

The Truth about Deflationism: A Critical Study of Crispin Wright's *Truth and Objectivity*¹

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In his new book, Crispin Wright attempts to develop a theory of truth which contrasts with the classical versions of realism, anti-realism and deflationism. His own view could be characterized as a form of minimalism, but he is also favourable to a pluralistic account which allows for many different uses of the predicate “true”, including one where the word means “superassertible”. I will divide this critical study into three separate sections. In the first, I shall discuss Wright's criticisms of deflationism (Chapter 1). In the second section, I shall describe his arguments for minimalism and discuss his claims concerning the way to pursue the debate between realists and anti-realists (Chapters 2-5). Minimalism, as opposed to deflationism, is supposed to be compatible with acknowledging the meaningfulness of substantial disagreements over metaphysical issues such as the nature of truth. In the final section, I shall briefly discuss Wright's attitudes towards the arguments for quietism, i.e. the view according to which philosophical grammar entails the dissolution of those metaphysical debates (Chapter 6).

In assessing these different claims made by the author, I shall adopt the position held by the deflationist philosopher. I will try to show that his criticism of deflationism fails and that there is a version of this doctrine which is congenial with Wright's own approach to the problem. I shall also try to suggest that the deflationist philosopher could argue along the

following line. She could claim that the debates between realists and anti-realists are ultimately only of a “normative” sort and that a correct understanding of this phenomenon forces us to the conclusion that they cannot be settled by resorting to independent empirical facts. It will then appear that the only fact of the matter about truth, as claimed by the deflationist philosopher, is revealed by the disquotational principle. In the end, Wright is himself not very far from embracing deflationism and the differences between his own minimalist approach and the one held by the deflationist philosopher amount to almost nothing. Saying this is also saying that I find myself in agreement with a lot of the things that are claimed by the author. He has been fairly successful in his attempts to vindicate a minimalist approach to the problem of truth. My criticisms of the book are therefore meant as a contribution to an ongoing exchange and it is clear that Wright has done a lot to raise the level of the discussion.

I

Let me begin by describing the three classical anti-realist paradigms that Crispin Wright wants to avoid. There will be those who, like Michael Dummett, seek for a general justification of anti-realism in the theory of meaning. They claim, first, that truth is central to an understanding of meaning. But they also argue that if we accept the principle of the manifestability of meaning, a theory of meaning must also be a theory of understanding. This requires producing, first, a theory of sense in addition to the theory of reference, but it also requires showing how meaning is reflected in use. According to that view, meaning can in no way transcend use. Those ideas are the ones involved in the claim that a theory of meaning has to be a theory of understanding. They induce a “full-blooded” theory of meaning that contrasts with the truth conditional approach. The central notion of truth, which is essential to the meaning of an indicative sentence, must then be reflected in the understanding of the agent as a verification procedure for that very sentence. This leads to the adoption of an anti-realist version of a semantics couched in terms of assertibility conditions, and it is on this basis that a systematic anti-realistic approach can be built.

The second paradigm is one which does not involve renouncing the traditional truth conditional account of meaning. Adopting an anti-realistic attitude towards a particular class of statements is, according to that approach, compatible with acknowledging the truth conditional character of those statements. The anti-realism is obtained instead by denying that we “attain to truth” with those sentences. There is a metaphysical superstition involved in the suggestion that the targeted sentences are true. This view has been adopted by Hartry Field concerning pure mathematics and by John Mackie concerning ethics. By advocating theories which purport to stipulate the existence of facts corresponding to mathematical or ethical sentences, we are simply committing an error.

The third paradigm mentioned by Wright is the one held by philosophers like Ludwig Wittgenstein, Alfred Ayer, Charles Stevenson, Simon Blackburn, Allan Gibbard and Richard Hare, and it is the view that certain statements which, on the face of it, seem to be available for the performance of assertions, turn out to be used in order to do something totally different. They look as sentences available for assertions, but we use them to perform very different kinds of speech acts. The emotivist interpretation of ethical statements held by Ayer, Stevenson, Blackburn or Gibbard, and the prescriptivist interpretation of Hare, give us clear examples of this strategy. Statements which appear on the face of it to be endowed with cognitive meaning turn out to be used in fact to perform expressive or directive illocutionary acts.

For various reasons, Crispin Wright expresses discomfort with those three different approaches and tries in his essay to steer a course between them and the one usually associated with realism. But he first tries to elaborate a minimalist account of truth and explains that it should not be conflated with deflationism. The deflationary account is, according to Wright, an “unstable” position for reasons that we shall shortly see. Let me first try to define very briefly the minimalism that Wright has in mind. The view involves two claims. It is first argued that “is true” and “is warranted assertible” are normatively coincident, in the sense that we tend to use those two predicates in the same circumstances.

The second claim is that the extension of the two predicates can be different. Satisfaction of one norm need not entail satisfaction of the other. (21) In short, the two notions coincide in normative force but still register distinct norms and the reason is that they can diverge in extension. By predicating truth to a sentence, we tend to describe it as semantically assertible. But since the notions of truth and semantic assertibility express two distinct norms, it is also admitted that there is more to truth than simply the claim that a sentence is semantically assertible. The minimalism embraced by the author is simply an acknowledgement of these facts about truth.

In trying to spell out this minimalism, Wright suggests that we should not look for more in a truth predicate than its compliance with a set of platitudes:

- that to assert is to present as true;
- that any truth-apt content has a negation which is likewise truth-apt;
- that to be true is to correspond to the facts;
- that a statement may be justified without being true, and vice versa. (34)

Now, according to him, this view cannot properly be described as deflationism and the reason is that deflationism is, as he calls it, an “unstable position”. The problem, of course, originates in the fact that it “falsely” assumes that ascribing truth to a sentence amounts to no more than an assertion of that sentence. But let us look more closely at Wright's argument. The author characterizes the disquotational principle along the following lines. It stipulates that by saying that a sentence is true, we assert that sentence. Wright interprets this as establishing an equivalence between ascribing truth to a sentence and asserting it with appropriate reasons. It is as though the metalinguistic ascription of truth would, on the left hand side of the equivalence, explicitly express the norm which appears, on the right hand side, as an implicit reason for the assertion. The left hand side statement is therefore interpreted as the claim that the quoted sentence exemplifies a norm of truth. In the context of the disquotational principle, the norm of truth governs the performance of assertions and it is, for this reason, a norm of assertibility. Saying that a sentence is true is thus, at least in part,

claiming that it is semantically assertible. Now deflationist philosophers obviously endorse the disquotational principle, and so they must also, according to Wright, accept the claim that predicating truth to a sentence is declaring it as warrantably assertible.

This is the first premise in the argument that Wright develops against deflationism. It is crucial for the argument, so let me dwell on it a little more. We can formulate the rationale for it along the following lines. Deflationism is, still according to Wright, committed to the view that the reasons we have to regard a sentence as warrantably assertible are also reasons for endorsing its assertion, and conversely. (18) Now a reason for endorsing an assertion is, by the Disquotational Schema (“For all p , ‘ p ’ is true iff p ”), also a reason to regard the sentence as true, and conversely. Therefore, the deflationist philosopher must also accept the conclusion, which is that a reason to regard a sentence as true is also a reason to regard it as warrantably assertible, and conversely. (18) In other words, deflationist philosophers are, like anybody else, committed to the claim that truth coincides in normative force with warranted assertibility. So this is, as I said, the first premise. Truth is normatively consonant with warranted assertibility. (30)

But, Wright insists, we must acknowledge the fact that the two predicates diverge in extension in the case of undecidable statements. Usually, this divergence is expressed by denying that the disquotational principle holds universally. But this is not Wright's strategy. He accepts the universal validity of the disquotational principle, but thinks that he can still build a case against deflationism for the following reason. The two predicates “is true” and “is warrantably assertible” have to be regarded as registering different norms. Wright shows this in the following steps:

We must first accept as an instance of the Disquotational Schema (DS):

(i) “It is not the case that p ” is true iff it is not the case that p .

We must then accept, also as a consequence of accepting the DS, that if (i) is true then

(ii) It is not the case that p iff it is not the case that “ p ” is true.

Now from (i) and (ii), by transitivity of the biconditional, we get

(iii) “It is not the case that p ” is true iff it is not the case that “ p ” is true

But (iii) must fail, right to left, when “is true” is read as “is warrantably assertible” in the case of sentences which justify neither their assertion nor their denial. Take any such sentence “ p ”. According to Wright, it will be correct to report that it is not the case that “ p ” is warrantably assertible but incorrect to report that the negation of “ p ” is warrantably assertible. Hence since (iii) “holds good” for the truth predicate, we have to acknowledge some sort of conceptual distinction between “is true” and “is warrantably assertible”. (20)

So what is the problem with deflationism? By holding that the truth predicate is merely a device for the endorsement of assertions, it is committed to the view that warrantability is the only norm operative over assertoric discourse and that truth is reducible to such a norm.(23) The instability of the position is exhibited by the fact that it maintains that the DS incorporates a complete explanation of the meaning of the word, while it should be forced to recognize that truth and assertibility do not share the same extension. (30) Wright rejects deflationism and wants to maintain instead that truth and warrantable assertibility are distinct norms.

I wish to suggest that the author has failed to refute deflationism. The deflationist philosopher denies what Wright ascribes to her in the first premise of his argument, for she does not treat the truth predicate as the application of a norm of warrantable assertibility. It is surprising that Wright would want to impose such an interpretation, for she obviously should reject that interpretation without hesitation. The author thinks that the equation made between truth and assertion amounts to no more than the suggestion that truth is the only *norm*

operative on assertoric discourse. But Wright has got it wrong. For the deflationist philosopher, truth does not describe a normative property. It is just one way of spelling out explicitly the fact that the quoted sentence is being asserted. Ascribing truth does not impose an objective norm upon an assertion, since it *is* nothing but an assertion. Saying that a quoted sentence is true is nothing over and above asserting it.

I will not attempt, in the confines of this paper, to develop an alternative approach. Let me just describe briefly the essential features of the reply available to the deflationist philosopher. We should first distinguish between two components in the meaning of the truth predicate. We should distinguish between its linguistic meaning and its semantic content. Its linguistic meaning is given by the disquotational principle. A semantically competent speaker must know that the truth predicate serves to assert the quoted sentence and, therefore, that saying that a sentence is true amounts to asserting it. On the other hand, the word “true” also expresses a certain content which is captured by a certain norm that we may want to express. The word may be *used* to apply a certain norm to a sentence, but it is then a matter of convention and it may vary from one discourse to another. In short, we may want to do more when we ascribe truth to a sentence than simply utter the sentence, but this additional element is relative to our instituted uses. The predicate will be used in different contexts to mean that the sentence quoted is semantically assertible, or superassertible, or that it corresponds to the facts (in the metaphysical sense of the expression).

Now even if these two semantic components of the word “true” are two irremediable aspects of its meaning, there are sentential contexts in which the predicate makes a semantical contribution to the sentence only through its linguistic meaning. In such a sentence, the information contained in the sentence as a whole is just an assertion. Saying that “p” is true in such a case is just asserting that p. One should thus distinguish between two different functions performed by the truth predicate. It can be used to *assert* a sentence or it can be used to say that it exemplifies a norm of truth (assertibility, superassertibility, etc.), and one must not confuse those two uses. Saying that a sentence is true is not always saying that it is

assertible. An essential claim made by deflationist philosophers is that there are at least some uses where the term “true” only serves to assert a sentence as opposed to the uses where it could in addition serve to say that it is assertible.

The situation is analogous to the so called observational sentences. Even if all predicates are in a way “theory laden”, and never purely observational, there are sentential contexts in which a given word may contribute to the meaning of the sentence as a whole only through its purely observational or stimulus meaning. Take for instance the term “water”. It is most probably a term which involves, in addition to its purely observational meaning features, an indexical meaning component such as the one described by Putnam. The word serves to refer to a substance which is of the same liquid as this sample (while pointing at a sample of water). It is on the basis of such an indexical component that we could want to include the property of being H₂O as part of its meaning. But the word also has a stimulus meaning, and there are sentential contexts in which it could be used to refer only to those stimulations. Consider people who lived in the 18th century and before, or the young child who has just learned to use the word “water”. When they utter “this is water”, they might just want to refer to a bunch of phenomenal properties, and this is perfectly compatible with the claim that the word also has other semantic features which make it theory laden. In other words, one should distinguish between the linguistic and conceptual role of a term, and include as part of its linguistic meaning the features which relate it only to phenomenal properties.

One should grant that there can be uses where it is only through its linguistic meaning that the word contributes to the meaning of the sentence as a whole. These uses of the word “water” are perhaps less in vogue now that almost everybody distinguishes between what a thing looks like and what it is. We are more and more able to distinguish in principle between two liquids that have the same phenomenal features. But these remarks do not threaten the main part of our argument. There remains a strictly observational use of the sentence “this is

water” and as long as we recognize such a use, a distinction should be registered between at least two distinct contributions made by the term “water” in different sentential contexts.

The same considerations should apply to the word “true”. It involves both aspects of meaning, one linguistic and the other more theoretical or normative. These two components are respectively captured by the disquotational principle and by the operative norm associated to the term within a particular discourse. And there are sentential contexts in which the word “true” is not used to capture such a norm but only used to assert the sentence.

We can afford to distinguish between different contributions made to the “meaning” of a sentence by the truth predicate, just as we did for the term “water”, if our general semantic framework is molecularist and if it takes the form of a semantics of assertibility conditions. Even if no term is strictly observational and always conveys semantic content (conceptual role) in addition to its strictly observational or linguistic meaning component, the basic semantic unit is the sentence and a given term may within a given sentence perform its semantic contribution only through exhibiting a certain linguistic meaning, without regard to the more theoretical aspects that it can serve to express in other sentential contexts.

This, of course, does not suffice to establish the truth of deflationism, for we must also be able to explain the other occurrences of the word “true”, i.e. those in which the predicate serves to express a norm. But imagine that, in the case of the word “true”, it is claimed that the only *brute fact* about its meaning concerns its linguistic meaning and therefore that, as such, it is a device for assertion. Imagine also that it is the only universal fact about it and that the other features associated with it vary from one discourse to another and are a matter of instituted uses. Aren't we then very close to endorsing a deflationist reading of the predicate? If the residual debates that remain concerning the more normative aspects of the word are not to be settled by the facts but rather, ultimately, only by stipulation, then isn't it a reason to claim that the only fact of the matter about truth concerns what is revealed by the disquotational principle?

I shall not say anything more concerning this alternative version of deflationism which is still available to us. My main criticism remains that Wright has conflated two distinct uses of the term “true”, that he wrongly assimilated all of its occurrences to those of a normative predicate and, moreover, that he did so without argument. It is only because of this confusion that he is then led to the claim that deflationists are committed to equate truth with assertibility. But deflationist philosophers are not committed to treat the truth predicate as always performing the role of an operative *norm* over assertoric discourse, and therefore not committed to equate it with assertibility. To claim otherwise is simply to miss the essential point of deflationism.

II

I have mentioned one reason why Wright is unhappy with deflationism, but it must be noted that, on a more positive note, he also thinks that we should spell out in detail the intuition that there is more to truth than a mere device for assertion. This admission is also part of the minimalist account. The additional missing ingredient will vary from discourse to discourse. There are going to be many different uses of the word “true” in all those different discourses. Wright's approach is therefore based upon a pluralistic account and it is against the background of such a pluralism that a notion of truth understood in terms of superassertibility will be allowed. For example, statements concerning the aspects of an object are perhaps true or false in the realist (correspondentist) sense, while statements concerning their colour can at best count as superassertible or not.

I will shortly define what is meant by “superassertibility”. Let us however notice for the moment how moderate this anti-realism is compared with the three paradigms described above. It agrees with a minimalist account of truth that should be shared by everyone. Among the truisms accepted, Wright is willing to endorse the disquotational principle. It is also a pluralist view. It recognizes the plausibility of a realistic account in certain areas of discourse, and it only claims that we should endorse an anti-realistic conception for certain specific

cases. So it does not present itself as a systematic anti-realism, neither does it involve a rejection of truth conditional semantics as a whole, as it was once advocated by Dummett. It does not need to deny the existence of certain classes of states of affairs, as suggested by the error-theory versions of Field and Mackie. And finally, against the third strategy, it acknowledges the assertoric character of the statements that are available for truth ascriptions. But there is more. As we shall now see, Crispin Wright's anti-realist approach does not even require a revision of classical logic.

This last feature is revealed in the criticism formulated against Putnam's internal realism. According to Putnam, truth should be analysed *a priori* as warrantedness under ideal epistemic conditions. But saying, as Crispin Wright does, that there is more to truth does not entail, according to him, that it can univocally be defined as an idealization of rational acceptability. The criticisms that were formulated against the deflationist account can also be formulated against Putnam. Where truth is *defined* as idealised rational acceptability, the Negation Equivalence expressed in (iii) will not hold as soon as we will be dealing with an undecidable statement. If we rewrite (iii) in Putnam's vocabulary, we get:

(iv) "It is not the case that p" is justified under ideal epistemic circumstances iff it is not the case that "p" is justified under ideal epistemic circumstances.

But notice that the equivalence will turn out false from right to left when "p" is an undecidable statement. Indeed in that case, the right hand side of the equivalence will be true while the left hand side will be false. It is simply not *a priori* true, according to Wright, that if a sentence fails to be justified under ideal epistemic circumstances, its negation would then be justified. (40) The same kind of criticism would apply to any definition which would require an epistemic constraint (evidential basis) on the application of the predicate "true".
(44)

Of course, there is a way out of the difficulty. The internal realist runs into trouble only if she concedes that all statements are either true or false and that for any “ p ”, p or $\neg p$. If she accepts the law of the excluded middle and if truth is nothing but justification under ideal epistemic circumstances, then she is indeed committed to the claim that the negation of every statement in the language would be justified if their assertion is not justified under ideal epistemic circumstances, and that would surely be problematic. But one needs not accept that the principles of bivalence and the law of excluded middle hold for all sentences of the language. It can be claimed that those principles fail in the case of undecidable statements. This is indeed a way out of the difficulty, but it shows that Putnam's equivalence or any anti-realistically inclined *definition* of truth must involve a rejection of classical logic. (44)

Let us now take a look at the notion of superassertibility. We notice, first, that warranted assertibility is always assertibility relative to a given state of information. (47) And since it is clear that truth cannot be equated with assertibility, we have to look for an idealised notion. It then looks as though the only possible idealisation is the possibility of an ideal state of information. But Wright finds interest in statements that would remain justified “no matter how that state of information might be enlarged upon or improved.” A statement is superassertible if and only if “it is, or can be, warranted and some warrant for it would survive arbitrarily close scrutiny of its pedigree and arbitrarily extensive increments to or other forms of improvement of our information.” (48) ²

The first question we want to ask is whether superassertibility is just another anti-realist proposal, or just another candidate on the market for a definition of the word “true”, for the reason that it too would be vulnerable to the criticism that was made against Putnam. The answer is that it is not.

(v) “It is not the case that p ” is superassertible iff it is not the case that “ p ” is superassertible

is, according to Wright, a valid statement. (50)³ More precisely, it will be valid as long as we are able to establish the validity of both

(vi) It is superassertible that p iff p

and

(vii) “ p ” is superassertible iff p .

Now It would be easy to show the non validity of those two last statements by providing examples of sentences that could be true although they are not superassertible or superassertible although they are not true. An example of the first kind is the Christian belief that there is life after death, which is true, according to them, even if surely not superassertible. An example of the second kind is the materialist claim that the mind does not exist, which is, according to dualist philosophers, superassertible but false. Wright does not deny that we could find such examples, but he correctly points out that those will be cases where a distinct concept of truth comes into play, and he just wants to point out that there are some discourses for which the only notion of truth that we must authorize is that of superassertibility. The counterexamples would be good ones if the defender of superassertibility was interpreted as suggesting that the notion applies accross the board to all discourses. But Wright is resolutely a pluralist and he is just arguing for a local use of his anti-realistic concept.

Moreover, the proposal will be formulated in accordance with all the platitudes about truth, including the disquotational principle. Superassertibility provides one adequate model of truth and it validates all the basic platitudes. And we now arrive at the most striking feature of Wright's notion of superassertibility. It is compatible with classical logic and with the disquotational principle while remaining anti-realistic in spirit. It does not require a rejection

of the excluded middle in the case of the negation equivalence, even in the case of undecidable statements, for if such a statement is not superassertible, its negation will be superassertible.

It will be appropriate to use such a concept for classes of statements where we also accept

(viii) If “p” is knowable then “p” is superassertible

and

(ix) p iff “p” is knowable (58)

Wright claims that for “discourses all of whose contents are in that case, superassertibility is a model of the truth predicate.” (60) Again, it must be stressed that we do not need to deny the excluded middle for cases where (v) would fail to hold, and the reason is that it does not fail if it is assumed that the discourse in question is one in which truth is to be analysed as superassertibility. If we were able to establish that a sentence “p” is not superassertible, we would have to accept that “¬p” is superassertible. Undecidable statements do not generate counterexamples for (v), even when the truth predicate is analysed as superassertibility, and the reason is, presumably, that if a statement does not become available for truth through time no matter how much additional evidence is gained, then its negation is one that seems to be holding through time no matter how much additional evidence is gained.

In the course of his argument, Wright has not been invoking the notion of an ideal state of information and has not been trying to define truth univocally. And unless we make an implicit use of a different truth predicate within the same discourse, we shall be in a position to validate classical theorems such as (iii). These are the strengths of Crispin Wright's notion of superassertibility. In addition, the notion does not refer to a timeless

property. This may at first sight seem problematic for it could yield cases where a certain statement is not superassertible at a given time, although it is “true”, for it could be superassertible at another time. Wright acknowledges this possibility and briefly discuss the problem in two places. (49)⁴ But this is not a counterexample for (v). For if at a given time a statement is not superassertible, then at that time, its negation is superassertible.

This was the first task undertaken by Crispin Wright in his book. He wanted to develop a minimalist notion of truth that had to be contrasted with deflationism and to develop “locally” an anti-realistic notion that would comply with the minimal platitudes he had introduced. The second task is to show that the debates between realists and anti-realists are still genuine debates. If minimalism is to be contrasted with deflationism, Wright must be able to show that those debates are still in order and can still genuinely be pursued. The author is concerned to show that “bloodless” quietism is out of place. (76) But how are these debates going to be pursued? Clearly, we have to decide whether a particular discourse is going to be described as one in which a realist or an anti-realist concept of truth is to apply. But how are we going to assess that?

Wright distinguishes four different debates. The Dummettian debate concerns the question whether a particular discourse enforces a distinction in extension between truth and superassertibility. (78-79) Wright does not discuss in detail this debate in *Truth and Objectivity*.

The Euthyphro debate occurs as soon as it is agreed that the two predicates coincide in extension within a contested discourse but differ in the sense that they express different properties. It is named in honour of a celebrated discussion in Plato's *Euthyphro* in which it is wondered whether certain acts are pious because they are loved by the gods or loved by the gods because they are pious. (79) Even if all true statements within a discourse are superassertible and all superassertible statements are true, the question remains whether they are true because they are assertible or assertible because they are true. In that case we have to choose the order of determination between truth and superassertibility. There will be the

‘detectivist’ approach which will explain best opinion as merely responsive to truth, while the ‘projectivist’ account will instead explain truth in terms of best opinion. Both detectivists and projectivists will agree on what the author calls “provisional equations” of the form:

“For all agents, within the discourse, if optimal conditions C prevail, then it would be the case that p (where “p” is the content of a judgement) iff the agents have some germane response R”

This sort of equation leads to particular instances such as this:

“If optimal conditions C prevail, then it would be the case that x is square iff an agent would judge that x is square”

And we shall referee the debate between detectivists and projectivists by imposing an *Apriority* condition. We shall say that it suffices to classify a class of judgements on the detectivist side if none of these basic equations can be known to be true *a priori*.

The third debate concerns the correspondence platitude according to which a statement is true if and only if it corresponds to the facts. Wright imposes a principle which he calls “Cognitive Command”. Roughly speaking, a discourse exhibits Cognitive Command iff it is *a priori* that differences of opinion arising within it can be satisfactorily explained only in terms of “divergent input”. (93) If we are able to show that a given subject matter exerts cognitive command, it shows that the subject matter in question is a matter for which the same representationally functioning systems targeted on the subject matter in question will produce different outputs only if working on divergent input. This will give grounds to the claim that we are functioning on the cognitive or representational mode for the kind of topic and will give good grounds for a realist interpretation of the statements dealing with that topic. (146) As Wright puts it, “showing that a discourse exerts cognitive command thus has

the effect of beefing up the correspondence platitude in just the kind of realism-relevant way I advertised.” (147)

There is, finally, a fourth debate about facts, in which we inquire whether, within a particular discourse, something more substantial can be said about the facts to which the statements correspond. It is often suggested that a realist attitude towards a particular class of statements is justified if, by mentioning the facts depicted by these statements, we provide the best explanation for entertaining them. Wright thinks that we should replace the constraint of “best explanation” by one which he calls “the wide cosmological role”. Instead of asking whether the existence of a given state of affairs constitute our best explanation for the existence of a particular belief, we should ask: “what in general can the citation of such states of affairs help to explain?” (192) The width of cosmological role for a given subject matter is measured by the extent to which citing the kinds of states of affairs can contribute to the explanation of all sorts of things such as cognitive effects, precognitive-sensuous effects, effects on us as physically interactive agents, effects on inanimate organisms and matter.(196-7)

I have just briefly described four sub debates that could be pursued and that could eventually serve to develop the realist / anti-realist disputes over a given subject matter. I just mentioned them in passing, and I have therefore not done justice to Wright's subtle and detailed discussion of these proposals. There could be a lot of good things to say about the author's careful evaluation, especially since it forms the largest portion of the book, but for reasons of space I shall restrict myself to discussing one particular problem. I do not see how these sub issues place us in a better position to translate the debate between realists and anti-realists in terms of independent factual considerations. For instance, the provisional equations in the Euthyphro debate (e.g. “If optimal conditions C prevail, then it would be the case that x is P iff an agent would judge that x is P”) offer a clear case where the opponents on these issues will simply adopt a different attitude and decide to treat them as pieces of *a posteriori* or *a priori* knowledge depending on whether their stance is realist or anti-realist.

Let me however be a little more precise. Saying that the four sub issues discussed by Wright do not relate to factual matters to be settled by an independent empirical enquiry does not necessarily entail a commitment to the third anti-realist strategy *as described* by Wright. At first sight, it is true that things surely look this way. If one suggests that the claims made by either party in the Euthyphro debate are not factual, is she not committed to treat them as statements which look like assertions but which in fact turn out to be used in order to perform different sorts of speech acts? What do we mean when we say that there is no fact of the matter that resolves either of those debates?

Consider the statement suggesting that truth transcends our evidential basis (in the Dummettian debate), or the one in which it is claimed that a certain class of judgements exerts cognitive command (in the debate about correspondence), or the one according to which a certain fact has a wide cosmological role (in the debate about facts). Are these not assertions to be treated as such, and are we not denying this assertoric nature when we suggest that the problems they raise cannot be settled by an appeal to factual considerations?

I will very briefly try to show that this is not exactly the case, but let me just announce right away that, as we shall see in the next section, Wright himself seems to be ready ultimately to accept that the statements which purport to invest the truth predicate with a more substantial role (beginning with the statement that asserts the existence of two distinct uses of the term “true”) are not themselves to be treated as “true” in the substantial sense. They may be *correct* in the sense of “minimally true”, but not true in any metaphysical sense.

But how are we to answer the criticism that, by denying any factual basis to the four sub issues, we are in fact adopting the third anti-realist strategy? Within the general framework of a semantics of assertibility conditions, we can distinguish between the locutionary and illocutionary components of meaning, and we can acknowledge that statements may exhibit different illocutionary assertibility conditions. Statements can in general serve to perform assertives, commissives, directives, expressives and declaratives.

Now notice that we need not, as in the third anti-realist strategy criticized by Wright, appeal to a reading in which the crucial claims made in these different debates turn out not to have any assertoric character whatsoever. We need not translate sentences in the indicative mood as imperatives or as used in order to perform expressive illocutionary acts, for there is another available option.

Notice also that we are not committed to Dummett's version of a semantics of assertibility conditions. We can treat the notion of an assertibility condition as another word for "use", and interpret it as the "meaning of an expression" relativized to a "point of view". Understood in this way, assertibility conditions do not necessarily involve a commitment to anti-realism and they are compatible with more moderate versions of realism (such as McDowell's). This does not seem however to be a move that Crispin Wright is ready to make, since he tends to regard the general semantical framework of assertibility conditions as essentially a Dummettian enterprise in which a global form of anti-realism is defended. But we can reinterpret the semantics of assertibility conditions in such a way that it does not necessarily have such a feature. Assertibility conditions, as understood within a Kripkensteinian framework, do not necessarily involve a commitment to a Dummettian anti-realism. At the very best, they entail only a rejection of metaphysical realism.

We can all at once recognize the intuition behind the claim that the sub debates yield statements having an assertoric nature, and do so without thereby accepting that they are used to perform assertive illocutionary acts. Indeed, if the force generally associated with those statements is the *declarative* illocutionary force, we do *not* need to deny that they are truth apt. It is just that they will be true because they are *made true*, i.e. stipulated to be true. The so called sub issues that we alluded to will all turn out to be unrelated to *independent* factual considerations in that sense. The sentences that are uttered in these debates are genuinely assertoric in nature and can even be used to assert certain "facts", but these are normative facts to be established only by stipulations.

This anti-realist position is perhaps a variant from the third anti-realist strategy, but it is not vulnerable to the criticisms made by Wright against it, for we need not argue that we are misled by the surface syntax. The target sentences may irreducibly be in the indicative mood. Still it might be a mistake to think that they are first and foremost used to assert the existence of already existing states of affairs. The illocutionary conditions governing our use of these sentences might be declarative. This is all that is required in order to prove that they relate to no brute fact whatsoever.

If that were the case, and Crispin Wright has offered in his book no reason to think that it is not, it would confirm the deflationist account that I briefly discussed above as an alternative approach that remains available, in spite of what was claimed by Wright. It could very well be that the only brute fact of the matter about truth is its disquotational character. It does not mean that there are no other uses of the term “true”. But the constraints that we could want to impose upon the predicate will only be established by stipulations in the sense we just alluded to. In other words, a statement such as “truth is superassertibility” has assertibility conditions which makes it available first and foremost only to the declarative illocutionary force. It is only because of this that we can be in a position to use the very same statement with an assertive force. It will then describe a fact, but not a brute fact. It will describe a fact made true by stipulation. The disquotational character of the truth predicate can therefore be seen as the only brute fact concerning truth. If that does not secure deflationism, I do not know what would.

III

Crispin Wright ends his book by examining arguments purporting to demonstrate that no philosophical debate needs to occur regarding the nature of truth. The position according to which there is no room for such metaphysical debates is described by the author as “quietism” and it has been held by Wittgenstein. According to John McDowell, for instance, Wittgenstein has steered a course between two extreme positions in the rule following

considerations, and this has consequences concerning the metaphysical debates over the notion of truth. Just as Wittgenstein wanted to avoid both Platonism and non-cognitivism in the rule following debate, we should also urge a similar intermediary solution concerning truth in general, and in particular concerning moral discourse. So there never was a real debate between the two positions, just a “misunderstanding of what the engagement of mind with objective subject matter requires, and a misunderstanding of what it takes to avoid that misunderstanding.” (208) This intermediary position is one that simultaneously entails cognitivism and the idea that the appreciation of any fact requires a point of view.

A similar solution is envisaged by those who adopt an anti-realist solution in the rule following debate along the lines developed by Kripke. The irrealism about rule following inflates into an irrealism about assertoric discourse in general and dissolves in this way the traditional metaphysical debates. (211)

Wright seems to entertain an ambivalent attitude towards these kinds of arguments. He would certainly want to reject quietism as such, but his main concern is to reactivate the philosophical debate between realists and anti-realists. And he seems to think that this is compatible with accepting a certain form of minimalism about meaning and content. But he does not wish to accept all the arguments that lead to minimalism. He examines in particular an argument by Paul Boghossian which is an attempt to show the connection between an irrealism about meaning and an irrealism about truth in general. Of course, Boghossian wants to establish a link between those two forms of irrealisms in order to refute minimalist accounts of meaning. But we are only concerned here with wondering whether we can establish such a connection. I find that part of the book particularly difficult to read, and one of the reasons is that Wright rejects the argument developed by Boghossian although he describes his own account as compatible with its conclusion, while Boghossian uses the argument in trying to show the absurdity of the conclusion.

If we adopt the sceptical conclusion according to which there are no facts of the matter about meaning and understanding, we must accept

(x) It is not the case that “S has the truth condition that P” has truth conditions.

And from (x), it can be inferred that

(xi) It is not the case that “S has the truth condition that P” is substantially true

since only a sentence with a truth condition can be substantially true. But if we also accept the disquotational character of the truth predicate, we are also able to infer

(xii) It is not the case that S has the truth condition that p.

And since this is to be the case no matter what “S” stands for, it appears that we can conclude that no sentence is “in the market” for substantial truth. (216) In other words, we can move from (xii) to

(xiii) It is not the case that S is substantially true

Even if Wright thinks that we can't easily discard global irrationalism, he wants to argue that this argument is not valid. The first problem in Boghossian's argument is that since we can substitute anything to “S”, we can have, if the argument is valid,

(xiv) It is not the case that (x) is substantially true

and we are able to derive

(xv) It is not the case that it is not the case that “S has the truth condition that P” has truth conditions,

and this looks very much like a *reductio ad absurdum* of the argument. If it is a *reductio* of the argument, it shows that meaning minimalism is incoherent. But as Wright emphasizes, this is so only if in the argument, (x)-(xiii) are themselves to be interpreted as expressing substantial truths. They may simply be attempts at expressing correct claims, elucidations that result from doing philosophical grammar. Let us suppose that it is so. (x) is therefore only the expression of a correct claim (concerning substantial truth conditions) and it is compatible with the denial, expressed in (xiv) and (xv), that it expresses a substantial truth and truth conditions, in which case we can no longer argue that we have achieved a *reductio* of the argument. The same remarks could be made concerning (xi), (xii) and (xiii). If we are to avoid any inconsistencies, we must treat them only as “correct” claims. According to that view, there is a distinction between discourses that are truth-apt and those that are merely apt for correctness (minimal truth), and any statement made concerning such a distinction can itself only be apt for correctness. (217)

But if that is the appropriate way out, Wright invites us to notice an important consequence. (x)-(xiii) involve *correct* negative claims to the effect that what follows the negation expresses a substantial truth. And if that is the appropriate interpretation, it follows that, for a different region of discourse, one could after all say that a sentence expresses truth conditions. She would perhaps not utter a substantial truth and her claim would perhaps not express truth conditions, but still, it could in principle be *correct* to say that a given statement expresses truth conditions. If this is so, it appears that (xii) may no longer be read as an expression of *global* minimalism, and it is consistent with the *correctness* of claiming that some sentences have truth conditions. (217)

However, Wright does not tell us the reason why from the mere fact that a statement is correct, it follows that it cannot apply to all regions of discourse. Specifically, it does not

seem to be clear why, from the fact that minimalist claims are merely correct claims, it would follow that global minimalism is false. Aren't we at best committed to the idea that its negation is logical possible?

Before looking at what is, according to Wright, the crucial difficulty in Boghossian's argument, let us notice that the problematic move in the argument is *not* the move from (xi) to (xii). Why would we want to say that the inference is here problematic? Well we could want to deny that the disquotational principle applies whenever a sentence or its negation is merely correct and not truth-apt. According to that view, if a sentence is only available for a correct claim and not truth apt, we should want to say that the statement asserting its truth is incorrect.

The inference from (xi) to (xii) exploits a modus tollens of the right to left ingredient in the disquotational schema. If we accept the schema, we accept its right to left ingredient, namely, " $A \rightarrow 'A' \text{ is true}$ ". And if we accept that, we should also accept its contrapositive, namely " $'A' \text{ is not true} \rightarrow \neg A$ ", and this is precisely the form of the inference from (xi) to (xii). Now since the negated sentence in (xii) is merely available for correctness and not for substantial truth, it could be argued that it is one for which we should not accept the disquotational schema.

But Wright aptly notices that this argument assumes that the matrix for the truth predicate is non-conservative. It assumes that if " A " is merely correct and therefore neither true nor false, the claim that it is true is itself false. But this assumption may be questioned and it could be claimed that the matrix for the truth predicate is conservative even when both truth and correctness are at play. It can therefore be claimed that whenever " A " is merely correct, the evaluation of " $'A' \text{ is true}$ " will itself be correct. So we are right, after all, in exploiting the disquotational principle in Boghossian's argument.(219)

However, Wright thinks that the problem in the argument occurs in the inference from (x) to (xi). The argument presupposes the apparently valid claim that a sentence must express truth conditions in order to be true. This seems fair enough, but we apparently run into a

problem when the statement involves a sentence which is not apt for genuine truth. Consider the inference from (x) to (xi). It exploits the contrapositive of the principle according to which

(P) “A” is true \rightarrow “A” has a truth condition

Is (P) valid? Well, consider what happens when “A” is not apt for truth but only correct. The antecedent (i.e. “‘A’ is true”) is substantially not true but correct. But the consequent, the claim that “A” has a truth condition, is apparently going to be incorrect. Wright concludes that principle (P) is not valid and cannot be at the service of the contraposition by which the argument proceeds. And in general, according to Wright, Boghossian's argument collapses. The inference from (x) to (xi) is not valid because we can offer a case where it can be correct to say that a sentence is true, while incorrect to say that it has truth conditions.

Of course, one could also want to suggest that the first premise in the argument cannot be granted or, in other words, that minimalism about meaning is incoherent. This is actually the strategy deployed by Boghossian himself, but I shall not deal with that criticism and I shall restrict my comment to Wright. As I said, Wright does not necessarily reject meaning minimalism⁵, and he does not even reject the move from meaning minimalism to global minimalism. He just feels unhappy with Boghossian's particular argument, and the problem is centrally located in the inference from (x) to (xi).

What can be replied to Wright? He unfortunately fails to distinguish between two different kinds of truth conditions, those which correspond to independently existing possible states of affairs, and those which correspond to the states of affairs as stipulated within the framework of a semantics of assertibility conditions. Just as we distinguish between two notions of “truth” (substantial truth and correctness), we should also want to distinguish between two different notions of truth conditions. If we make such a distinction, Boghossian's

argument for global minimalism no longer collapses, *pace* Wright. For if we understand “truth conditions” only in the second sense, the move from (x) to (xi) once again seems to be valid. It is the contrapositive of (P), and (P) is the principle according to which a statement must have truth conditions in order to be true. Would that principle fail in the case where a sentence A would only be available for correctness and not for substantial truth? The antecedent (“A is true”) would, according to Wright, be substantially false but it would also be correct. Why then not say that the consequent, while substantially false, is also a correct statement? This would be a genuine option if we were working with a weak notion of “truth condition”.

Wright is willing to acknowledge a use of the words “true” and “false” which is available for the performance of correct claims, but he is mysteriously confining the expression “truth condition” to a substantial reading only. But if he were consistent in his approach to the problem, he should recognize that the two uses of the word “true” induce two different uses of the expression “*truth* conditions”. It would then follow that when a statement A is only available for correctness, the claim that it is true may be correct and so is the claim that it has “truth conditions” in the weak sense of the term.

Let me emphasize once again that even if Wright does not endorse the argument put forward by Boghossian, he thinks that the intuition behind global minimalism remains a plausible line and it remains to be seen whether under such circumstances we can save the metaphysical debates about truth. Wright accepts that if we are to endorse minimalism about meaning, we shall have to endorse also minimalism about metalinguistic ascriptions of truth. (222) So what could be said concerning those metaphysical debates? Wright thinks that even if a global form of minimalism were true, it would still be possible to accept versions of the traditional debates, except for the Dummettian one concerning Evidence transcendence. (227) If we can move from minimalism about meaning to minimalism about truth, then we must acknowledge a certain form of minimalism concerning those statements that predicate truth to sentences. Since the Dummettian debate concerns the possibility of there being transcendent

facts in the sense suggested by the metaphysical realist, it appears that we can no longer clearly make sense of the metaphysical realist. It is surely a consequence of the sceptical solution to the paradox concerning rule following that we can no longer make sense of such transcendent states of affairs.

But what about the other three debates that were discussed by Wright? Can they still be pursued within the confines of a global minimalism about meaning, which inescapably seems to be entailing a global minimalism about truth, as Wright himself is willing to admit? Granting that the sceptical solution involves the systematic replacement of truth conditional semantics by a semantics of assertibility conditions, the question to be asked is whether the Euthyphro debate, the debate about “correspondence” and the one about the “facts” still make sense as genuine *metaphysical* debates within such a semantical approach. Wright thinks that they are still in order as long as they are not confused with considerations pertaining to the *meaning* of the words under consideration. (227)

But here the worry is that the claims made within these genuine metaphysical debates may very well be interpreted as rules of the language. Indeed it would not be surprising to discover that the semantical status of singular terms, common nouns, quantifiers and sentences affects our positions on those so called metaphysical debates. In inquiring upon the status of singular terms, for instance, we ask, whether they are directly referential or descriptive and whether they have occurrences in observational statements or whether they are always theory laden. These issues certainly seem to have a bearing upon the ones raised by Wright, and he has not shown that we could confidently separate the metaphysical issues from those that concern the semantics of the language.

The so called “facts” concerning truth could then perhaps be spelled out in terms of stipulations made by the community regarding the semantic status of some of the sentences belonging to a particular discourse. For instance, a “solution” to the Euthyphro debate could be forthcoming if, within a given community, certain statements served in accordance with the rules of language to report proximal facts about their experiences and not distal ones. The

specification of those facts would enter into the determination of the assertibility conditions of those statements, and this would reveal that the debate is semantical in essence.

Similarly, the fact that a certain class of statements induce a disagreement only when there occurs a cognitive shortcoming may also be explained in terms of the semantics of the language. This is what would happen if, for instance, the members of the community used the referential terms in those statements as directly referential expressions. A propensity for a realistic interpretation for a given class of statements might very well rely upon conventions to the effect that some of the key terms within those sentences are to be treated as directly referential.

The same kind of considerations could apply to the suggestion that a certain class of facts has a wide cosmological role. This is perhaps also to be explained by reference to certain features of our use of sentences. It could simply be that we tend to mention the so called “primitive facts” in the formulation of the assertibility conditions of many different sorts of statements, as relevant for their proper understanding. These facts need not be interpreted as objective features of the external world, but rather as what *we* have stipulated as an important ingredient in the meaning of many different sentences.

Let us imagine that it is so. Imagine that the only universal fact of the matter about truth is that it is used by everyone in accordance with the disquotational principle. All the other so called facts have to do with the specific assertibility conditions associated to particular statements within a given community. Since these facts depend upon the semantics of the discourse, and since they may vary from one community to another, they are made true by stipulations. A semantics of assertibility conditions is established by convention and the facts that are induced by these semantic rules do not as such count as brute facts.

It is a presupposition shared by realists and anti-realists that the debates between them is genuine and that it should be resolved by a close scrutiny of the facts. The deflationist is the philosopher who reminds us that these metaphysical clouds dissolve into a drop of philosophical grammar.

¹ Truth and Objectivity, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England, 1992. In what follows, I shall refer to the work by inserting the page numbers in the body of the text.

² For further characterizations of the notion of superassertibility, see “Can a Davidsonian Meaning-Theory be Construed in Terms of Assertibility?”, section 3, Chapter 9 of Realism, Meaning and Truth, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1987.

³ See Realism, Meaning and Truth, p.299.

⁴ Realism, Meaning and Truth, p.300-302.

⁵ See Wright's successful refutation of Boghossian's attempts at showing that meaning minimalism is incoherent in the Appendix of the last chapter.