Facts as Fictions (or, the deflationary theory of facts)

The word "true" (and its greek and latin equivalents) has a twisting history throughout the philosophical canon. In some eras, a 'truth' is an entity that resides on the *reality* side of the representation/reality divide. On this use, the expression 'truth' might just as well be translated as 'fact.' And yet in other eras, 'truth' is taken to be a property of *ideas,* when they are adequate to reality (as Aquinas put it).

Of course, the vacillating use of the term 'truth' to describe a property of *reality* or *our representations thereof* recurs throughout the history of our own analytic tradition. Bertrand Russell (at one point in his career) understood truth to be a property of propositions (which he conceived as structures of worldly objects and properties) that is realized whenever a proposition is also a fact. And since Russell's time, a number of philosophers have followed this basic idea of the so-called 'identity theory of truth'—the basic idea being that a *truth* is the same thing as a *fact.* According to this view, it is a misnomer, or a second-rate use of the expression 'true', to call a thought or a sentence *true.* Properly speaking, a thought has a *true* content; a sentence *expresses* a truth.

The opposing tradition, which runs through the likes of Wittgenstein, Tarski, Fodor, etc., understands truth to be primarily a property of *our* representations of reality—not the reality that is being represented. So, on this view, it is *sentences* and the mental analogues of sentences (mental representations, thoughts) that are the primary bearers of truth.[1]

And of course, there are plenty of views that occupy an intermediate position. An intermediate position is one that takes propositions to be the primary bearers of truth, and then conceives of propositions in such a way so that they have one foot on the 'representation' side and the other foot in 'reality'. (Or perhaps they are neither, like a Fregean thought residing in a third realm.) The idea here is that propositions are not sentences, but nor are they states of affairs; they bear some semblance to sentences, and they also bear some semblance to states of affairs.

Anyway, I can be vague about this, because it isn't really my aim to talk about theories of *truth* per se. My aim is actually to talk about *facts.* Or rather, I want to advance a thesis about facts that parallels a central claim about truth made by one of the mainstream views.

The view I have in mind is deflationism. According to this view, the concept of truth, when applied to a representation, is not meant to refer to some substantive property; rather, it is a logical device that increases our expressive power. In particular, it allows us to express a plurality (perhaps infinitely many) of sentences, without having to express each one. Imagine that I wished to assert a sequence of sentences S_1, S_2, S_3,… With the concept of truth at my disposal, I can succinctly assert that "each one of those sentences *is true.*" The reason I can do this—claims the deflationist—is because the predicate 'is true' allows me to substitute a sentence, S_i, with the equivalent expression *'S_i' is true* (since 'S_i' *is true* iff S_i). Since the quote-name 'S_i' appears in the *object* position, I can quantify into that position. In sum, the

[1] The Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* speaks of propositions; but for him, these are sentences *qua meaningful*.

concept of truth allows us to substitute a sentence with an expression that names that sentence, which in turn allows us to quantify over sentences to express a plurality of them.

Now, I have come to think that deflationism about truth is implausible. (I have given some of my reasons here.) This is a long story, but the gist of it is simply that, according to deflationism, there can't be any story to tell about the relation between a representation and what it represents. But plausibly there *is* a story to tell, and there is value to telling it.

But now that I think of it, it is strange to me that anyone would have thought that the nominalizing-for-the-sake-of-generalizing role, which deflationists claim is the *raison d'être* of *truth,* would belong to a property of *our representations.* For if I wanted to assert that S_1, S_2, S_3,... *etc.,* it is rather convoluted to say "each one of *the representations 'S_1', 'S_2', 'S_3',... is true.*" Rather than going through this unnecessary metalinguistic detour, it is much more straightforward to say *"all of them are facts."*

And now this brings me to my main thesis: the deflationary theory of facts. Like the deflationary theory of truth, the deflationary theory of facts consists of two main theses: one of them concerns 'fact'-discourse and the other one concerns the metaphysics of facts. (This theory has been proposed before. It can be found in Quine's *Word and Object.*)

The generalizing role of 'fact' discourse

According to the first thesis of the deflationary theory of facts, the primary reason that we have an operator in our language "that __ is a fact" (or "it is a fact that __" or "there exists a fact that __") is for the purpose of expressing generalizations. For suppose we want to express S_1, S_2, S_3,...*etc.* The fact operator allows us to take a whole stand-alone sentence, *S,* and then syntactically transform it into the logically equivalent, *that S is a fact* (or *"there is a fact that S*"). We assume "*S if and only if there is a fact that S*" is always true. Since *that S* now occupies a nominal position in the resulting sentence, we can now objectually quantify over these pseudo-entities (the facts). If we collect all of the pseudo-entities, *that* S_1, *that* S_2, *that* S_3, into a set and call it A, we can say "everything in A is a fact." According to fact-deflationism, this is the sole purpose of fact-talk. "The facts" are really pseudo entities that serves as expedients of expression: the things expressed are always first-order claims that are not really about facts.

Let me give an example. Here are a list of things that I could truly say about myself: *Graham is a student, Graham is 5'10", Graham is a vegetarian, Graham lives in Vancouver, Graham is a human, etc.* Indeed, if I wanted to say all of the true things about myself, then this list would go on forever. Since we cannot literally say *all* of the things on the infinite list, we can indirectly speak *of* them with the use of the phrase "*all of the facts about Graham*". This phrase succeeds in cashing out everything I wished to say about myself precisely because the fact f = <Graham is P> will belong in A (the set of facts about Graham) if, and only if, Graham is P.

This example illustrates another important point. Namely, that we hardly ever use set-theoretic terminology when speaking of sets of facts. Instead, we usually use descriptions, such as "the facts about Graham." Nonetheless, this phrase picks out a set. (According to the

deflationist about facts, it picks out a *pseudo set of pseudo entities.*) Precisely, it picks out the set A = {f = *that a is F* | *a = Graham*}.[2] We can pick out sets in other ways as well. For example:

- B = The necessary facts about Graham = {that *a is F* | *a = Graham* and □(*a is F*)}
- C = The intrinsic facts about Graham = {that *a is F* | *a = Graham* and *a is intrinsically F*}
- D = The physical facts about Graham = {that *a is F* | *a = Graham* and *F is a physical property*}

We can speak of B as a shorthand way of saying that *Graham is human, Graham is a mammal,* and so on. We can speak of C as a shorthand way of saying that *Graham is human, Graham is 5'10",* and so on. And we can speak of D as a shorthand way of saying that *Graham is 5'10", Graham weights 185 lbs, etc.*

Some of the most important uses of the 'fact' language in philosophy is when we ascribe features to *subsets of facts* or relations *between subsets of facts.* For example, we might say such things as:

(i) All essential facts are necessary.
(ii) All facts are physical facts (physicalism).
(iii) All moral facts are subjective.

On the present view, we must see each of these as shorthand for infinitely long lists of statements that are not themselves about facts. For example, (i) asserts that the set of essential facts {that *a is F* | *a is essentially F*} is a subset of the set of necessary facts {that *P* | necessarily *P*}. But this is essentially a long conjunction of material implications: if a_1 is essentially F_1 then necessarily, a_1 is F_1; and if a_2 is essentially F_2 then necessarily, a_2 is F_2; and so on. Moreover, (ii) asserts that the set of all facts is identical to the set of physical facts. This can be understood as an infinite conjunction of biconditionals, each one of them to the effect that *a is F if and only if being F is a physical property.* The claim of the fact deflationist is that all fact discourse can ultimately be understood alone these lines.

To refute this claim of the fact deflationist, one must argue that there are uses of 'fact' language that cannot be so understood. There are a few candidate counterexamples that I can think of. All of them have to do with so-called 'factive' states and 'factive' relations. The problem, it seems to me, is that we also use the 'fact' language to refer to the *particular relata* of factive states and factive relations.

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[2] Technically, this definition is ungrammatical, since the definiens and the definiendum do not share the same variables. ('*a*' is not used as a variable in the defiendum, but it is the in the definiens.) To remedy this problem, we must understand the definition *schematically.* It's as if *'a'* is being used as a variable for substitutional quantification, rather than objectual quantification. I don't see this as a problem. In fact, I think that this is to be expected. Substitutional quantification seems to be required whenever we try to explain and define the dummy objects that go proxy for infinite conjunctions and disjunctions.

I'll give one example of this sort of objection. The relation of *explanation* appears to take *facts* as the type of object that it relates. Consider:

- The fact that the ball was thrown *explains* the fact that the window shattered.
- That the ball was thrown explains that the window shattered.

I take it that these two sentences are equivalent. The problem is, that even in the second sentence, the "that-" clause is being used to refer to a fact. The relation expressed by "*x explains y*" is such that the variables *x* and *y* take facts as values. Moreover, only two particular facts are mentioned: the fact that the ball was thrown and the fact that the window shattered. So it's not plausible to think that the nominalization of the sentences "the ball was thrown" and "the window shattered" is done just for the sake of generalization, as described earlier. This appears to be a use of 'fact' language that can't be explained by treating all 'fact' talk as indirect generalization.

Nevertheless, the fact deflationist has a response.[3] The sentence "that the ball was thrown explains that the window shattered" can be taken as a roundabout way of saying "the window was shattered *because* the ball was thrown." Unlike "explains", the word "because" is a *sentential* operator. Hence, "because" doesn't take names for facts as its complements; it takes regular old sentences. "The window was shattered *because* the ball was thrown" only mentions the window and the ball. It doesn't mention any entities besides; in particular, it doesn't mention any facts.

This illustrates the general strategy of argumentation between the fact deflationist and their opponents. The opponent of fact deflationism will present an example of an alleged factive property or relation, expressed by "F(x)", with objectual variables ranging over facts. The fact deflationist will respond that "F(x)" paraphrazes some other sentence F*(S), where F* is a sentential operator and "S" is a sentential variable. To refute fact deflationism, one must find an example of a factive predicate that cannot be so paraphrased. This is the real crux of the matter: whether there are such predicates. I suppose that this is an open question. But since I favour fact deflation, I must presume that there is not.

I would like to end this section by mentioning a few reasons to prefer ascribing the nominalization-for-the-sake-of-generalization role to the operator "it is a fact that" rather than the predicate "is true". (This is contrary to the traditional truth deflationists, Quine, Leeds, and Field.)

For one, traditional truth deflationism doesn't explain why we have a predicate for *two* truth values: *true and false.* If, as the truth deflationist claims, the sole reason for having the predicate "is true" in our language is so that we can nominalize and then quantify, then why on earth do we need the word "false"? (Don't say that it's so that we can call a collection of sentences false. We can do that just fine by saying that their negations are all *true.*) Fact deflationism obviously doesn't face this worry, since there's no distinct word for a non-fact.

Secondly, it is also widely known that the expressive role ascribed to 'is true' doesn't

[3] Thanks to Zach Blaesi for this.

work when the truths in question are sentences whose truth-conditions are sensitive to context. Consider the collection: "I am hungry", "Today is Wednesday". Whether I wish to call these *true* will depend on the context in which they are used (what person uttered them at what time). In other words, it depends on the *content* they express relative to their context. It's for this reason that many truth deflationists have preferred to ascribe the generalizing role to "is true" only when it's applied to *propositions.* But as noted in the opening of this post, propositions are funny entities. Within some theories, the true propositions start looking a lot like facts.[4]

Finally, unlike truth deflationism, fact deflationism has no problem explaining quantification over facts for which there is no expression in language or thought. Consider all of the facts about me. As previously noted, this is a set which is defined by A = {*that a is F* | *a* = *Graham*}. Even if talk about this set is shorthand for all the things that *could be said about me*, there's no reason to restrict the set to *only* the things that could be said about me *in English* (or any other natural language or thought). Indeed, we could define it so that A = {that *a is F* | *a* = *Graham* and *F-ness* is *any property that Graham has*}. This now makes explicit that A includes facts about properties of mine that we may not be able to express or represent.

Contrast this with truth deflationism. As previously mentioned, truth is a property of *representations.* Therefore, there cannot be a truth that has no representation. And therefore, when we quantify "all of the truths about *a*", we quantify over only those truths *that are represented* (by some means or other—whether by language or by thought). If not all of the facts are represented, then it follows that there are facts that are not expressed by a truth. And if so, then quantifying over *the facts* is expressively more powerful than quantifying over *the truths.*

The metaphysics of fact deflationism

So far, all of the points have been made about *words*. Specifically, the first half of fact deflationism is a thesis about the words "it is a fact that" and "there is a fact that". It claims that our *uses* of these expressions are governed by the rule that "there is a fact that P" and "P" are equivalent (in some sense). "There is a fact that P" and "P" are interchangeable; and we interchange them only to exploit the former to perform certain syntactical tricks at our own convenience.

But according to the second, metaphysical thesis of fact deflationism, it is *only* a syntactical trick. Saying "there is a fact that P" does not incur any *ontological* commitments that are not already incurred by the original statement "P". I say "there is a cat on the mat"; I am thus committed to the existence of at least one cat and at least one mat. I now say "there is a *fact* that there is a cat on the mat". I am still committed to the cat and the mat, but I am not now committed to something more; I am not committed to a third entity—*the fact.* In other words, fact discourse does not increase our ontology. It is committed to nothing more than what non-fact-discourse is committed to. Presumably, this may be limited to the objects and properties

[4] This is just a cursory remark. To make this point in full would require an entire essay on truth-bearers—an issue that I have found too convoluted to cover in a single post, yet.

that we pre-theoretically take to inhabit the world.

If this is right, then a delicate question remains as to how to think of the entities we apparently refer to in fact discourse. What are "the facts" then? So far I have been calling them "pseudo entities", but that's a wave of the hand. We still need a theory to understand the apparent referents of fact discourse.

Notoriously, such questions are sensitive to *meta*ontology. Depending on whether you follow Carnap or Quine, you may take this question in very different ways. For the Carnapian, there is no deep ontological question about what to make of the referents of fact discourse. We say that they exist when we use the fact-language, and we know their properties in virtue of knowing the rules of this language. Whether to speak the fact-language is a mere pragmatic choice; it need not answer to some deeper metaphysical question about whether there *really are* facts and what they are like. So, for the Carnapian, I can just end this post here; there's nothing more to say.

But, for better or worse, I've always found myself more sympathetic to Quine on this matter. For the Quinean, an ontological commitment is more serious. If we find ourselves uttering statements to the effect that "there are *Fs*"—in the present case, "there are *facts*"—then we owe a metaphysical explanation.

According to Quinean metaontology, if we utter "there are *Fs*", we have four options:[5] (I) we accept *Fs* as *real* entities; by doing so, we would need an account of what they're really like; (II) we avoid (I) by *retracting* our utterances; we avoid the commitment by disavowing our previous statements; (III) we systematically *paraphrase* "there are *Fs*" into an equivalent sentence that doesn't carry the commitment; or (IV) we treat each use of "there are *Fs*" as a less-than-fully serious use of language; we don't treat them as outright assertions, but rather a different type of speech act. In (IV), we may treat "there are *Fs*" with the same attitude with which we treat "there are orcs in Moria": that is, a fictitious assertion.

One of the main motivations for fact deflationism is precisely to avoid a serious ontological commitment to facts. Clearly, the point is to avoid (I). So the remaining task is to figure out which of options (II)–(IV) is best for the fact deflationist.

The question, then, is whether it is possible to avoid talking about facts in our theorizing about the world. Can we eschew fact discourse altogether, and simply talk about objects and their properties, without ever talking about facts?

We have already seen good reason to think that fact discourse is useful: it increases our expressive power. It allows us, in effect, to say an infinite number of things in a finite mode of expression. Undoubtably, this is a good thing. For this reason, let's not be too quick to embrace route (II).

Can we paraphrase away all mention of facts? As far as I know, we can paraphrase every mention of a *particular* fact. Rather than saying "it is a fact that the cat is on the mat", we can just speak like normal people and say "the cat is on the mat." But if, as the first part of this post claims, quantifying over facts plays an indispensable role in expressing infinite pluralities of

[5] I believe that I got this Stephen Yablo's "The Myth of Seven".

statements, then not all mention of facts can be paraphrased in a finitary way. Consider the Principle of Sufficient Reason:

(PSR) Every contingent fact has an explanation.

Essentially, this says that the set of contingent facts is a subset of the set of explained facts. According to the present view, this can be expressed by an infinite conjunction of infinite disjunctions, like so:

If $\Diamond P_1$ & $\Diamond \neg P_1$, then [(P_1 because Q_1) or (P_1 because Q_2) or (P_1 because Q_3) or …]
And
If $\Diamond P_2$ & $\Diamond \neg P_2$, then [(P_2 because Q_1) or (P_2 because Q_2) or (P_2 because Q_3) or …]
And …

(Note: "there is a fact that explains P_i" can be cashed out as an infinite disjunction: "(P_i because Q_1) or (P_i because Q_2) or (P_i because Q_3) or …".)

There is no way to paraphrase the Principle of Sufficient Reason in a finite way without quantifying over facts. To paraphrase it without mentioning facts, we need a *two* dimensional infinite series of statements. Since the PSR is just one example of an important philosophical thesis that we'd presumably want to express, there's no dispensing with fact discourse through finite paraphrase.

The situation with facts is actually quite a lot like the situation with numbers. If we only ever needed to count a finite number of things, then it would be entirely possible to paraphrase away all mention of numbers. Consider "the number of pears in my pantry is two." We can cash out this claim, without mentioning numbers, as "there is a pear x and a pear y, x is not y, and there are no other pears in my pantry." By paraphrasing in this way, we obviate the apparent need to mention numbers.

In fact, we can go further. We can express each *instance* of the arithmetical rules using this paraphrasing tactic. For example, we can cash out "two pears plus two apples equals four fruit" without mentioning numbers. However, if we wanted to express the arithmetical rules in their full generality, then we would need to express all of the instances. We could hypothetically do this if only we could express an infinite conjunction of all of the instances. But it isn't possible in a finite way *without mentioning numbers*.

It's at this point that fictionalists about numbers enter with their view. According to number fictionalism, the numbers don't really exist. Strictly speaking, there are no such things as numbers out there. For this reason, such statements as "every natural number has a unique successor" are not literally true of reality. Rather, when we say such things, we ought to think of the discourse as engaging in a useful fiction. The sentence "every natural number has a unique successor" is true *in the fiction of numbers*, but it is not literally true. We introduce this fiction precisely because it affords an incredibly convenient (indeed, indispensable) way of speaking of,

and thinking about, matters that ultimately concern a numberless reality.

Fictionalists thus stake out the following claims about number discourse: (i) that it's *literally* false, but (ii) it nonetheless serves as an indispensable means of capturing an infinite number of literal truths in a finite manner of expression, (iii) that its indispensability for this role does not incur ontological commitment, and (iv) we can regard it as nothing more than a useful (and ontologically harmless) myth.

Clearly there are parallels between these claims and the fact deflationist's diagnosis of fact discourse. According to the fact deflationist, there are, literally speaking, no such things as facts. There are only objects and their properties. (There is only the cat and the mat that it sits on; there isn't a third thing: the *fact* that the cat is on the mat.) Nonetheless, for technical reasons, there is an indensible role for speaking *as if* there is a third kind of entity, the facts. By speaking of them, we are able to *indirectly* say a lot more about the worldy objects and their properties than we could if we only spoke *directly.* But mention of facts is only a fictitious way of speaking; it ought not to be taken as the literal truth. The facts are just the artifacts of a harmless myth.