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Dissertation Summary

My dissertation concerns theories of truth. Aristotle said, "to say of what is, that it is, and of what is not, that it is not, is true." Modern theorists have found this expression consistent with a wide range of views, from robust "correspondence" accounts -- truth is correspondence to reality -- to weak, "deflationary" ones -- "truth" isn't a property at all, but merely a logical device. I trace the development of these two extremes, showing that the difference is not what it has seemed. Along the way, I articulate a new correspondence theory, one that overcomes traditional objections, and I end by arguing for it over deflationism.

In Chapter 1, I discuss early correspondence theories and their difficulties. The first attempts made use of facts: a statement is true when it fits the facts. It turns out, however, that giving these "facts" a coherent account is not easy. The main difficulty is what I call "the comparison problem": how can we compare statements with raw, unconceptualized reality, if we have no access to the latter? Because the difficulty is especially acute for fact-based theories, one way to make headway is to take up a recursive approach, giving the truth of a sentence in terms of the reference of its parts. What is needed, then, is a suitable account of reference. Some recent skeptical arguments have sought to undermine our sense that reference is determinate, and thus throw the possibility of such an account into doubt. I suggest that these arguments also involve versions of the comparison problem. Of particular interest is the claim that we are epistemologically trapped in a "linguistic" view of the world; that is, because our experience is language-like, we can never compare our statements to an uninterpreted external world.

In Chapter 2, I explore the emergence of deflationism as a reaction to these correspondence difficulties. One way of avoiding the problems cited in Chapter 1 is to obey what I call the "mediation restriction": because our experience of the world is mediated, the only good way to express the worldly conditions that make a sentence S true is by using the sentence S itself. Because this trivializes the relation between "S" and "S is true," a natural way to develop a theory of truth that meets the mediation restriction is to invoke "deflationism": truth is not a property with a nature to be analyzed, but is merely a grammatical aid for endorsing sentences. I trace development of deflationary theories that obey the mediation restriction, from naive "redundancy" ("S" and "S is true are synonymous") to a more developed "disquotational" account, on which the T-sentences -- "'Snow is white' is true if and only if snow is white, and so on -- provide an implicit definition of truth.

Chapter 3 concerns a different response to the correspondence difficulties. The idea is to develop a more subtle correspondence theory, one that avoids the difficulties of Chapter 1. There are three basic ideas. First, take scientific language as paradigmatic, since it is in our scientifically-minded interactions with the physical world that we have the best hope of having a non-linguistic experience of reality. Second, focus on practical, successful reasoning rather than on meaning and understanding. Third, take a local approach, appreciating that different cases will require different kinds of analysis. The result is a "physical correspondence theory of truth." I give details by developing a predicate-extension link, and by showing how contextual examinations of language can

reveal hidden semantic function The account is especially sensitive to indeterminacy; it shows how predicates can be associated with different extensions under different conditions, without being ambiguous. As to the linguistic view of the world, the claim here is that we can compare language to reality, not in a global or metaphysical way, but in the ordinary, piecemeal way allowed for in scientific practice. I end by challenging the deflationist with three semantic tasks that this correspondence theory does easily, and that seem worth doing: justifying sameness-of-reference across time, distinguishing and analyzing vague language, and distinguishing and analyzing non-representational discourse.

        Chapter 4 develops deflationism by taking up these challenges. Recall that in Chapter 2, deflationism was used as a way of meeting the mediation restriction. It needn't be, however, and in Chapter 4 I discuss a version with different motivations. The new idea is that our theory of truth should be as weak as possible while still doing its job. For a better understanding of what that "job" is, I turn to the deflationary responses to the challenges of Chapter 3. Often, those responses mimic the analysis of the physical correspondence theorist, but advocates claim they do so without invoking the semantic notions characteristic of non-deflationary theories.

        In Chapter 5, I argue that the deflationist responses of Chapter 4 lead in two directions. In the first, the reason for the similarity between the deflationist accounts and those of the physical correspondence theorist is that they have hold of the same set of ideas, differing only on what a theory of truth is supposed to accomplish. That is, the new deflationist reduces the workload of a theory of truth by increasing the work elsewhere. This "physical deflationist" agrees with the physical correspondence theorist that ordinary scientific investigation provides the best insight into how the world is, and hence, into what real world conditions our language is tracking. He also agrees that scientific cases provide paradigmatic cases of reference. We can compare statements to reality, not globally, but in the ordinary practice of science. Between this and the physical correspondence theory, I plump for the latter, because it is more natural and convenient. The second, and quite different, direction, I call "discourse deflationism." It denies the paradigmatic status of scientific reference, and also the comparison with reality, insisting that all we can do is be faithful to the existing methods and standards of our various discourses. Thus, when we employ scientific methods in our semantic investigations, the justification is not that those methods are correct, but that they are the ones we use. I argue that the responses of the discourse deflationist are simply deficient.

        Thus, I distinguish two types of deflationism. My conclusion is that the physical correspondence theory is preferable to both.