To Appear in *Philosophical Studies* symposium of Hartry' Field's *Truth and the Absence of Fact*

Comment on Field's *Truth and the Absence of Fact*

In "Deflationist Views of Meaning and Content", one of the papers in his terrifically important and interesting *Truth and the Absence of Fact,* Hartry Field contrasts two traditions in philosophical accounts of truth, truth conditions and other semantic concepts and properties; reference, meaning and so forth. According to accounts belonging to the first tradition semantic concepts and properties/relations are descriptively and explanatorily "extremely" central in the philosophy of mind and language. Proponents of these accounts hold that truth is a *substantive* value and goal for belief and assertion, that understanding a language and grasping thoughts *consists in* knowledge of truth conditions (and other semantic properties and relations), that the difference between factual and non-factual discourse is explicated in terms of semantic notions, and that semantic properties (and relations) of thoughts and other intentional mental events and states enter into rationalizing and causal explanations of actions. Some go even further and claim that semantic (and intentional) properties as "natural kinds" involved in scientific laws.

According to accounts belonging to the second tradition the concept of truth is *not* explanatorily central, at least not in the ways just mentioned. On these accounts the primary role of the concept of truth (or the predicate "is true") is as a logical device for disquotation and for expressing certain thoughts that

would otherwise require infinitely long expressions. Proponents of these accounts think that the explanatory work that the first tradition assigns to semantic concepts can either be accomplished by this logical role (together with other non-semantic notions like causation, indication, computational role, biological function) or can be accomplished non-semantically in terms of naturalistically acceptable notions.

Apt titles for accounts belonging to the two traditions are "robust" and "deflationary." The struggle between these two traditions has been (and continues to be) one of the central dramas of recent philosophy of language and mind. Frege, Brentano, Russell, early Wittgenstein, Lewis, Fodor, and Devitt belong to the robust tradition. Late Wittgenstein, Quine, Ayer, Horwich, Brandom, Hill and Leeds are representative of the deflationary tradition.[1] *Truth and the Absence of Fact* includes papers in which Field articulates and defends accounts belonging to both traditions and which to an extent chronicle his change of allegiance from the robust to the deflationary tradition.[2]

My goal in this short commentary is very limited. I want to describe how I understand Field's way of thinking about these two traditions, some of the reasons he has come to favor the deflationary, and then raise a pretty obvious issue about the prospects of success of Field's deflationary approach. My hope is that my errors of understanding and emphasis will prompt Hartry to expand a bit on how he views his deflationary program.

The paradigm robust account of truth and reference- "R-truth" and "R-reference"- is the correspondence account that Field discusses in "Tarski's Theory of Truth" and "Mental Representation." On this account the R-reference relation and possession of R-truth conditions occur in casual/explanatory theories of linguistics and intentional psychology. The meaning of a sentence consists primarily in its R-truth conditions and the intentional content of a belief consists primarily in its R-truth condition. The R-

[1]Rorty and Derrida are also sometimes classed as "deflationists" though their interests seem quite different and most of the deflationists in my list don't see them as allies.
[2] In "The Deflationary Conception of Truth" (Field 1986) one can see Field's struggle between the two traditions.

truth conditions of sentences and thoughts are ultimately derivative on the R-references of component parts (words and concepts). Many (Field included) think that R-reference (and other R-semantic properties) can play the causal explanatory roles specified by linguistic and psychological theories only if it is *reducible* to physical relations. There are various proposals for exactly what reduction of a higher level property F requires. The usual view is that for every nomologically possible instantiation of F there are complexes of physical properties that are instantiated and which are nomologically sufficient (realize) for the instantiation of F. Of course what physical relations realize R-semantic relations or whether there are such physical relations is the big question for this kind of correspondence theory. A physicalist who comes to believe for some reason that there are no such physical relations- that R-truth is not physically reducible- may end up being an elimitivist about "R-truth" and hold the paradoxically sounding propositions that nothing is R-true and nothing R-refers.

The paradigm deflationary concept of truth is the pure disquotational truth predicate-"is D-true."[3] On the pure disquotational account "is D-true" is a predicate of my language (or thought) that applies only to tokens of sentences that I now understand (and to my thoughts). The meaning of "is D-true" is specified by its role in disquotation; from "S" and "'S' exists" I can infer "'S' is true" and visa versa. Field puts this by saying that "S" and "'S'" is true are "cognitively equivalent modulo the existence of 'S'"[4] Another way of characterizing "D-is true" is in terms of acceptance of the generalization "(S)('S' is D-true iff S)" where the universal quantifier is a substitutional quantifier with respect to sentences..[5] D-reference is characterized by the cognitive equivalence (modulo the existence of the term "t") of "t" and "the reference of 't'.

R-truth and its kin (R-reference, R-truth conditions etc.) and "D-truth" and its kin are very different. First, it is an objective fact whether one bit of the world (a token of a term or a brain event)

[3]Field introduces "pure disquotational truth" in Field 1986.
[4]More exactly, relative to the assumption that the token "S" exists S and "S" is true are cognitively equivalent. Field says that S and S* are cognitively equivalent for X if X's inferences fromS to S* and S* to S are *a priori* and relatively direct.
[5]This formulation has the advantage of allowing the derivation of generalizations concerning truth - e.g. (S)(Q)("S&Q" is true iff S&Q)- where the specification in terms of cognitive equivalence enables derivation only of instances of the generalization.(Field suggests another way of obtaining the generalizations on p.141) It has the disadvantage of explaining "is D-true" in terms of substitutional quantification which is itself usually explained in terms of true but perhaps it is possible to explain substitutional quantification in terms of inferential role. See Hill

bears R-reference to some other bit of the world (an individual or property or...). An expression has its R-semantic properties whether or not any thought we can think or express has the same or even similar semantic properties. In contrast, D-truth and reference are subjective in that they apply only to one's own language and thought. Second, whether a term t bears R-reference to some entity is a contingent matter (contingent on use and causal etc. relations involving t) while D-reference attributions are not contingent on anything. As Feidl says "they are use independent". Third, knowledge that if t exists then "t" R-refers to t" is *a* substantive bit of knowledge about the relation between "t" and t while knowing that if t exists then "t" D-refers is utterly trivial. Both "if t exists then "t" D-refers to t" and "if t exists then "t" R-refers" are knowable *a priori* but for different reasons. The first is based on possessing the conceptual roles of quotation and "refers" and the second from knowing the meaning of "t" which, on robust accounts, is knowing its reference. Fourth, where R-semantic notions are supposed to be suitable for scientific explanations - occur in lawful generalizations and so on- the D- semantic notions have no such pretensions. Fifth, while the question of the physical reduction of R-semantic notions seems to be pressing and difficult there is no such issue concerning D-truth and D-reference. The bi-conditionals that implicitly define "is D-true" make no additional demands on ontology beyond those that the theories expressible in the language already have.

Quine long ago observed that it is useful to have a D-truth predicate in one's language (or meta-language). Since "S" and "'S' is D-true are cognitively equivalent, asserting "'S' is D-true" amounts to asserting S so, as Field points out, if I just want to deny a theory T I can say that one of T's consequences is not D-true. The cognitive equivalence of S and 'S' is true enables me to express generalizations like this one without involving myself in any commitments (other than the existence of elements of my language) about word usage or connections between my words and the world. R-truth is more committal. "One of the consequences of T is not R-true" says more than the denial of what T says since it does say something about T's language-world connections. Non-factualists about an area of discourse also find D-semantic notions useful. Someone who thinks that e.g. ethical predicates fail to R-refer to any properties may still want to speak of sentences of ethics as being true in order to generalize;

2002)

for example, to express ethical agreement with the Pope by saying “All of the Pope’s ethical pronouncements are D-true “

D-truth and D-reference are limited in that they apply only to my current language and thought. Field also introduces an extended disquotational truth predicate that applies to utterances of others and my utterances at other times and counterfactual utterances. The basic idea is that “S is D*true” iff there is an utterance (or thought) U such that U *translates* S and S is D-true. If translation is explained partly in terms of sameness of R-semantic notions then D*-truth piggy backs on R-truth. But Field thinks that it is possible to explain translation without appealing to R-notions. I have a little more to say about this later. “is D*true” has modal properties similar to R-truth since I can apply it to sentences in non-actual worlds in which my sentences possess counterfactual computational roles/indication relations. Field also now thinks (p.147-51) that I can apply D* true even to sentences I don’t understand (and can’t translate). Even if I don’t understand “S” I can treat “S” and “‘S’ is D*-true” as having the same cognitive role. Just as the meaning of “or” is given by its computational role (say those associated with the usual introduction and elimination rules) and doesn’t change when we add new sentences to our language, the meaning of “is D*-true” is given by its role and doesn’t change when we come to add new sentences to our language or acquire new concepts. Thus the D-extension of “is D*-true” approximates what propoponents of R-semantic notions think is the D-extension of “is R-true.” Even so, R-truth and D-truth are metaphysically fundamentally different.

There are two questions that are central to the deflationism/robust debate. One is whether our ordinary language semantic predicates are best analyzed as R- notions or D-like notions (or something else). Another is whether all the work that semantic notions can legitimately be put do can be done by D-like semantic notions or some explanations require R-notions. Field’s view is that the first question has no determinate answer and, in any case, is not all that interesting. My own view is our ordinary concepts are not D-like. Our inclination to look for theories of truth and content is evidence of this. But I agree with Field that this question is likely indeterminate and is as interesting as the second issue. The second question though is quite interesting. D-truth and D-reference are clearly legitimate notions (paradoxes

aside) since they have purely logical characterizations. The same cannot be said for R-semantic/intentional notions. There are two main worries about R-semantic notions. One is that there may be no physicalistic reduction of R-reference, possessing R-truth conditions and so on. The other is that R-semantic notions in fact do not figure in any proper science. More generally, R-semantic notions don't have the explanatory punch that is claimed for them. The worries are complementary. If there is a science containing laws governing R-semantic notions then we would expect that it would be possible- at least in principle- to explain what it is that physical phenomena have in common in virtue of which they constitute or realize R-semantic and intentional states. Not every philosopher agrees with this. Fodor, for example, famously has argued that special science laws can be autonomous in that there is no reduction of the special science law to laws of physics.[6] But even on Fodor's view there must be physically characterizable properties that are metaphysically sufficient for properties that occur in laws.

Are R-semantic properties physically realized? Positive proposals for naturalizing R-semantic properties properties are few and unconvincing.[7] In addition there are arguments- the Kripkenstein considerations, Quine's inscrutability arguments, and certain construals of Davidson's irreducibility arguments that seem to conclude that no physical property is metaphysically sufficient for a truth conditional property. There is hardly a consensus that these arguments are successful (or even exactly what they are) bu If they were to be successful we would have no choice but to conclude either that even a weak physicalism is false or that R-semantic notions are un-instantiated. Physicalists/naturalists like Field and myself would endorse the second disjunct and if we had no other semantic concepts, D-semantic concepts, to employ we would find ourselves mired in paradox.[8]

In my view the reductionist worries are sufficient to motivate the program that Field calls "methodological deflationism" (p.140). It counsels that one begin with D notions of truth and reference and then extend them to apply beyond (in the manner of ("is D*-true) as long as the extension is characterized only in terms of physicalistically acceptable notions. Field's characterization of D*-truth appeals to "translation" which, of course, cannot be explained in terms of sameness of R-truth conditions. His idea is

[6]Fodor argued for this very influential view in Fodor (1975) and Fodor (1997)
[7]For a survey of attempts to reduce or naturalize intentionality see Loewer (1996)
[8]For example, it is paradoxical to claim that "refers" fails to refer. See Boghossian (1990) for an extended

that "use properties"- especially computational role and indication/causal relation- ground our evaluations of good translations. He also thinks that translation is indeterminate and context dependent. I think one might want to introduce a tidied up notion of translation along the following lines. Part of our interest in translating or interpreting (attributing mental states to) others lies in our ability to use translations and interpretations to predict others behavior, to explain their behavior and to "exploit" them in so far as we can obtain information about the world from their utterances and beliefs.[9] So we might think that translations can be rated on how well they do by these aims and a translation is good to the extent it does or would do well on all of them. As far as I can see this notion of translation doesn't take us beyond deflationary and physical notions at least as long as we can make sense of psychological explanation in terms of only deflationary notions.

Methodological deflationism may lead to the development of semantic notions, D-semantic notions- that are deflationary in so far as they are explained in terms of D-truth and otherwise physicalistically OK concepts. Field observes that it might even lead to a D-semantic notion of truth that could be easily inflated (i.e. without going beyond physically OK concepts) into R-truth. The idea would be to regiment computational roles and indication relations into "equivalence classes" and devise a recipe for going from D-references of members of the class to their R-references. This would be a very happy outcome- deflationist methodology vindicates inflationist semantic notions! But I think Field is quite skeptical that this is in the outcome is likely.

Suppose it turns out that methodological deflationism doesn't lead to the reconstruction of inflationist notions. If there are phenomena that can be genuinely explained by theories employing R-semantic notions but can't be explained by theories employing D-acceptable notions but can be explained using r-semantic notions then deflationism will have failed. We will have to admit that there are r-semantic properties (and that they are instantiated) and if we can't reduce them to naturalistic notions we will have to give up naturalism or come to live with the idea that intentional properties and laws supervene on

---

discussion.

[9]Paul Boghossian recently reminded me that the acronym PEE- predict, explain, exploit- encapsulates our interpretive aims.

physical ones but we can't discern how. On the other hand, the deflationist tradition would be vindicated if it provides explanations of all or most of the phenomena that the R-tradition claimed to be able to explain or explained why the putative R-explanations are actually pseudo explanations.

Critics of deflationism have claimed that there are lots of phenomena that D-semantic theories can't handle. A comment one often hears in conversation is that D-notions can only be defined for languages that already instantiate R-semantic concepts. Another is that D-semantic notions sever the relation between language and the world.[10] A third is that "is D-true" etc. don't refer to properties at all and so deflationism is a non-starter as an account of the property truth. The first of these complaints is obviously question begging, the second obviously mistaken, and the third a bit more complicated. Of course if deflationism is true then no predicate bears R-reference to anything. And if by "property" we mean "natural kind" or "causally potent property" (whatever that may mean) then deflationists hold that "is D-true" doesn't refer to a property. But it has an extension and ("is D-true" and "is D*-true" have counterfactual extensions as well) so on a more relaxed view of properties they D-refer to properties.

Some more serious challenges to deflationism are that D-notions can't formulate logical laws of truth, can't be extended to languages containing indexicals and demonstratives, applies only to one's own language or utterances one can understand, and can't distinguish factual from non-factual discourse. As far as I can see Field has good answers to each of these. More serious are the objection that D-notions can't explain why acting on true beliefs tends to be successful and in particular explanations when we have reason to think that someone forms true beliefs but don't know exactly what beliefs[11]. There are good replies to these objections too.[12] The most serious challenges for the deflationist program rather come from issues concerning explanation. Can psychological explanations can be understood or reconstructed or replaced without loss by explanations in which the only semantic notions that figure are D-notions? For example, we explain why Terry buys flowers in terms of his just having been reminded by

[10]I have heard this point urged more than once after talks by Field on Deflationism.
[11]Field (1986) argues that a non-deflationary notion of truth conditions may be required to explain successful behavior in cases where we don't know what thoughts and beleifs the person whose behavior we want to explain has. Leeds (1995) shows that this isn't the case and Field was persuaded.
[12]For example in Loewer (1993) and Horwwich (1998)

his wife that it is their anniversary. Terry's acquisition of the belief that today is his wife's anniversary- and the belief's being about- referring to his wife etc.- clearly figure in the explanation. What role can D*-truth conditions play in this explanation? Field's idea is that the D*-truth conditions explain by encoding a class of computational roles (those that ground my interpretation of Terry) which cause Terry's flower buying. This seems to me promising. As far as I can see the counterfactual that expresses the explanatory relation between Terry's thought and his act- if Terry had not come to believe that it is his anniversary he wouldn't have bought flowers- is perfectly acceptable on a deflationist reading. That reading says something along the lines of "If Terry had not tokened a sentence in his belief box that is translated by my utterance "its her [Terry's wife] anniversary" he would not have bought flowers. This explanation makes reference to me and my language (off course, in evaluating this counterfactual we suppose that my language is as it actually is) but I don't see any harm in that since that reference is just playing a role in encoding a computational role. The counterfactual is true in part because of the causal relation between the computational role encoded by my sentence and Terry's action. This account may seem a bit awkward but deflationist will be quick to point out that it is also problematic how R-truth conditions can play a role in mental causation.

The main problem I see with the deflationist program succeeding is if it turns out that Intentional psychology succeeds in formulating a science that contains systematic laws that involve truth and reference. I don't think that deflationism can survive that. Take an example of a putative psychological law; if a person in pain believes that she is being given pain medicine she will report that the pain is alleviated. There are problems with a deflationist construal of this "law." First, it seems very awkward to posit a law whose formulation makes reference to the person who formulates or uses the law.. A related awkwardness is that, somewhat different laws would be posited by different scientists since their characterizations of the belief will all involve reference to their own language. Further, if translation without appeal to r-semantic notions (i.e. translation preserves R-truth conditions) is context dependent and indeterminate then extended deflationary semantic notions are unsuitable for the expression of serious scientific laws. The deflationist might reply that the *real* law underlying this generalization makes reference not to R-semantic notions but only to computational role and indication relations (the latter

might by used to pick out computational roles). But without actually producing the proposed "real" law this is merely hand waving. No doubt the "law" is implemented by computational (and neurophysiological) processes. But it is not at all obvious that there would be a way of picking out the relevant class of computational roles without appealing to r-reference and r-truth conditions. It might turn out- this is what some inflationists like Fodor think- that while every instance of the law can be explained in terms of computational role there would be no explanation of what these instances have in common *n virtue of which* they fall under a more general law. If we could pick out the relevant class of computational roles/indicator relations without reference to r-semantic notions then that looks like it would come very close to being a *reduction* of the belief. We end up with a vindicated physical inflationism. But if it turns out that we cannot pick out the relevant class except in terms of R-semantic notions then we would be faced with a law that we cannot reduce to more fundamental laws. Perhaps God could have made our world so that it has such laws even if all the fundamental laws and all the matter and fields (the stuff out of which every thing is made) are physical. In that case intentional laws would be like laws of geology except we wouldn't know how to reduce them to more physical laws. If God did make our world like that then semantic and intentional concepts/properties have an explanatory role that is much more significant than Deflationism allows. If there were such laws we would feel a very strong pressure toward reduction.

References

Boghossian, Paul (1990) "The Status of Content" *Philosophical Review* 99: 157-84.

Field, Hartry (1986) "The Deflationary Conception of Truth." in G.acDonald and C. Wright eds. *Facts, Science, and Value* Oxford: Blackwell 55-117.

Field, Hartry (20010 *Truth and the Absence of Fact* Oxford University Press

Fodor, Jerry (1975) *The Language of Thought*. New York: Crowell.

Fodor, Jerry (1987) *Psycho semantics* Cambridge Mass: MIT Press.

Hill, Chris (2002) *Thought and World* (Cambridge, 2002).

Horwich, Paul (1998) *Truth* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Leeds, Stephen (1995) “Truth, Correspondence, and Success”, *Philosophical Studies* 79, 1-36

Loewer, Barry (1993) “The Value of Truth” in E. Villanueva ed. *Philosophical Issues 4. Atascadero California: Ridgeview Publishing.*

Loewer, Barry (1996) “A Guide to Naturalizing Semantics” in *Companion to the Philosophy of Language*, ed. by Wright and Hale. Blackwells, 1996 p. 108-127