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Deflationism in Semantics and Metaphysics

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Abstract and Keywords

Various forms of deflationism have been defended in various arenas. On the semantic side, there is deflationism about truth, reference, and meaning, all of which are popular, perhaps even orthodox. On the metaphysical side, there is deflationism about existence, and meta-ontological deflationism about ontological debates. Unlike their semantic counterparts, these views have gone unnoticed or been widely attacked. The purpose of this chapter is to bring discussion of these sorts of deflationism together. It is argued that semantic deflationism leads to a form of existence deflationism. As a result, it is incoherent to accept semantic deflationism but reject existence deflationism. Moreover, it is argued that existence deflationism leads to a form of meta-ontological deflationism. Finally, it is argued that once we see how these views form part of a global deflationary package, it becomes

evident that they are more defensible than they have often seemed when examined in isolation.

1 Introduction

Various forms of deflationism have been defended in various arenas. On the semantic side we have deflationism about truth and deflationism about reference and meaning; on the metaphysical side we have deflationism about existence.[1] While the term 'deflationism' is used in many ways, here I will use it to describe theories that deny that the relevant concept (of truth, reference, or existence) is even attempting to refer to a substantive property the nature of which we can investigate and hope to discover. As a result, deflationary theories renounce the search for reductive generalizations of the form: x is true iff … (x corresponds to the facts, is made true by truthmakers, is verifiable, is ideally warranted …); <n> refers to x if <n> bears … to x (is causally linked to x, evolved with the function of indicating the presence of xs …); Ks exist iff … (Ks are causally potent, mind-independent, posited by our best scientific theory …). Instead, each holds that the relevant concept maybe grasped by grasping certain trivial platitudes governing the concept. Each thus gives a sort of no-theory attitude towards the concept in question, holding that we were wrong to think that we need a theory to uncover what truth, reference, or existence consists in. As a result, adopting the relevant form of deflationism leads one to reject any number of different philosophical proposals to identify the deeper or more substantive nature of truth, reference, or existence.[2]

(p.186) Semantic deflationism has been on the map and considered a serious contender for some time. Indeed, it has been called "one of the most popular approaches to truth in the twentieth century" (Stoljar and Damnjanovic 2012). Deflationism about existence has hardly been noticed as an option by the contenders in most contemporary ontological debates.[3] Indeed, it is only by ignoring the very possibility of a deflationary view of existence that the vast majority of debates in ontology—about whether or not entities of various sorts

such as numbers, properties, mental states, etc. 'really' exist—can proceed as they do. Deflationism about existence thus also leads to a certain sort of meta-ontological deflationism: holding that something is wrong with a great many standard debates in ontology. Meta-ontological deflationism, however, has also been unpopular, and where it has been articulated it has been roundly attacked.

The differences in the familiarity and popularity of these deflationary views— semantic deflationism about truth and meaning on the one hand, and metaphysical deflationism about existence and the consequent meta-ontological deflationism—are striking. The purpose of this chapter is to bring discussion of these sorts of deflationism together. I will not attempt here to argue for or defend any form of deflationism (though I have argued for or defended certain forms of meta-metaphysical deflationism elsewhere (Thomasson 2007a, 2008, 2009)). Instead, I will begin by discussing deflationism about truth and deflationism about existence—showing all that they have in common, which should make the contrasting fates of the views more surprising. I will then go on to discuss the main problem originally thought to plague existence deflationism. I will argue, however, that familiar forms of deflationism about truth give us a model for how to avoid this problem. Moreover, adopting a deflationary use theory of meaning enables us to develop a form of existence deflationism that clearly avoids this problem. This takes us some way towards establishing that existence deflationism is both defensible and similar to more popular semantic forms of deflationism.

Thereafter, I will go beyond this to argue that semantic deflationism in fact *leads to* a form of existence deflationism, so that it is not only surprising but also incoherent to accept semantic deflationism but reject existence deflationism. This of course makes even more surprising—and less defensible—the difference in popularity between these deflationary positions. Moreover, I will show how existence deflationism leads to a form of meta-ontological deflationism. This is a fact that has been little noticed, but noticing it may make a big difference to the prospects of semantic and metaphysical forms of deflationism alike.

(p.187) Finally, I will discuss what follows if, as I have argued, these forms of semantic and metaphysical deflationism do in fact come as a package.[4] Are the links between these varieties of deflationism a good thing or a bad thing for each of the views in question? I will argue that although association with metaphysical deflationism may cast more suspicion on semantic deflationism in the eyes of ambitious metaphysicians, overall the links between them are a good thing. For, taken together, the theories form a broader deflationary view that makes it evident why various forms of objection that have been raised to each side (considered as a separate view) were wrong-headed. In short, by seeing how these views form part of a global deflationary package, we can also more readily see why they are more defensible than they have often seemed when examined in isolation.

2 Semantic deflationism

The most venerable form of deflationism is deflationism about truth. A deflationary understanding of truth may be traced back at least to Frege, who wrote:

> It is worthy of notice that the sentence 'I smell the scent of violets' has the same content as the sentence 'it is true that I smell the scent of violets'. So it seems, then, that nothing is added to my thought by my ascribing to it the property of truth. (1956: 293; compare Stoljar and Damnjanovic 2012)

While there are many versions of deflationism about truth,[5] the basic idea is that the meaning of 'true' is captured in the trivial equivalence schema (using angle brackets to mark propositions and their constituents): "<p> is true iff p" (Horwich 1998:103)— and by the view that any further investigation hoping to discover the nature of truth would be out of place. The function of the truth predicate, on Paul Horwich's version of the deflationary view, is simply to serve as a device of generalization, enabling us to say, for example, 'Everything that Sally says is true', without restating and reaffirming each thing Sally has said. But this is a function that can be perfectly well fulfilled by the concept of truth expressed in the trivial equivalence schema. For if we have

mastered the rule expressed in the equivalence schema, then we are able to use the (p.188) concept of truth as a device of generalization. According to the deflationary position, there is no more to be said about the nature of truth, no deeper and more substantial theory to be uncovered, so attempts to look for one (in a correspondence, coherence, verificationist, or other theory of truth) are one and all misguided.

As Horwich has argued, deflationism about truth goes naturally and inextricably with a deflationary approach to other semantic notions, specifically:

> The deflationary conceptions of *truth, being true of*, and *reference* go hand in hand with one another. These notions are inter-definable, so any substantive analysis of one would imply substantive analyses of the others. And any argument for deflationism with respect to one of the notions … will be convertible into an argument for deflationism about the other notions too. (2004: 74)

Perhaps the easiest way to see this is to see the concepts <refers to> and <true of> as linked to the concept of truth as follows. Using angle brackets to mark propositions and their constituents (singular and general concepts), we can say:

> <n is P> is true iff <n> refers to n and <P> is true of n

This triviality shows that the concepts <refers to> and <true of> maybe introduced by way of the concept of truth: if someone only had the concept of truth, we could introduce them to the concepts of reference and true-of in this way. (Tough we needn't be committed to seeing one direction as prior to the other; perhaps if someone possessed the concepts of true-of and of reference, one could introduce them to the concept of truth in this way.)

Given these trivial conceptual connections between the concepts of truth and reference,[6] a substantive analysis of reference is appropriate only if it is also appropriate for truth —making it clear that forms of deflationism about these semantic notions go together. But how exactly should we understand deflationism about reference?

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The basic idea behind deflationism about reference is that the meaning of'reference' for singular terms is captured roughly in the platitude that a singular term x referring to y is "a matter of x being *the singular term* '*n*' (in quotes) and y being the *thing n* (out of quotes)" (Horwich 1998: 115)—or, for singular concepts, a matter of x being <n> and y being the thing n.[7] On the deflationary view of reference, such trivialities as that 'Aristotle' refers to Aristotle, Horwich argues, are "not merely the start of the story [about the reference of singular terms] but the whole story" (1998: 118). We should expect no informative and substantive theory of what the reference relation consists in (whether causal, descriptive, teleological, etc.). Understanding reference is not a matter of our accepting anything of the form 'tokens of *n* refer to x iff *n* (p.189) bears R to x', where 'R' names a substantive relation thought to 'explain' why our term refers to what it does (Horwich 1998:120). (The * notation marks that the term is to be individuated by its meaning, enabling us to put aside worries about ambiguous singular terms (Horwich 1998: 118).) Instead, grasping the concept of reference (as applied to non-context-sensitive singular terms in our home language) is roughly a matter of grasping the trivial schema:

For singular terms (individuated by meaning):

$(\forall x)$(tokens of *n* refer to x iffn = x) (Horwich 1998:119)

If we work with singular concepts instead of singular terms, we can say:

$(\forall x)$(<n> refers to x iff n = x)

As a result, all across-the-board theories purporting to give a substantive analysis of what the reference relation consists in (whether they are causal theories, teleological theories, or whatever) are to be rejected, although they may leave us with insights about how terms of certain particular kinds work.[8]

Just as a deflationary theory of truth denies that there is any deep and substantive answer to the question of what the property of truth consists in, and deflationism about reference denies that there is any substantive answer to the question

what the reference relation consists in, deflationism about meaning denies that there is any special (non-semantic) property of *meaning F* to uncover the nature of, enabling us to say in general what meaning F consists in.

Deflationism about truth opens up the way for deflationism about meaning. For the standard idea that the meaning of a predicate determines its extension (or what it is true-of) follows trivially from the equivalence schema for truth. More precisely, the following meaning-to-truth conditional is trivial for general predicates x:

> x means <dog> → x is true of all and only dogs (Horwich 1998:110)

Or, put more formally, for monadic predicates:

> x means <F> → (∀y)(x is true of y iff Fy)[9]

Since this is a trivial consequence of the equivalence schema, in giving a theory of meaning we then are not constrained to look for some substantive relationship hooking up a term to those things in the world it is true-of: we need not answer the question—*in virtue of what* is the term 'dog' about dogs?—and seek some substantive relation (of causal connection, function, etc.) to explain this. It is instead seen as a triviality. As a result, by adopting deflationism about truth we are also ultimately freed from the demand to offer a substantive general analysis of what relation in general (p.190) holds between a term and those things it is true of: we need not say what meaning in general consists in. Instead, it maybe that:

> 'x means DOG'; consists in something or other, 'x means ELECTRON' consists in something else … and so on—but that there is no general account of the structure 'x means F'. We might call such a view of meaning, 'deflationary', both because it is *parallel to*, and because it is *justified by*, the deflationary view of truth. (Horwich 1998:113).

On this view, we have no reason to expect that there will be something more substantive to be said about *the* property of x meaning F (beyond what is expressed in the trivial schema);

that it may be subjected to some sort of reductive analysis. Thus on this model all theories of meaning that would reduce meaning to some other more substantive property—such as being causally connected to the right (sort of) object, having evolved to fulfill a particular indicating function, being associated with a certain mental picture, etc.—are to be rejected, and we have instead a deflationary view of meaning (Horwich 2004: 52–3).

One theory of meaning compatible with deflationism about meaning is a use theory.[10] Use theories of meaning of course take many different forms, traced back to Wittgenstein and Sellars, and reappearing in the form of different versions of inferential role semantics. On a use theory of meaning, the meaning of a term is said to be constituted by[11] its basic use-regularity that explains the acceptance of sentences containing the word (on naturalistic versions, e.g. Horwich 1998:45–7) or (on normativist versions) by *rules or norms* governing its use.[12] For what follows here, not much hinges on the differences among these views.[13] For simplicity (and consistency with my prior work), I will speak below of 'rules' rather than 'regularities' of use.

(p.191) One must take care in describing exactly the sense in which a use theory of meaning is and is not deflationary. For we do have views about what sort of thing constitutes different meaning properties in different cases, and we also allow that it may take some serious investigation to figure out, in particular cases, exactly what the relevant rules of use for a given term are. But it is deflationary in the sense that we give up the search for any *uniform* theory specifying some kind of relation that *always holds between a term and what it means* (e.g. that x means <F> iff any appropriate tokenings of x would be caused by something if and only if that thing is an F; or that x means <F> iff the function of x is to indicate the presence of Fs, etc.) (Horwich 2004:111–12). On the use theory the meaning-constituting propertymaybe quite different in different cases: for example, color terms, mentalistic predicates, and number terms may operate very differently (Horwich 2005: 20), and all of these maybe quite different from those for natural kind terms such as 'wolf', or logical

connectives such as 'and' (Horwich 2004: 45)—and they needn't constitute a relation between the term and what it means. The deflationist is clear that we may end up with a different story in different cases about how the term works: a pluralist view that does not identify meaning in general with some particular other property or relation between a word and what it means, but that does allow that we may identify differing particular rules as constituting the meanings of different words.

3 Existence deflationism

Deflationism about existence takes of from a very similar observation to that which inspires deflationism about truth. Just as Frege observed that apparent ascriptions of truth add nothing to the content of a thought, so Hume noted that existence "makes no addition" to the idea of any object—to think of an existing cow adds nothing to thinking of a cow. Instead, Hume held, existence is "the very same with the idea of what we conceive to be existent" (1739/1985: 500–6, Bk 1, Part II, § vi, para. 55). Kant, following Hume, denied that 'exists' is a predicate. Ayer, too, expressing the view common to the Vienna Circle, denied that when we say that something exists we even attempt to ascribe an attribute to that thing (1936/1952: 43). So there is a robust philosophical history of thinking that grammar may mislead us into thinking that 'exists' describes a property or activity of objects.

But unlike semantic deflationism, which Simon Blackburn calls "an increasingly popular, almost orthodox, position in the philosophy of truth" (2006: 249), deflationism about existence has become somewhat of a lost and forgotten position—despite its respectable historical roots. Debates about whether numbers, fictional (p.192) characters, properties, colors, and the like 'really' exist, are typically based on arguments that the purported entities are or are not causally potent, mind-independent, etc.—presupposing that existence has a substantive nature tied to possessing some such feature. Other contemporary metaphysicians take the common neo-Quinean approach of arguing that we should accept/deny the existence of the purported entities since we do/do not need to quantify over them in our best scientific theories—a view also

inconsistent with deflationism about existence, as I will discuss below.[14]

But debates conducted in this way are sustainable only if one rejects or ignores the possibility of a deflationary theory of existence. For deflationary views of existence reject the idea that 'exists' or 'existing' names (or even attempts to name) a property or activity of objects *the substantive nature of which we can investigate*.[15] On the deflationary view, existence is simply not a property or activity the deeper nature of which one could hope to uncover with a philosophical theory. As a result, all substantive theories of existence, whether they identify existing with having (distinctive) causal powers, being mind-independent, being physical, observable, or trackable, would alike be rejected as wrong-headed, much as the semantic deflationist rejects all of the diverse proposals about what the property of truth or the relation of reference really consists in. Instead, in each case, the deflationist may hold that across different cases in which a sentence is true or an object exists, there is no common substantive property (of truth or existing) the nature of which we can investigate (compare Stoljar and Damnjanovic 2012: § 5). But if there is no substantive property of existence to be discovered, then all arguments about whether or not entities of various kinds exist that are based on their having or lacking some such property such as causal relevance, mind-independence, physicality, etc. (thought of as an across-the-board requirement for existence) are brought into question.

Why has deflationism about existence become practically invisible, while semantic deflation has become near-orthodoxy? One might think that views about existence along these lines were killed off by a prominent criticism of early versions of the view, leaving deflationism about existence of the menu of options. Peter Geach summarizes the idea (traced back to Hume) that the concept of existence adds nothing to the idea of an object as follows:

> To be sure, people guilty of this confusion would say it is improper to speak of the concept of existence; for the assertion sign adds no concept, so their very confusion

makes them deny that the verb 'exists' or 'there is' adds a concept either. What 'there is an A' or 'an A exists' adds over and above the bare term 'an A' is not a concept, they say; rather, there is a transition from the (p.193) bare concept of an A to a judgment, and it is the act of judgment that mirrors existence.... (1965: 458)

The relevant judgment that occurs when we add 'existence' to the conception of some object, on Hume's view, was simply that we "join belief to the conception, and are persuaded of the truth of what we conceive" (1739/1985: Bk 1, § vii).

Geach goes on to attack the idea that 'existence' functions only to form a judgment or belief in the object as "hopelessly erroneous." For an existential proposition "may occur unasserted without change of content" (Geach 1965: 458), for example, in disjunctions (e.g. in 'either a Loch Ness monster exists or many observers have been unreliable') and in conditionals ('if canals on Mars exist then Mars is inhabited' (Geach 1965:459)). In those contexts, one may entertain existential propositions like 'the Loch Ness monster exists' and 'Martians exist' without believing in the monster or aliens, as the existential propositions appear in force-stripping contexts. Moreover, one cannot respond that the meaning of the existence claim differs in the embedded context from its meaning in the unembedded context, on pain of making simple modus ponens arguments invalid on grounds of equivocation. For the following argument is clearly valid:

(1) If Fiona is right, then the Loch Ness Monster exists
(2) Fiona is right
(3) Therefore the Loch Ness Monster exists

But if existence claims had a different meaning in embedded and unembedded contexts, then the above argument would be invalid on grounds of equivocation between (1) and (3). Thus Geach concludes that, contrary to the deflationary position, adding 'exists' does not serve (merely) to form a belief in the object. Moreover, he holds that adding the term 'exists' introduces a new concept into the proposition, whether the proposition is asserted or not (Geach 1965: 459).

To avoid the problem Geach identifies, one must be able to give an account of the meaning of 'exists' such that the meaning remains constant across changes in force, preserving the validity of simple inferences like that above. Do we have to give up on *any* deflationary approach to existence in order to meet these requirements? I will return to address that question in Section 7.5. First, it will be useful to see how similar worries have been addressed by semantic deflationists, as this will provide insight about how the worry may best be handled by deflationists about existence.

4 The Frege-Geach Problem and Semantic Deflationism

Deflationism about existence was of course not the only view attacked by Geach. For, developing what would become known as the 'Frege-Geach problem', Geach (p.194) conducts a sustained attack on *any* attempts to explicate the *meaning* of a term in terms of its contribution to the *force* of an utterance. (Much the same point is made by Searle 1969). Geach traces his criticism back to what he calls "The Frege Point": that a thought may have just the same content whether it is asserted or not, and a proposition may have a truth value independently of being asserted (1965: 449). Any thought or proposition maybe embedded in a force-stripping context, such as a conditional. Yet it has the same meaning regardless of whether it is in a conditional or in an unembedded context. Thus we cannot identify the meaning of an expression with its contribution to the force of utterances in which it appears. Geach famously uses this line of argument to attack not only the Humean view of existence, but a variety of other views including the view that negation simply functions to reject a statement; that 'good' functions to commend an action; and that to say 'it is true that P' is just to assert P. Thus the Frege-Geach point would appear to undermine a certain form of deflationism about truth just as much as it undermines (a certain form of) deflationism about existence.

How have contemporary deflationists about truth gotten around this problem, to retain their view in the face of this notorious objection? Ayer had proposed an early form of

deflationism about truth, treating 'It is true that...' simply as a 'mark of assertion' so that 'p is true' adds no content to 'p', but merely marks the force (of assertion): "To say that p is true is simply a way of asserting p" (Ayer 1936/1952:89). But this early form of the view, which is susceptible to the Frege-Geach objection, differs from contemporary deflationisms about truth (such as Horwich's) in two important respects. First, there is a difference in what each identifies as the function of the term 'true': while Ayer treated it as a force-marker (a mark of assertion), Horwich treats its function as serving as a device of generalization. Second, and more crucially for present purposes, contemporary deflationism about truth does not identify the meaning of the term with its contribution to force or with its function, but instead seeks a view of the meaning of a term that explains how it can fulfill its function.

But then what is the meaning of the truth predicate, according to contemporary deflationary views? As mentioned above, contemporary deflationism about truth is typically allied with a use theory of meaning, which enables the deflationist to give an account of the meaning of the truth predicate that neither equates it with its function or contribution to force, nor treats it as acquiring its meaning in virtue of a relation to some substantive property whose nature we can investigate.

We can now see that there is good reason for pairing the deflationary approach to truth with a use theory of meaning: for then we may treat the meaning of '... is true' as constituted by the core rule of use captured by the trivial equivalence schema: "<p> is true iff p" (Horwich 2004: 71–2). That rule of use remains regardless of whether 'it is true that...' appears in an embedded or unembedded context. In that way we can clearly meet the demand imposed by the Frege-Geach problem of specifying what the meaning of the disputed term is that may remain constant across changes of force (and preserve the validity of inferences using the term)—and yet do so without abandoning the core deflationary idea that there is no substantive property (p.195) of truth with a nature to be uncovered by scientific or philosophical investigation. We can also connect this to the original functional analysis by showing how a term governed by that rule of use enables it to fulfill its

function (of serving as a device of generalization). In short, adopting a use theory of meaning is useful to defending truth deflationism, as it enables us to retain the idea that 'truth' may be meaningful (and retain its meaning across changes in force) without thinking of it as representing some substantive *property of being true* that is referred to and of which we may seek a reductive account.

Might a similar approach rescue deflationism about existence from the grips of Geach's argument? It may, if we can identify a core rule of use for 'exists' that plays a central role in constituting the meaning of the concept, without requiring that 'exists' acquires its meaning by referring to some property of existing, the substantive nature of which may be investigated by metaphysicians. I will argue below that we can do just that, and indeed that the core rule of use for 'exists' is importantly connected to the core rule of use for 'refers' (and 'true of')—in such a way that popular forms of semantic deflationism turn out to entail the rather overlooked position of deflationism about existence.

5 How semantic deflationism leads to existence deflationism

Familiar forms of semantic deflationism lead to less familiar forms of metaphysical deflationism: deflationism about existence and deflationism about ontological debates themselves. For from a simple truth claim, we may trivially derive both singular and general existence claims, given only the equivalence schema for truth along with standard assumptions about how to state things in quantificational terms and about the relation between a quantified claim and an existence claim. For we may reason as follows:[16]

(1) <n is P> is true
(2) <n is P> is true iff n is P
(3) n is P
(4) n is P iff $\exists x\ ((n=x)\ \&\ Px)$
(5) $\exists x\ ((n=x)\ \&\ Px)$
(p.196) (6) $\exists x\ ((n=x)\ \&\ Px) \rightarrow \exists x\ (n=x)$
(7) $\exists x\ (n=x)$

(8) ∃x (n=x) iff n exists

(9) n exists

(10) ∃x ((n=x) & Px) → ∃x(Px)

(11) ∃x(Px)

(12) ∃x(Px) iff Ps exist

(13) Ps exist

Since we can always derive existence claims (singular and general) from truth claims, there is some substantive across-the-board criterion for existence only if the same is available for truth. But if (as the deflationist holds) there is no general substantive condition required for a proposition to be true, then we may derive different existence claims from the truth of diverse propositions—without any common condition holding, and so without any single substantive criterion for existence being fulfilled across all cases. So, since the deflationist about truth denies that there is any across-the-board condition for a proposition to be true, she is also led to deny that there is any across-the-board criterion for existence. The truth deflationist should thus also embrace deflationism about existence.

In neither case does this mean denying that it takes something of the world for a particular claim to be true, or for a thing (or things of a certain kind) to exist. What it does mean, however, is that we should expect no robust across-the-board criteria for truth or for existence in either case. Instead (for extensional first-order predicates), we can simply move from a true proposition to derive the relevant existence claim. So if we have a true proposition such as <the table is brown> we can move from there to infer that tables (and brown things) exist; from <five is odd> we can infer that the number five (and an odd thing) exists.[17] Given these entailments, the only way to doubt the existence claim is if one also doubts the truth of the original propositions (<the table is brown> or <five is odd>). The original propositions certainly seem true, however. It seems that doubts about their truth are only raised (except by the mathematically or perceptually incompetent) for *metaphysical* reasons: doubts, for example, about what the truthmakers for the relevant claims could be or whether we should countenance the alleged truthmakers (given that they

may not be causally (p.197) relevant, etc.) But those worries are out of place if we accept a deflationary theory of truth, which rejects across-the-board demands such as the requirement that truths have truthmakers.[18] On this deflationary view, we should thus give up the search for some 'criterion of existence' telling us what it is for something to exist, just as semantic deflationists give up the search for the nature of reference, meaning or truth.

Given the conceptual connections between reference and truth, it should come as no surprise that there are also conceptual connections between the notions of reference and existence—indeed these may be the more fundamental conceptual links.

For singular concepts, as we have seen, the deflationist holds that the notion of reference maybe roughly[19] captured in the following schema:

$\forall$x (<n> refers to x iff n = x)

If we are also willing to say that a general concept refers to whatever is in its extension, we can also offer the following schema for the reference of monadic predicates:

$\forall$x (<P> refers to x [or: has x in its extension] iff Px)

In addition to the relational notion of what a singular concept refers to, or what a general concept has in its extension, we also have and need a semantic notion of when a concept refers *at all* (or has anything in its extension), as opposed to when it fails to refer. For it is often crucial to be able to identify which concepts (singular or general) refer (or have an extension) and which fail to refer (or fail to have anything in their extension).

We may define the monadic notion of being a referring concept in terms of the relational notion of *referring* to as follows.[20] For singular concepts:

<n> refers iff $\exists$x (x = n)

And for general concepts:

<P> refers iff $\exists$x (Px)

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Clearly we should accept a deflationary understanding of the monadic notion of being a referring term if we are deflationists about the relational notion of referring to something (or having something in its extension). Given the common assumption of the interdefinability of the existential quantifier and 'existence' (as: $\exists x\ (x = n)$ iff n exists, and: $\exists x(Px)$ iff Ps exist) we can also get, via transitivity:

(p.198) E: <n> refers iff n exists

E*: <P> refers iff Ps exist

These should be taken as conceptual truths, giving a core rule of use for 'exists'. In fact, there is reason for thinking that this is the more fundamental conceptual link, from which the conceptual connections between the notions of existence and truth follow. For, as discussed above, it is a triviality that <n is P> is true iff <n> refers to n and <P> is true of n. But given E, if n doesn't exist we can infer that it's not the case that there is some n that <n> refers to, and so that it's not the case that <n is P> is true. Similarly, given E*, if Ps don't exist, we can infer that there is nothing <P> is true of and so again that it's not the case that <n is P> is true. We have reason to think that the conceptual connection between existence and reference is more fundamental than that between existence and truth, since we may derive the latter from the former, and also since the former takes the form of a nice tight biconditional rather than a long one-directional derivation.

So on this view the concepts of truth, reference, truth-of, and existence are all interlinked by trivial rules, and deflationisms about any of these notions stand or fall together.[21] This is not to claim that these are the *only* rules actually governing the term 'exists' (or the concept it expresses). But they do seem to be among the core rules constituting the meaning of the term, with E and E* perhaps being the most fundamental. In fact, they seem to be what we were looking for: core rules of use for 'exists' that help constitute its meaning, so that we can understand how 'exists' maybe meaningful without requiring that it acquire its meaning in virtue of a connection to some property of existing, the nature of which we may investigate.

6 The function of exists

The view developed above enables us to preserve the original insights of deflationism about existence: that 'exists' does not attempt to name a property or activity of objects the nature of which maybe investigated.[22] But it does not (with the earlier versions of existence deflationism criticized by Geach) fall into the mistake of confusing the meaning of 'exists' with its function or contribution to force. We may still want to give a functional analysis of the term 'exists' or the concept <exists>, but we needn't identify that function with the meaning. Instead (as with the concept of truth) we can show how a term that has a meaning constituted by these rules can fulfill its function.

(p.199) So what is the function of <exists>: why would we want to have such a concept or term? It may be better to begin by examining the function of claims that things of some kind do *not* exist. For positive existence claims are seldom used in ordinary English conversation, except to rebut claims of non-existence, and so the latter seem to play a more basic role. What then might the function of non-existence claims be? Typically, they are used to disabuse listeners of mistakes we think they are making, in expecting people to have been talking about (or drawing or …) something, when in fact they are making a mistake, telling a story, etc. So, for example, we might comfort a child by telling her that monsters don't exist—they are just talked about in stories and movies. Where existence claims are used, they are typically used with a 'doch' function, of rebutting a non-existence claim or insinuation; and in that case they may (as Hume had it) function to (re-)join 'belief to the conception.

But why do we need a concept of existence, if we have one of reference? One important use of the concept of (non)existence may be that it enables us to call attention to certain kinds of mistake, while remaining in the object language. For it is far more natural to most speakers to use the object language than to shift to a metalanguage in which we explicitly talk about whether certain concepts or terms refer.

If the rules of use for the terms 'true', 'refers', 'true of', and 'exists' are linked in the ways suggested above, then the term exists' so understood may ably perform the function of correcting mistaken assumptions about reference. For if we start from a general nonexistence claim such as 'monsters don't exist', we may infer that there is some problem with the use of the allied term or concept: for we may infer that it is not the case that there is something that is a monster, from which we may infer that it is not the case that there is something that <is a monster> is true of—and that the it would be a mistake to assume that <is a monster> functions as <is a grizzly bear> does. Similarly, from a singular nonexistence claim such as 'Santa Claus doesn't exist' we may infer that there is nothing that is identical with Santa, and so that the singular concept <Santa Claus> is defective, and doesn't work in the way indoctrinated children had supposed.[23] But in each case, the term 'exists' can ably fulfill its function of enabling us to make these kinds of mistake evident, while staying in the object language.

Yet here an objection may arise: since this analysis links the concept <exist> with the semantic concepts of <truth> and <reference>, it seems to follow that speakers may only have the concept of existence if they also possess these semantic concepts. This may (to some) seem implausible: <existence>, they might say, is surely the more basic concept, and one that could be possessed without possessing any semantic concepts such as <reference>.

(p.200) It may well be that most world-oriented concepts may be possessed prior to and independently of semantic concepts, but <existence> is an unusual concept. Presumably, for any concept <C> one can possess <C> only if one also possesses the concept of <not-C>; one possesses the concept of <red> for example only if one can not only apply it to red things, but also refuse it where things are not red. Often this can be taught ostensively, as we learn to correctly classify those things that are, and are not, red. But we can't acquire the concept of <not existing> ostensively, or learn to classify things into the categories of existent and not existent (since there is nothing to ostend or to place in the latter category). To understand denials of existence instead seems to require

having an idea of the difference between representation and reality, and understanding that words may be used (or pictures drawn or pretenses made) that aren't about anything (but are merely part of a made up story or are grounded in mistaken beliefs). But this does require having a rudimentary concept of reference: of the idea that our words (and other representations) may or may not be about anything (in the *de re* sense of aboutness). Of course one needn't possess an entire metalinguistic vocabulary to use and understand existence claims—indeed, I have suggested that part of their use is to enable us to call attention to certain kinds of mistake while remaining in the object language. Nonetheless, it does seem plausible that to understand a nonexistence claim (or an existence claim) one must have at least a rudimentary grasp of the difference between representations and reality, in order to understand the sort of mistake that maybe made in taking representations to be true when they are mistaken or intentionally fictional or pretending.

While I have given a suggestion about a function of the term 'exists', it is important to be clear that I am not identifying the meaning of the term with its function (or with what it is used to do, in simple claims of existence and nonexistence). Instead, on this view the meaning of 'exists' is constituted by the rules that link it conceptually to 'true' and 'refers'—rules that enable it to fulfill its function. In this way we can identify a meaning that remains constant across changes in force. Adopting a use theory of meaning enables us to give a clear and full response to the Frege-Geach problem, as we can identify a meaning of 'exists' that neither gives the meaning in terms of its contribution to force, nor identifies the meaning with some substantive (first-order) property referred to. In fact, we can even allow that 'exists' functions grammatically as a predicate, and that it does (as Geach insisted) introduce a new concept into the proposition—a concept constituted by the rules of use identified above.

Thus we can arrive at two important conclusions about existence deflationism. First, it follows from semantic deflationism, which has been far more familiar and popular. If we accept deflationism about truth it seems that we should accept deflationism about existence. Second, accepting

deflationism about existence is not a bad thing— for, once combined with a use theory of meaning, we can clearly avoid the Frege- Geach problem that, nearly 50 years ago, was thought to remove the approach from the menu of options.

(p.201) 7 Can we accept both semantic deflationism and existence defationism?

Other doubts maybe raised here, however, about whether we can coherently embrace *both* semantic deflationism and deflationism about existence. Considering the equivalence: Term 't' refers if t exists (the linguistic parallel to the conceptual '<t> refers iff t exists'), Alexis Burgess writes:

> [T]he deflationist about reference does not read this biconditional from right to left, so to speak, as reducing ontological facts to semantic facts. That reading might constitute a genuine deflation or demotion of ontology.... If anything, the deflationist reads the biconditional from left to right, as reducing semantics to ontology. The two readings are mutually incompatible. It is therefore far from obvious that we can coherently deflate semantics and metaphysics at once, much less that doing the former provides a way to do the latter. (2012: 621–2; see also Burgess forthcoming: § 2).

What I am arguing for, however, is a view that neither reduces ontological facts to semantic facts, nor vice versa. Instead, the idea is that these concepts—of reference and existence (and also of meaning, quantification, and truth)—are closely interlinked in a conceptual circle. We may choose to explicate one in terms of another for various purposes (e.g. depending on the background of our interlocutor), but the idea is that the concepts of truth, meaning, reference, quantification and existence are interdefinable in a small circle, and *none* maybe given a reductive, substantive definition.

Thus these concepts are in much the same situation as the concepts of necessity, synonymy, and analyticity are on the analysis Grice and Strawson (1956) offer in response Quine's arguments in "Two Dogmas." The right lesson to draw, they argue, is that those concepts form a 'family-circle', where each

maybe understood in terms of the others, though there may be no way to reductively define any of them in ways that reach outside the circle to provide necessary and sufficient conditions for their application specified in terms outside the circle (Grice and Strawson 1956:148). Such family circles of concepts, they suggest, are quite common (including moral concepts and semantic concepts), and the inability to give an explicit definition reaching outside the circle is no mark against their intelligibility. This, of course, is perfectly coherent with the deflationism developed here, where the idea is that none of these linked concepts (of truth, reference or existence) demand any sort of reductive definition reaching outside the circle of the form: <p> is true iff ... <n> refers to x iff ... or Ps exist if....

It may be fairly obvious that the semantic concepts are interlinked; the only surprise is that <exists> (and quantification) forms part of the same circle. But the idea here is that <exists> and <refers> are linked by simple moves of semantic descent and ascent, just as 'Snow is white' and'<Snow is white> is true' are, according to the truth deflationist. One might wish to say: but we do need a substantive theory of when and why snow is white; so similarly we need a substantive theory of existence! There is something right and something wrong in this move. Yes, if we say platypuses exist if (p.202) and only if <platypus> refers, we may go on to investigate whether or not platypuses exist, to offer a view about what it would take for platypuses to exist (e.g. for there to be creatures of a kind ostended by those who grounded the reference of the term?), or a robust explanation of why platypuses exist (given in terms of a history of how platypuses came to evolve and roam the rivers of Australia). We can do this even while still being deflationists about existence and reference, just as one may seek a robust explanation of why snow is white (given in terms of its reflectance properties) without giving up deflationism about truth. But to engage in this kind of investigation or explanation does not mean giving a robust theory of existence (or reference): of what it is for something (anything whatsoever) to exist (or for any concept to refer), any more

than explaining why snow is white involves us in giving a substantive and across-the-board theory of truth.

8 From existence deflationism to meta-ontological deflationism

Though the argument that takes us to a deflationary view of existence is trivial, the potential impact is great. For if we accept semantic deflationism and are thus led to be deflationists about existence as well, we should reject all theories about what it is to exist: for example, we should reject the popular Eleatic criterion that to exist is to possess (distinctive) causal powers and reject all arguments for and against various entities that are based on making use of that criterion (see also Thomasson 2008). We should equally reject all arguments for or against entities of various sorts based on their success or failure at meeting other supposed 'criteria of existence', such as observability or mind-independence. Moreover, we should even reject the dominant neo-Quinean approach to existence questions: that we should accept the existence only of those entities ineliminably quantified over in our best scientific theories. For some concepts, for example <hat>, apparently refer regardless of whether or not we quantify over hats in our best scientific theories.[24]

This also leaves us with a form of meta-ontological deflationism, holding that something is wrong with the vast majority of recent debates about what exists—for all of those based on the neo-Quinean methodology or on appeal to some substantive criterion of existence turn out to be wrong-headed. This is a radical conclusion indeed that (if the above is correct) follows from the widely familiar and accepted deflationism (p.203) about truth, given that deflationisms about these ontological and semantic notions go together.

Stepping back from the particular details of the argument, however, perhaps we should not be so surprised that accepting deflationism about truth ultimately undermines the prospects for ambitious metaphysics aimed at determining what 'really' exists. For, as Huw Price puts it "quietism about metaphysics needs to go hand in hand with quietism about semantics" (2011:14). For accepting semantic minimalism

undermines the representationalist picture of the relation between language and the world: the idea that all language has the function of representing the world, and that true statements 'match' features of the world (Price 2011: 3–4). The prevalence of the representationalist picture makes it seem that for any true statement 'P' we are entitled to ask what the truthmakers are for P—the facts in the world that explain what makes it true. Yet, as Price points out, "the representationalist conception of language is so deeply entrenched that it has been hard to see how directly it is challenged by semantic minimalism—hard to see what a radical thesis semantic minimalism is, in this sense" (2011: 242).[25] Semantic minimalism encourages us to give up the representationalist picture. For if the notion of truth is simply captured in the equivalence schema, then there is no pressure to look for what states of affairs correspond to our true claims, what facts make them true, or what objects they are about in order to explain what makes them true.

Once we give up that picture, it seems that semantic minimalism is radical in another sense: it also should lead us to give up much of traditional metaphysics. For without the representationalist view of language, the metaphysician's traditional questions, such as 'Are there distinctive objects or properties referred to by our (social, evaluative, mathematical) terms?' and 'What are the truthmakers for our (aesthetic, moral, mathematical) claims?' do not arise. Once we reject representationalism, we cannot even formulate robust metaphysical positions about what 'really' exists, what could serve as the truthmakers for our diverse claims, and so on, and are left with a sort of metaphysical quietism (Price 2011: 235–6).[26] The quietest approach may leave us uttering the same truths as the ordinary person does about what numbers, obligations, or beauties there are. But we do so without raising—or purporting to make any sense of—deep metaphysical questions about whether the relevant terms *really* refer, whether the statements have truthmakers, or whether the objects described *really* exist—where the 'really' is supposed to avert to some deep and substantive criteria (p.204) that might fail to be met, even when the standard

conditions for reference given by the rules of use for the terms are satisfied.[27]

The conceptual links elucidated above between deflationism about truth, reference, and existence simply provide one explicit route for seeing how semantic minimalism, fully understood, gives grounds for deflating a great many serious debates in ontology.

9 How existence deflationism and the use theory of meaning lead to easy ontology

If we accept a deflationary view of existence, how should we address questions about what sorts of thing exist, if not by determining whether some criterion of existence is met, or whether we ineliminably quantify over the questioned entities in our best scientific theories?[28] Given the relation between the rules of use for <exist> and <refers> we may do so via addressing questions about whether the relevant general concept refers (or has anything in its extension).

But how can we answer questions about whether a given general concept <P> refers?[29] Deflationism about reference itself merely justifies renouncing a demand for a general answer to questions such as 'what relation holds between a concept and the things it refers to?' or 'under what conditions does a concept refer?'. For a positive answer to how we may go about resolving the question of whether a particular concept refers, we would have to turn to a positive view about the conditions under which concepts of diverse sorts refer, but —given the defationism—not expecting any single unified answer.

On the use theory of meaning described above, a meaning is a concept constituted by its constitutive rule(s) of use—but the structure and content of these rules may vary. Among these rules for general predicative concepts are application conditions: rules that license the application of the concept on various grounds, entitling us to say that the concept refers. So, it may be a core rule of use for <red> that the concept maybe properly applied in observational conditions *like these*. It maybe a core rule of use for <squirrel> that it may be

properly applied to creatures with the same genetic structure as *those* creatures have.

In other cases, the rules of use may be quite different. So for example, it seems that concepts introduced to refer to abstract entities such as numbers or properties maybe introduced by way of rules that license us to introduce these new nominative (p.205) concepts by means of trivial inferences from uncontroversial propositions that made no use of those concepts (Schiffer 2003; and Hale and Wright 2001). For example, from <there are three cups on the table> we may introduce the concept of number and infer <the number of cups on the table is three>, and from <the notebook is blue> we may (given the rules that introduce the concept of property) infer <the property of blueness is possessed by the notebook>. But given our deflationary view of existence, from those truths involving the new nominative concepts of number and property, we are (generally) licensed to conclude that these concepts refer and that numbers and properties exist.[30]

An interesting upshot then is that, if we are deflationists about existence, and take the obvious route of combining this with the above sort of use theory of meaning (along with plausible assumptions about the rules of use for the concepts in question), then many of the most disputed existence questions may be answered quite straightforwardly. Some existence questions ('are there red things?') are answerable simply by observing the world and making use of our conceptual competence (to recognize observational conditions like these, and so conclude that the concept refers and that red things exist). Others—including many of those most hotly debated in metaphysics, about the existence of numbers, properties, propositions, events, and entities of many other sorts—may be answered by making use of our competence with the rules of use for the concepts in question, combined with our knowledge of uncontroversial truths. For, given conceptual mastery of the rules that introduce the concepts of numbers or properties, we may make trivial inferences from an uncontroversial truth that does not involve the concept in question (<there are three cups>, <the notebook is blue>) to conclude that the introduced concepts (<number>, <property>) refer and that there are entities of the disputed

sort (numbers, properties). These latter arguments follow the familiar pattern of easy ontological arguments, in holding that many existence questions may be answered by undertaking trivial inferences from an uncontested truth.[31]

In this way, existence deflationism, combined with a (particular form of a) use theory of meaning and a rather plausible view about the constitutive rules for certain concepts, leads to meta-ontological deflationism in a still broader sense than that identified earlier. For it suggests that something is wrong with many ontological debates— not just to the extent that many are based in either neo-Quinean methodology or the assumption that there is a substantive criterion of existence to draw on in defending (non-)existence claims—but rather precisely because we can answer those existence (p.206) questions by way of simple observations or via trivial inferences from uncontroversial truths (which, given the constitutive rules governing the concept, may guarantee that the concept refers and that things ofthat kind exist). This, however, makes answering these highly disputed existence questions so easy that serious metaphysical debates about these existence questions begin to look quite out of place.

10 Results for deflationism

Suppose that the foregoing is correct and that deflationary semantics does lead to deflationary metaphysics, in the form of a deflationary view of existence and a deflationary meta-ontology What follows from this? First, although (as noted at the outset) semantic deflationism has been far more popular than metaphysical deflationism, it becomes clear that it is not merely odd but inconsistent to accept the first without accepting the second.

But if we can't accept the first without the second, is that a good thing or a bad thing, from the point of view of the deflationist?

At first glance, it might seem like a bad thing from the point of view of defenders of deflationary semantic positions, for they are then saddled with the quite unpopular metaphysical forms of deflationism. But popularity is no sure guide to truth or

defensibility, and metaphysicians who fervently oppose anything smelling of deflationism may have vested interests at stake.

Seen with a view to defensibility rather than popularity, it may well be a good thing for theorists on both the semantic and metaphysical sides to see their views as parts of a total deflationary package—for the comprehensiveness of the view makes it more defensible against a variety of objections.

11 How deflationary metaphysics helps deflationary semantics

Seeing the connection between deflationary semantic and metaphysical accounts makes it easier to see how to defend semantic deflationism against some familiar objections. It makes it obvious, for example, that the truth-deflationist need not deny that there really are facts about what statements or propositions are and are not true. For if we combine it with the easy approach to ontology we can make use of trivial inferences in each case to move from <p> to <it is a fact that p>, to <there is a fact [namely that p]> and be thereby assured that there are facts, in the only sense that 'fact' has: a sense in part constituted by these inferences that license introduction of the term or concept.

But while we can then accept that there is a fact for each truth, this does not mean we are forced to accept the representationalist 'picture' theory according to which "contrary to minimalism, statements are *made true* by the existence of facts to which (p.207) they correspond" (Horwich 1998:105, emphasis added). For while there are such facts (the fact that p) for each truth (p), talk of facts is seen on this view as derivable by way of trivial inferences from p. Facts so understood cannot play a role in *explaining* p or the truth of <p>. To take facts (so understood) to explain what makes propositions true would be to fall prey to a dormitive virtue explanation. For just as we may move from saying that poppies make us sleepy to claim more pretentiously that poppies have the dormitive virtue (where this is taken merely as a fancier, nominalized way of making the original claim), so we may move from saying that <snow is white> is true to saying that

it is a fact that snow is white. But the fact that snow is white then cannot be invoked to *explain why* snow is white, or why <snow is white> or 'snow is white' is true.[32] Thus we can retain the intuition that there are facts of the relevant kinds, without falling back into a kind of picture theory according to which there are facts that explain what makes our propositions or statements true.

The ability of deflationary semantics, coupled with the deflationary easy approach to existence questions, to accept the existence of facts is also important given that one of the recurring objections raised against various forms of inferential role semantics is that there may (on that view) turn out to be no 'genuine facts' about the meanings of words, since there may be no such facts about conceptual or inferential role (see Horwich 2006: 45). But as Horwich points out "there is a perfectly legitimate *deflationary* sense of 'fact' in which 'p' is trivially equivalent to 'It is a fact that p'; and when we attribute a meaning we obviously suppose there to be a 'fact', in *that* sense, as to what is meant" (2006: 45).

Some have objected specifically to normativist versions of use theories of meaning on grounds that there may be particular worries about "whether it could be a purely factual matter whether a certain normative condition obtains" (Greenberg and Harman 2006: 319). But normative truths no less than truths of other kinds permit feeding into the relevant inferences that take us from 'p' to 'it is a fact that p'. Adopting a metaphysically deflationary view, on which we may easily infer the existence of the fact that p from a true statement 'p', is sufficient to deflect such worries. For given the deflationary sense in which the metaphysical deflationist understands the question 'Do the relevant facts (about meaning or normative conditions or whatever) obtain?', critics can no longer flat-footedly say that the normativist about meaning "denies the very existence of semantic facts involving reference and truth" (Forrai 2009: 213).

Others have objected to versions of deflationism about truth that (like Horwich's) presuppose that the truth predicate applies primarily to propositions, on grounds that "propositions are highly dubious entities" (Horwich 1998: 86).

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But again, once we adopt the easy approach to existence questions that falls out naturally from our deflationary semantic theories combined with a use theory of meaning, we can see (p.208) how to counter these doubts (and see why we need not worry about the appeal to propositions throughout this chapter). For suppose, as Schiffer (2003) argues, that we may be assured of the existence of propositions by the very rules of use that introduce proposition talk into our vocabulary, licensing us to infer from 'Mary believes that whales are mammals' to 'There is something that Mary believes' to 'There is a proposition (believed by Mary)'. In that case doubts about whether there 'really' are propositions (doubts often grounded in worries about their failing to be causally efficacious, physical, or in general failing to meet some presumed general criterion of existence) are misplaced and properly put aside.

Similarly, even the standard way of expressing the deflationary theory of truth or reference shows up differently once we pair it with a deflationary 'easy' approach to ontology. For it is sometimes presented as denying that there is a property of truth, or a relation of referring. Yet paired with the easy approach to ontology, we can easily make inferences from: 'p is true' to 'p has the property of being-true' to 'there is a property of being true'; and similarly from "t' refers to x' to 't stands in the relation of referring to x' to 'there is a relation of referring'. Seen in this light, the semantic deflationist's view should not be expressed as denying that there is a property of truth or a relation of reference—and that is a good thing. For, as Horwich says:

> That truth is a *property* almost goes without saying. We do, after all, distinguish two classes of statement: those that are true and those that aren't—so truth is what members of the first class have in common. (2004: 71)

But if the thoroughgoing deflationist comes to say that there is a property of truth or a relation of reference, how is the deflationary view after all to be distinguished from non-deflationary positions? I have alluded to this in my way of expressing the view already: the semantic deflationist need not (indeed should not) deny that there is a property of truth

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or a relation of reference. But she *does* deny that there is a deep and substantive 'nature' of the 'truth property' or 'relation of reference' to be uncovered by a philosophical theory, so that it makes sense to seek some reductive view of what truth or reference 'really' is. The feeling that there is such a theory to be found is based on mistakenly treating the property of truth on analogy with properties referred to in scientific theories—such as being magnetic or conductive, where such 'discoveries' of an underlying nature make sense. And this in turn may be based on an unwarranted functional monism, that assumes that all predicative terms serve the same role of identifying some uniform feature of the world that we may go on to investigate (rather than some serving very different functions, such as serving as a device of generalization). But the very fact that we can (truly) speak of there being a property or relation here does not entail that such reductive analyses make any sense; it merely reflects the trivial rule of use that entitles us to infer from the claim that x is P to conclude that x has the property of being P, and from the claim that x R y (where R is a two-place predicate) to conclude that x stands in relation R to y.

(p.209) 12 How deflationary semantics helps deflationary metaphysics

My central concern is more with defending deflationary metaphysical views than deflationary semantic views, however —in particular with defending the easy approach to ontology. So let us examine whether accepting deflationary semantic views may help avoid misunderstandings and difficulties thought to plague deflationary views in metaphysics.

I have already shown how a use theory of meaning may help us to formulate a deflationary approach to existence that clearly avoids the Frege-Geach problem, thus enabling us to offer a view of 'exists' that neither takes it to refer to a special property or activity of which we can seek a substantive theory nor falls into the error of mistaking force for meaning.

We can also gain substantial advantages for the deflationary 'easy' approach to ontology by explicitly combining it with a deflationary semantic view. For deflationary meta-ontological

views are quite commonly misunderstood. The easy ontologist typically accepts that there are disputed entities, such as numbers, properties, fictional characters, propositions, and the like, since we can infer the existence of these entities by way of trivial inferences (licensed by the introduction rules for the terms in question) from uncontroversial premises. Their opponents, however, often deny that the easy ontologist *really* holds (or is entitled to say) that the relevant entities exist. In the first instance, they are often held to not genuinely endorse the existence of numbers, properties, or propositions *because these entities are not posited as truth-makers* for our mathematical, descriptive, or semantic claims. The feeling commonly arises that although the easy ontologist may echo what the realist says (viz. that there are numbers, properties, or propositions, even that they are necessary entities, etc.), she is really holding something back—not genuinely endorsing a realist view of the questioned entities.

This point has been made most famously by David Lewis (2005), who argues that Simon Blackburn's quasi-realist view of the moral (though it is able to imitate all that the realist wants to say) is best understood as a form of fictionalism. For, Lewis argues, quasi-realism should be understood as implicitly prefacing all of the assertions that sound like realism (that there are moral facts, that these are objective, etc.) with a 'disowning preface' like the fictionalist's preface "according to the fiction…" (2005: 319). For Lewis reads Blackburn as taking the (traditional) moral realist to be making a mistake, namely thinking that "there are properties, perhaps non-natural properties, such that we can somehow detect them; and such that when we do detect them, that inevitably evokes in us pro- or con-attitudes toward the things that we have detected to have these properties" (Lewis 2005: 315–16). On Lewis's reading, since the quasi-realist will not endorse those elements of (what Lewis takes to be) genuine realism, all the realist-sounding things the quasi-realist says must be understood as in the context of a 'disowning preface' like the one used by fictionalists.

(p.210) But once we explicitly combine the easy approach to ontology with deflationary semantics, we can see where this

line of thought goes astray. The easy ontologist who asserts a simple realist view that there are moral facts, or properties, or propositions, etc. does not mean to say that these existence claims are true *only in some reduced, quasi-, or pretending sense*. Instead, she holds that these existence assertions are true in the only sense in which we can make sense of them (compare Blackburn 2005:325). (It seems then that '*quasi*-realism' is a misleading choice of name for the view, and that simple' realism—as contrasted with 'explanatory realism'—would be better.) The old-school Realist is mistaken not in asserting that there are moral facts, properties, propositions, etc., and that true existence claims maybe made about them. Instead, he is mistaken in the representationalist theory of truth that he attaches to the view: that for those claims to be really true, there would have to be discoverable entities that we could investigate and form a substantive philosophical theory about, and which would explain what makes the relevant claims true. Adopting a deflationism about truth enables us to make explicit that the easy ontologist can hold that our standard existence claims are perfectly true—true in the normal sense, in the only sense that has sense—not just 'true' in some reduced, held-back, or pretending sense.[33]

Explicitly combining meta-ontological deflationism with semantic deflationism also enables us to combat many of the standard criticisms raised against those who wield 'easy arguments' for the existence of entities of different kinds. One standard objection raised is that the inferences used to move from uncontroversial premises to reach conclusions that disputed entities exist leave "hostages to metaphysical fortune."[34] For, as it is often put, what guarantees that the world really has enough objects to make good on the promises of the trivial inferences? But again if we make explicit the connection to a use theory of meaning, we can see that such worries are misguided. The principles that underwrite the trivial inferences are not to be treated as hypotheses, or parts of a (quasi-scientific) theory, but rather conceptual truths reflecting the very meanings of the terms ('number', 'proposition', 'object', etc.) in question. Thus if the initial premise of the easy argument is true, given the rules of use that are constitutive of the meanings of the nouns for the

disputed entities, there simply *is no further meaningful question to be asked* about whether there 'really' are numbers, properties or propositions—or more generally about whether there 'really' are enough objects to serve as truthmakers for the ontological conclusions of these arguments.

(p.211) Thus once we make explicit that the deflationary meta-ontological approach is to be combined with deflationary semantic views, we can both avoid misunderstandings of it (e.g. thinking of it as allied with fictionalist views) and show its resilience in the face of standard objections. This should make meta-ontological deflationism more palatable, and less of a liability for those who began only intending to embrace semantic deflationism. No doubt the deflationary metaphysical views (about existence and ontology) will remain unpopular among ambitious metaphysicians who have a vested interest in retaining ontological debates in their current form and defending their sense. But that need not worry a more neutral observer.

13 Conclusion

The moral of the story is that, although discussions of these diverse forms of deflationism—about truth, reference, existence, and ontological debates—have been largely kept separate, these forms of deflationism go together. The familiar and relatively popular deflationism about truth entails a deflationism about reference and about existence, leading to the conclusion that ontological debates based on whether or not disputed entities satisfy some 'criterion of existence' are misguided. All three are best and most naturally paired with a use theory of meaning (the way for which is opened up by deflationism about truth). And if we do pair deflationism about existence with a use theory of meaning (combined with plausible views about the rules governing key terms), then that in turn entails a deeper form of meta-ontological deflationism, on which many disputed existence questions are so easy to answer that protracted debates about them are wrong-headed.

These deflationary views are most clearly seen as defensible when we see them as a package. For often one facet of the

total deflationary position enables us to see why standard criticisms of another are misguided, based on misunderstanding, or easily answered. Though deflationism about truth has been far more familiar and popular than forms of metaphysical deflationism, if what I have said is correct, this should not remain the case—those who embrace semantic deflationism must also embrace existence deflationism. And by evaluating these deflationary views as a package, we can better see the considerable strengths of the total deflationary picture.[35]

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Notes:

(1) Among other things, of course. For one may also be metaphysically deflationist about particular entities, such as properties, propositions, or numbers; or meta-metaphysically deflationist about some or all debates in metaphysics. I shall have more to say about all of these forms of deflationism below.

(2) This of course does not mean that the deflationist must reject formal or analytic analyses of the relevant concepts and their conceptual interrelations. Nor does the deflationist have to deny that there is a relevant property or relation (of truth, reference, or existence). For we may undertake trivial inferences to acquire reference to the relevant properties or relations—though these cannot serve an explanatory function and we would be misguided to think of ourselves as discovering the true natures of these properties (in the way that we might discover the nature of water). See Section 11.

(3) With a few important exceptions. Contemporary authors who defend something like a deflationary approach to existence questions include Hale (2010) and Price (2011). At least in its most recent forms, Blackburn's quasi-realism may also be seen as defending a deflationary approach to at least

some existence questions. Looking further back, Carnap may be thought to introduce a kind of deflationary approach to existence questions (see Carnap 1950; for interpretation along these lines, see Thomasson forthcoming, ch. 1).

(⁴) While I argue here that semantic deflationism leads to deflationism about existence, some may wonder whether the reverse entailment holds: whether deflationism about existence leads to semantic deflationism. I do not mean to take a stand on that here: it seems plausible that there maybe some forms of deflationism about existence that do not entail semantic deflationism. Nonetheless, I will argue in Section 11 that adopting semantic deflationism is the key to defending the form of existence deflationism I shall discuss here against central objections raised against it, so the deflationist about existence is well advised to pair her view with semantic deflationism. Meta-ontological deflationism, taken simply as the view that something is wrong with contemporary ontological debates, of course, may be held for many different reasons, and need not entail either semantic deflationism or deflationism about existence.

(⁵) Other deflationary approaches to truth include, among others, Dorothy Grover's prosententialist theory (1992), Frank Ramsey's redundancy theory (1927), P.F. Strawson's performative theory (1949), and Quine's disquotational theory (1970). I will not take a stand on which of these is right here, but for simplicity will work with Horwich's version of truth deflationism.

(⁶) For another account of the relations between our concept of singular reference and the concept of truth, see Burgess (forthcoming).

(⁷) That is, barring difficulties in accounting for our attribution of reference to foreign terms, and for context-sensitive terms. For discussion of these, see Horwich (1998: 119–20). The structure of the view, however, will be easier to see if we put those complications aside.

(⁸) See Field (1994), for example, for a deflationary conception of what Kripke achieved.

(^{9}) It is easy enough to see how the account could be generalized to handle n-adic predicates, but for simplicity I will stick with monadic predicates here.

(^{10}) As Horwich makes evident, deflationary theories of truth do not entail the use theory of meaning— this is just one theory of meaning consistent with deflationism. But truth deflationism does show to be mistaken one common reason given for rejecting use theories of meaning—thinking that we need to specify some non-semantic relation between a term and its extension (which specifying use properties cannot do) (Horwich 2004:113).

(^{11}) On still other versions, the use regularities are seen as *determining* the meaning rather than giving it—playing a metasemantic rather than semantic role. See Greenberg and Harman (2006). I will leave these differences to the side here.

(^{12}) Naturalist versions of use theories of meaning are defended, e.g. by Horwich (1998, 2005), Field (1977), and Harman (1999), among others. The most prominent defender of a normativist version is Robert Brandom (1994). (For discussion of the differences between normative and non-normative versions of inferential role semantics, see Greenberg 2005 and Whiting 2009.) Another important division lies in whether the theory identifies the meaning-constituting property with *all* regularities/norms of use, or only with a core subset. I prefer to make, and have made elsewhere (Thomasson 2007b), use of a normativist version of the approach, which identifies the meaning of an expression with core constitutive rules of use. Thus for consistency with my prior work, and simplicity here (avoiding long disjunctions) I will speak in those terms above, though I will not have space to argue for those choices here.

(^{13}) Here is some of what does hinge on it. Holding that some core subset of rules/regularities are constitutive enables one to preserve the idea that there are analytic/conceptual truths, which are essential to preserve the validity of the easy ontological inferences discussed below. It also enables one to better account for constancy of meaning across speakers and times. Adopting a normativist rather than naturalist version

enables one to better avoid objections such as Williamson's (2007) to the claim that there are analytic/conceptual truths. A normativist version is also better suited to avoid other prominent objections against a naturalist use theory of meaning such as Horwich's, including Schifer's (2000) objection that Horwich's acceptance properties cannot possibly account for meaning in a public language, since they have nothing to do with use in interpersonal communication. Public rules governing our linguistic interactions would seem to have a far better chance at accounting for the role of meaning in communication.

(¹⁴) I do not mean to take a stand on whether this is the right interpretation of Quine's actual view, only to say that this is how a so-called neo-Quinean methodology is commonly used in metaphysics. For doubts that neo-Quinean metaphysicians have correctly interpreted Quine, see Price (2009).

(¹⁵) This is not to deny that there may be a property in a deflationary sense of property (on which for any predicate P we may make inferences from a true sentence of the form 'Px' to 'x has the property of being P' to 'there is a property of being P (which x has)'). See Schifer (2003). The point is rather to deny that there is a property *the substantive nature of which one may investigate*. See Section 10.

(¹⁶) Subject to the usual restrictions, e.g. that the claim is atomic and < ... is P> is not an intensional predicate (e.g. 'is worshipped', 'is believed to be fun', 'is possible'...) or an existential claim (e.g. 'doesn't exist'). Propositions such as <Sherlock Holmes is a detective> on my view do not constitute counterexamples to (4), for on my view that proposition is not a literal truth (although <According to the story/pretence, Sherlock Holmes is a detective> is true). From 'Sherlock Holmes is a fictional character', on my view, we are licensed to make the inference to the existence of Holmes, the character (not the man). For details about how I handle claims about fictional and mythical characters, see Thomasson (1999) and update in Thomasson (2010).

(¹⁷) See Hale (2010: 406) for separate arguments that we may argue from there being certain true statements using singular

terms that purport to refer to entities of a given kind, to the existence of entities of that kind. As he puts it:

> [W]e can argue for the existence of entities of [a disputed] kind by arguing that there are true statements involving expressions of the relevant kind. If, for example, there are true statements incorporating expressions functioning as singular terms, then there are objects of some corresponding kind. If the singular terms are such that, if they have reference at all, they refer to numbers, there are numbers (Hale 2010: 406).

([18]) See Horwich (2010: 299–322) for deflationary criticisms of truthmaker theory.

([19]) Again, putting aside difficulties in accounting for our attribution of reference to foreign terms, and for context-sensitive terms. For discussion of how to accommodate those, see Horwich (1998:119–20).

([20]) Of course for this equivalence to hold we must assume a plenitude of concepts, existing necessarily. I will not have space to defend this assumption here, only to suggest that it may be made good on not merely through a kind of heavy-duty Platonism about concepts, but alternatively through a pleonastic approach to concepts coherent with the deflationism advocated here. The equivalence clearly would not hold if we treated concepts as contingent mental entities; that is not the conception of concepts employed here.

([21]) For doubts about combining deflationism about existence and reference, however, see Burgess (forthcoming). I discuss one such doubt—about whether we can embrace both ontological and semantic defationism—later, in Section 7.

([22]) Nonetheless, as mentioned above, we may allow that it names a property in a non-explanatory sense, as we may derive property talk by hypostatization from a true predicative statement.

([23]) Of course this is not to deny that, in some contexts—where no mistake is being made—names in fiction and myth may

refer to fictional and mythical characters (abstract artifacts—not people). See Thomasson (2010) for fuller discussion of existence and nonexistence claims using fictional names.

(²⁴) One might try to retain the neo-Quinean view by also denying that a concept *refers* unless the things allegedly referred to must be quantified over in our best scientific theories—and thus also denying that <hat> refers. But that imports a treatment of reference at odds with the deflationary/pluralist position on which whether a concept refers is determined by its particular rules of use, which may vary for concepts of different types. As long as we acknowledge that pluralism, it will seem out of place to require as a condition of reference *for all concepts whatsoever* that their alleged referents be quantified over in our best scientific theories—though this may be a relevant condition for certain scientific concepts.

(²⁵) Alexis Burgess argues against this idea (2012: 621), in part on grounds of doubts about whether one can coherently embrace both semantic and existence deflationism. For a response, see Section 7 above.

(²⁶) This quietist position is in a sense the contemporary heir to the kind of anti-metaphysical stance proposed by Carnap (1950), who (with other members of the Vienna Circle) rejected both traditional forms of realism and anti-realism about numbers, the external world, etc. as lacking sense. For discussion of his view, why it does not rely on verificationism, and how it relates to the contemporary options, see Thomasson (forthcoming, ch. 1).

(²⁷) In this respect it is much like Blackburn's (1993) quasi-realism about the moral and modal, though I think that the 'quasi' here is misleading. See Section 12.

(²⁸) Here I will just address general existence questions, as those are normally what are at issue in ontological debates. I have discussed singular existence questions elsewhere (Thomasson 2010).

(²⁹) I have argued elsewhere that a term refers if the application conditions actually associated with it are fulfilled,

see Thomasson (forthcoming). But here I will stick with speaking of concepts rather than terms, to avoid a long detour discussing the nature of application conditions (but see Thomasson (forthcoming: ch. 2) for details and discussion of how these two ways of expressing the position are related).

(30) Although notoriously some inferences from <x is P> to <x has the property of being P> may lead to contradiction (e.g. where P is the property of being a property that doesn't instantiate itself). For discussion of how to handle this and the general 'bad company' problem, see Schiffer (2003: 67–70 and my forthcoming: ch. 8).

(31) An easy approach to ontological questions like this one is applied to different issues by Hale and Wright (2001, 2009) for the case of numbers; by Schiffer (2003) for propositions, events, properties, states, and the like; and by myself (2007) for ordinary objects. For general discussion, see Thomasson (forthcoming).

(32) Although we can, as mentioned above, give a scientific explanation of why snow is white, e.g. in terms of its reflectance properties—but this is not an explanation of the metaphysical form: <snow is white> is true because there is a fact that snow is white. The latter is only a pseudo-explanation.

(33) This move, however, does not oblige us to accept that claims like 'Santa Claus exists' are true: here the relevant claims *can* be seen as merely fictional or pretenseful. For discussion of this point and further discussion of the differences between deflationism and fictionalism, and why deflationism is a better option for our discourse about numbers, properties and the like (though not about fictional or mythical beings), see Thomasson (2014).

(34) As Hale and Wright (2009: 201–8) put it in responding to this line of objection. See also Thomasson (2009) for discussion of this line of objection.

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