in Sect. 2 that it is a challenge for the minimalist to characterize the sentences that can replace ‘p’ in the schema (P)—the truth-apt sentences—without bringing truth back in. These cases suggest that truth has an explanatory role to play. And in the other direction, truth itself cannot be characterized independently of other concepts. I argued in Sect. 1 that we cannot even formulate the minimal theory of truth without bringing in other concepts—not only proposition, but also language, possible language, sentence and sentence-token, interpretation, expressing, reference. Truth is not isolated, and we should reject conceptual deflationism. 61

We should also reject linguistic deflationism. In Sect. 2, I argued that according to some accounts of truth and the liar paradox, there will be true instances of (P) that contain ineliminable uses of ‘true’. And on either way of restricting the schema (P), there will be uses of ‘true’ that the minimal theory cannot accommodate: uses of ‘true’ in ungrounded sentences, or the use of ‘true’ (and of ‘false’) in Horwich’s claim that liar propositions are true or false. In the present section, I’ve argued that the minimal theory cannot handle explanatory uses of ‘true’, as in ‘to assert is to present as true’. These are all uses of ‘true’ that cannot be denominalized away.

58 Frege (1979, p. 233).
59 For an extended discussion of deflationism and assertion, see Bar-On and Simmons (2007).
60 See, for example, Bar-On et al. (2000).
61 We need not take truth to be somehow more fundamental than other concepts. We could take a view like Strawson’s (1950) or Davidson’s (1996), according to which concepts such as truth, assertion and meaning are each basic and not further reducible, yet we can improve our understanding of them by uncovering their interconnections.
References

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