

Truth and the Relevance of Practice

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Abstract Starting from the assumption according to which the philosophical reflection developed in the last century showed that the plausible interpretations of truth are very few, this article attempts to see whether it is possible to narrow down these interpretations even further. To this purpose the pragmatist criterion is applied, according to which *What has weight in our lives should have weight also in philosophy*. This criterion would appear to isolate alethic deflationism, on the one hand, and the interpretations of truth which can be traced back to deflationism, on the other. Accordingly, Horwich’s and Rorty’s deflationist stances are evaluated, and the interpretation of truth put forward by Putnam in his later work – which, even if not deflationist, comes very close to deflationism – is then compared with them. The key idea of the article is to verify whether these conceptions offer an acceptable picture of the relation between language and the world. In this respect the doubt is raised that alethic deflationism is enmeshed in a circle of language, despite the explicit claims of its subscribers to the contrary. Having highlighted what will be called the *physiognomy* of truth – the one it acquires by taking part in a coalescence of other concepts – and claimed that it is something our practice presupposes, the article shows how Putnam manages (and deflationists fail) to do justice to it.

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1. Narrowing down the field via abstract philosophical reflection

The so-called ‘pragmatist criterion’ – a fundamental tenet of pragmatism old and new – is a very useful means in the endeavour to understand what the concept of truth actually is. Here is a formulation of the criterion in Richard Rorty’s terms: «If something makes no difference to practice, it should make no difference to philosophy» (RORTY 1995: 19), and another in Hilary Putnam’s terms: «What has weight in our lives should have weight also in philosophy» (PUTNAM 1999: 70). Both claims are to the effect that the starting point of philosophical reflection – or its *measure*, whatever the point (starting or not) – is what we speakers and agents say and do in the course of the multifarious activity in which we are daily engaged. And – as hardly needs to be stressed – we do employ the concept of truth in our ordinary practice. Even Rorty, who undoubtedly is one of the fiercest critics of truth as it is traditionally conceived, at the very beginning of the *Introduction* to his *Philosophical*

Papers, Vol. 3, acknowledges that “nobody does say ‘There is no truth’”. Thus, notwithstanding the fact that he categorically denies the existence of anything resembling Truth with a capital T, something absolute and detached from our practices of justification, he retains the ‘idea’ of truth as something having a role in our linguistic and non-linguistic practice. (Whether his account does full justice to this role will be evaluated below.)

Now, as far as the topic addressed in this paper is concerned, the usefulness of the fundamental pragmatist criterion resides in the fact that it helps us to discard some interpretations of the concept of truth among the many put forward in the field from the very beginning of the history of philosophy. The pragmatist criterion is not the only means to this end, though. In some cases, abstract philosophical reflection suffices to ban some conceptions of truth from the list of the plausible ones.

Think for instance of the well-known interpretation of truth as correspondence between a belief, a statement, a sentence or whatever, *and* the piece of the world the belief, statement, or sentence is about. This is an interpretation often conjoined with a definite metaphysical position – the one it has nowadays become customary to call ‘metaphysical realism’¹. According to the latter, the world is a fixed set of objects and their properties existing quite independently of the human cognitive activity. The picture of reality that metaphysical realism gives us shows two great separate blocks – on the one hand, a fixed world, and, on the other, the human mind that tries to concoct an account of the world by striving to stretch its cognitive faculties towards the world itself. A successful effort at knowledge is then describable as a “correspondence” between a given belief and the piece of the world the belief is about. This same correspondence can thus be taken as what explains the belief to be true.

But – as I was saying – it is just abstract philosophical reflection that can show us how weak a metaphysical position of this kind can be – one of these weaknesses being that of paving the way for scepticism. The split between the mind and the world is so clear-cut that it is literally impossible for us to envisage a correspondence of that kind – it might only be envisaged by a God’s Eye View, as it is by now common to say, or a View from Nowhere, or an Archimedean Point. Commenting on the implausibility of this utterly “non-human” conception of truth and reality, Rorty remarked that «we will always be held captive by some picture or other, for this is merely to say we shall never escape from language or from metaphor – never see either God or the Intrinsic Nature of Reality face to face»² (RORTY 1994a: 80).

With this remark Rorty did nothing but record a platitude about the human condition, the same Putnam has recorded with the following words:

elements of what we call “language” or “mind” penetrate so deeply into what we call “reality” that the very project of representing ourselves as being “mappers” of something “language-independent” is fatally compromised from

¹ A correspondentist interpretation of truth can be placed in an anti-realist setting as well, allowing us for instance to make claims along Peircean lines like “a sentence is true if it corresponds to a fact stated at the ideal limit of inquiry”. However, on the one hand, I doubt this would be an interesting interpretation and, on the other, «one can nevertheless acknowledge that advocacy of a correspondence theory of truth comes much more naturally when combined with a metaphysically realist stance and usually signals commitment to such a stance» (DAVID 2016, very end of the entry).

² Cf. also: «There is no way, as Wittgenstein has said, to come between language and its object, to divide the giraffe in itself from our ways of talking about giraffes» (RORTY 1999: XXVII).

the very start. [...] Realism [with capital “R”] is an impossible attempt to view the world from Nowhere (PUTNAM 1990b: 28).

Of course, the claim that there is no sense in putting forward philosophical programmes and visions whose understanding would need capacities which go far beyond what we are actually able to do – intellectually and practically – has a pragmatist flavour, but one need not embrace pragmatism in order to see the scant plausibility inherent in the idea of the existence of a metaphysical relation of correspondence giving substance to the truth of any belief or statement, irrespective of their content³. For one thing, the conviction according to which we humans do not have the possibility of comparing our conceptual frameworks with an unconceptualized reality has been widely accepted at least from Kant onwards, for another, the effort at giving a correspondence-based explanation of the truth of sentences pertaining to the moral, mathematical, aesthetic realms smacks of failure from the very outset.

The latter has been called *the scope problem* – a problem which troubles also other theories of truth conceived as *pas-se-partout theories*. By ‘pas-se-partout theories’ I mean those interpretations of the concept of truth which give an explanation of the truth or falsity of a belief or statement independently of the area of discourse the belief or statement belong to – interpretations that take “true” as expressing a fixed property applicable across the board. Typically, the explanations of the truth or falsity of beliefs and statements we find in the history of Western philosophy are pas-se-partout theories. If truth is to reveal the presence of a correspondence between a belief and a piece of reality, and falsity the absence of such a correspondence, or if truth is to reveal the presence of a logical relation of coherence among beliefs in a certain web, and falsity the absence of such a coherence, then this must be so in the case of *every* belief – be the belief about the physical world, the world of morality, the aesthetical world, the world studied by the law, or any other sector of reality. Again, a small bit of abstract philosophical reflection is sufficient to persuade us that what works in one sector might not work in another, and vice versa⁴.

This is the basic reason that in the last decades motivated the so-called *alethic pluralism* – the thesis according to which there is more than one property of truth denoted by the truth-predicate (or just one property of truth realized by different properties of the bearers of truth)⁵, so that we can appeal to this or that property in order to account for the truth or falsity of a truth-bearer, depending on the case at hand. The specific content of a truth-bearer is in other words of the utmost importance in evaluating its truth-value. I think that focusing attention on the plurality of domains a belief or statement can be about, and the plurality of circumstances in which a given statement may be uttered, is one of the greatest merits of alethic pluralism, a merit that cannot but leave an indelible trace in the

³ This applies also to the versions of correspondence not linked to metaphysical realism.

⁴ The scope problem may be less serious for coherence than for other theories of truth (I thank an anonymous referee for stressing this to me), yet nevertheless coherence theories arguably fail to be a promising choice when some sentences about physical reality are at stake – the sentences whose truth-value requires above all else a reference to the world to be correctly evaluated.

⁵ This is roughly the difference between the alethic pluralism subscribed by Crispin Wright (1992) and that subscribed by Michael P. Lynch, respectively.

analysis of truth – anyone who is nowadays willing to carry on the philosophical analysis of truth cannot but take in due care this kind of pluralism. However, it seems to me that in granting validity to the traditional accounts of truth, even if in their respective domains – e.g., the correspondence account – alethic pluralism inherits some of the flaws of those accounts, together with the metaphysical worries those accounts may raise⁶. A careful analysis of alethic pluralism goes beyond the limits of this article, though.

On the whole, I think we can take advantage of the chief outcomes gained in the last centuries by sheer philosophical scrutiny, and recognise that there are very few interpretations of the concept of truth that remain in the field and are worthy of attention. It is for the purpose of narrowing down the field even further that the pragmatist criterion may come in useful. Thanks to its reference to practice, and given that our practice does not have an intrinsic philosophical character – let alone a ‘metaphysical’ character – all the *high-temperature-metaphysical* interpretations of truth can be dropped by default⁷. So, which are the contenders remaining in the field?

2. Following the pragmatist criterion

I would say that the contenders are the deflationary conception of truth, on the one hand, and all the positions which can be related in one way or another to alethic deflationism, on the other. Among the latter positions, I am just going to talk about Hilary Putnam’s conception of truth.

A bit of clarification before going on. When I say ‘deflationary conception of truth’ I am aware that deflationism is a constellation of different positions, that sometimes these involve theses which show a certain amount of friction between them, and that therefore every deflationary position should be analysed for its own sake. However, what I am interested in here is the core tenet of deflationism, i.e. the conviction according to which truth has no nature, and that the so-called T-biconditionals are all we need to grasp the concept. It is this conviction that I am going to compare with Putnam’s stance.

I am also well aware that taking alethic deflationism as one of the few options remaining in the field (if not the only one) can come as a shock to most of the people dealing with the intricacies of the concept of truth in general, and with the elements of any deflationary theory in particular. Moreover, I do know that deflationism is still facing a battery of formidable objections. But what I would like to maintain is that, its possible flaws apart, deflationism constitutes a promising program for answering the age-old question ‘What is truth?’, and therefore it is worth checking whether it meets the pragmatist criterion according to which what has weight in our practice should have weight also in philosophy.

A final word to clarify what I mean by ‘practice’. Practice is here the thinking and doing we show daily on the many levels we happen to find ourselves, both on an ordinary and an extraordinary level – the level of common interaction with fellow speakers as well as the level of professional relationships, the levels where formal

⁶ This applies, in general, to alethic pluralism as far as it seeks to explain what the *nature* of truth is, and, in particular, to the correspondentist explanation, as far as it is not metaphysically deflated (but then, if deflated, the question arises as to what constitutes the difference between this explanation and alethic deflationism).

⁷ This is the case of all the versions of the correspondence theory of truth, as far as they bottom the correspondence on a *metaphysical* relation between language and the world.

rules of behaviour are in place and the levels of more relaxed conduct, and so on. It is the thoughts and deeds of our quotidian existence that reveal the substance of what are our implicit presuppositions and intuitions on the countless theoretical and practical questions our life confronts us with. As to the question of truth, I think that the “platitudes” Crispin Wright speaks about can be taken as an important part of our ordinary – and often implicit – hunches and gut feelings regarding when, how and in which sense a statement is true or false. Here is a list of some of these platitudes:

- a) Any attitude to a statement is an attitude to its truth.
- b) Some truths may never be known, and some may be unknowable in principle.
- c) For a statement to be true is for it to accurately reflect how matters stand.
- d) A statement may be true without being justified, and vice versa.
- e) Truth is stable: whatever may be truly asserted may be truly asserted at any time⁸.

Note that these platitudes are not philosophical – if to be ‘philosophical’ requires being the result of a certain amount of explicit reflection and deep scrutiny – but can represent the tiny implicit core of a full-scale philosophical stance⁹. Wright himself does not think they are to be accepted a priori, but should be subject to philosophical analysis¹⁰.

So, having said that, let us see what alethic deflationism amounts to, and if it satisfies the pragmatist criterion.

3. Paul Horwich’s version of deflationism

According to Paul Horwich – a philosopher who has the great merit of having revived interest in alethic deflationism in the last decades – in order to understand what truth comes to we should just focus on the infinite instances of the so-called equivalence schema for propositions, $\langle p \rangle$ is true if, and only if, p – where $\langle p \rangle$ is a (non-paradoxical) proposition. The infinite list of these instances is what Horwich calls the *minimal theory*. His actual conception of truth is what he terms *minimalism*, and is made up of just two theses – the *exhaustive thesis* and the *explanatory thesis*, as we may call them. According to the former, the minimal theory represents all there is to say about truth, whereas, according to the latter, the minimal theory allows us to explain all the facts regarding truth. From the two theses stems a sort of *purity* of truth, this purity residing in the fact that we are able to understand what truth is without resorting to other concepts. Here is what Horwich says:

One may or may not propose an account which inextricably links truth with other matters: for example, assertion, verification, reference, meaning, success, or logical entailment. Minimalism involves the contention that truth has a

⁸ Cf. WRIGHT 2001: 760.

⁹ Likewise, common sense is not philosophical *per se* (nobody, to say the least, uses the term “external” speaking of the world in everyday discourse), but can be (and sometimes is) the basis for a metaphysical stance (commonsense realism). As a matter of fact, that common sense is inherently realistic is a widespread philosophical opinion.

¹⁰ Wright states: «I don’t think I ever thought that one should start with *incontestable* platitudinous a priori first principles – there is going to be some discussion of what goes into the list; there needs to be a process of ordinary philosophical critical reflection» (WRIGHT 2013: 129).

certain *purity* – that our understanding of it is fairly independent of other ideas (HORWICH 1998: 11).

Now, it seems to me that our practice is far from showing that «our understanding of [truth] is fairly independent of other ideas», and therefore it is far from showing that truth possesses that Horwichian purity. I am rather inclined to say that we manage to obtain an understanding of what truth amounts to thanks to the conceptual connections we find it involved in. Concepts such as those of meaning, world, assertion, and belief help us to elucidate the concept of truth. This is so because these concepts form a sort of *coalescence*, in the sense that they merge into one another, and every item in the coalescence depends on the others in that it acquires a nature in virtue of its being involved in the coalescence itself. (I will return to this point below.)

I think then that we do not use the predicate ‘is true’ in the *pure* way Horwich maintains. Moreover, it seems to me that the ‘equivalence schema’ does not represent *per se* a piece of the everyday practice we are immersed in. Marian David deployed a battery of serious qualms about the instances of the equivalence schema, stressing among other things how people do not actually use T-equivalences in their usual activity of language-users¹¹. And I agree. Nobody – no butcher, no bartender, no florist – says “<This rose is red> is true if, and only if, this rose is red”, unless she is attending a course in philosophy or reading the relevant texts. At the most, we may say that equivalences of this kind are implicitly presupposed in some verbal interchanges, and may be brought to explicit form for explanatory purposes. Granted, truth-equivalences have an undeniable importance in the study of truth, but what I want to say is that we do gain a grasp of the concept of truth via routes different from the implicit or explicit appreciation of the infinite list of instances of the equivalence schema. Maintaining on the contrary that these instances play a central role in our understanding of truth gives a sort of mechanicalness to this understanding and – given the centrality of truth in language usage – to our linguistic activities as a whole, as if it were all a question of syntactic plays. I am quite aware that this claim is far removed from what Horwich explicitly maintains, but for the time being I want just to hint at the strange impression Horwich’s theses give that we might behave like computers implemented with what we may call “the equivalence software”. If instances of the schema are enough to understand truth, and if «the truth predicate is needed [just] as a device of generalization in *all* domains of discourse» (*Ivi*: 129), then this understanding might be in principle showed by computers running a program which, for any sentence given as input, gives a truth biconditional as output, and vice versa. If that were the way it is, then it would be in principle possible to grasp what the concept of truth amounts to quite irrespective of any experience of the world.

This suffices to illustrate some doubts about the congruence between Horwich’s minimalism and practice. We can now turn to Rorty’s alethic deflationism.

¹¹ Cf. DAVID 2005.

4. Richard Rorty's version of deflationism

Rorty's deflationary account of truth revolved around three theses concerning the use of the word *true*¹². According to him, the uses to which this word can be submitted are solely the following: the *disquotational*, the *commending*, and the *cautionary*. The first is the one which equates an attribution of truth to a (quoted) sentence with the sentence itself (without quotes and the phrase 'is true'). The second is the use of the word we make when we want to endorse a statement or pay an implicit compliment to its author (for example when we say 'The statement she just made is true'). The last use of the word 'true' is the one we make when we say that a statement is correct, but we acknowledge at the same time the possibility that it might be mistaken. In a case like this we might say something such as 'This statement is fully justified, but perhaps not true'.

Nothing else need be said about the concept of truth. If our "philosophy of truth" is to coincide with our "practice of truth", then this is what we ought to say as philosophers, according to Rorty. His position seems to agree to a great extent with that of Paul Horwich, even if according to Michael Dummett Rorty's is a *nuanced* deflationist account, «because it allows that there are two uses of 'true' not to be explained disquotationally» (DUMMETT 2004: 109), and is as such seriously defective¹³. However, I have two reservations about this. The former regards the disquotational use of "true", and adds up to what I said about Horwich's equivalences: no speaker seems to utter such equivalences – be they of a Horwichian or Rortyan (Tarskian) kind. The equivalence schema is a very useful means in the endeavour to understand truth, as Tarski nicely showed, but as a piece of actual practice its instances appear to be very far from what speakers actually do. The latter reservation, on the other hand, regards Rorty's rendering of the cautionary use.

As we have just seen, this is the use of "true" we employ when we say that a statement is correct, i.e. fully justified on the basis of the knowledge we possess at the time of the utterance of that statement, acknowledging at the same time the possibility that the statement might be mistaken. In cases like this we might say something along the lines of "This statement is fully justified, but perhaps not true", or "I think she said something true, but possibly it is not true". In this sense, Rorty acknowledged that truth is something independent of us, qualifying this independence as *independence from our current knowledge* – or, as he would put it, independence from the *audience* we are part of. But, if we look more carefully at the cautionary use of "true", we can see that the kind of independence envisaged by Rorty is not enough to ensure a proper independence of truth – which is *independence in its full-blooded sense*, as we seem to implicitly (and pre-theoretically) think.

In fact, Rorty's rendering amounts to a particular interpretation of the *responsibility* our verbal and non-verbal behaviour must unavoidably take¹⁴. According to him the

¹² Rorty has acknowledged that he has been «trying to reduce truth to justification» and then has «fallen back on minimalism and [...] suggested that Tarski's breezy disquotationalism may exhaust the topic of truth» (RORTY 1995: 21).

¹³ «Rorty seems to be unaware that without an explanation [which Rorty does not provide] of the relations among all three uses, we do not know what his account of the meaning of 'true' is» (DUMMETT 2004: 106).

¹⁴ If our behaviour is not to be arbitrary and the concept of the norm is to have any content at all.

sense of the cautionary use resides in the fact that we cannot exclude that future *audiences* will be able to detect some flaw in a statement we *now* – on the basis of the best theories at our disposal – deem to be true. Our epistemological responsibility, in other words, is just toward future audiences, the ones who could be in a better position than we are to appreciate the correctness of a statement of ours, and not «toward nonhuman entities such as *truth* or *reality*» (RORTY & ENGEL 2007: 40; this is of course Rorty).

I think that Rorty's rendering of the cautionary use of the word "true" represents an *impoverishment* of this use itself. This follows from his contention that there is no substantial distinction between truth and justification – contrary to widespread opinion. Given that the difference between the two «makes no difference to my decisions about what to do [and given that] assessment of truth and assessment of justification are, when the question is about what I should believe now, the same activity» (RORTY 1995: 19), in the absence of any extra usefulness in putting things from the point of view of truth, he has deemed it more advisable to account for what we do in terms of justification and get rid of truth-talk.

However, I would like to stress the fact that a clear-cut distinction between truth and justification is already embedded in the cautionary use of the word "true". Contrary to Rorty's contention, the cautionary use does not simply call for a difference between present and future 'audiences', but between our current skills in justifying an assertion and *objective reality*. This is what we are actually accountable to and what gives objectivity proper content. And that is why I hold that Rorty's rendering of the cautionary use of "true" represents an impoverishment of this use itself.

Thinking that it is all a matter of audiences and their epistemic relationships makes it sound as if it were fundamentally all *a matter of talk* – as if we were fatally entrapped in a circle of language, and nothing but language. I want to suggest that the idea that things are not so is part of common sense, part of the stock of pre-theoretical intuitions that human beings share – irrespective of the culture one belongs to. In brief: part of our *practice*, as the platitudes c) and d) listed above reveal.

Therefore, to say that it is just a *slogan* to claim that «the real and the true are 'independent of our beliefs' – a slogan which [...] it is futile either to accept or to reject» (RORTY 1995: 32) and to substitute another slogan for it, i.e. «if it does not talk, we are not answerable to it»¹⁵ (RORTY 2015: 864), seems to make Rorty depart from that very *practice* whose careful observation is one of the few beacons he was willing to follow in philosophy. Even though talk of dependence/independence of the world is typically philosophical, something roughly analogous to it seems to be an implicit and natural presupposition of the man in the street.

5. Putnam's interpretation of deflationism

One of the morals we can draw from what we have been seeing so far – at least the moral I would draw – is that both Horwich's and Rorty's positions appear to be under the threat of losing the world – not the world as it stems from the traditional

¹⁵ Here is the passage: «On my view, the claim that human beings are responsible to reality is as hopeless as the idea that true sentences correspond to reality. I read James and Dewey as saying that we have no responsibilities except to fellows players of what Sellars and Brandom call 'the game of giving and asking for reasons'. My slogan is: if it does not talk, we are not answerable to it».

realist's picture, but the real actual world *period*. The world whose independence from us is a basic trait of the commonsense picture, and thus a trait of our practice. This is precisely the impression one is under when facing Rorty's rendering of the cautionary use of "true" and Horwich's thesis that all there is to truth are instances of the equivalence schema. In both cases the impression one gets from their account of speakers' linguistic exchanges is of a "purely verbal game" played by people (or computers) who might lack the connections with what is outside language. Granted, both philosophers would promptly retort they do not lose anything, let alone the world: Rorty, on the one hand, would probably say that talk of the world "out there" is pointless, and would reject this line of criticism root and branch; Horwich, on the other, would probably remind us that it is characteristic of truth to be *pure*, and thus it suffices to add your favourite realist metaphysics to his minimalism in order to salvage the world from disappearance¹⁶. This extrinsic *ad hoc* addition, though, would raise more problems than it solves, and – in any case – I have already remarked upon the extraneousness to practice of the purported purity of truth.

I would like to turn now to Putnam's analysis of deflationism, with the aim of letting him have the final word. The main point Putnam stresses about alethic deflationism is that it requires a *verificationist account of understanding and meaning*. The reason is clear: having deflationism banned truth from the set of the philosopher's explanatory tools, truth-conditions appear useless – they cannot explain anything, let alone meaning and understanding. Given that one of the traditional competitors of truth-conditional semantics is verificationist semantics, to ascribe the latter to deflationism requires just one step. As to Horwich, actually his repudiation of truth-conditional semantics leads him to subscribe to a conception of understanding and meaning in terms of *use* – in the wake of the later Wittgenstein. But for Putnam this does not alter his diagnosis: there are better and worse interpretations of Wittgenstein's thought, and the one that leads to what he terms *the positivistic interpretation of Wittgenstein* (an instance of bad interpretation, according to him) is based on the assumption that «the use of words can be described in terms of what speakers are allowed to say and do in observable situations» (PUTNAM 1991: 265). In order to show how deflationism rests on verificationism, Putnam usually quotes a passage of Horwich's to the effect that we have

dispositions to sanction various levels of confidence [*cached out as 'betting behavior'*] in the truth of certain sentences – where the appropriate degrees of belief are a *function of observable circumstances* (PUTNAM 2015a: 324, Putnam's italics)¹⁷.

It is interesting that Putnam too involves the analogy with computers here. Indeed, he remarks that Horwich's talk of dispositions – where the speaker is inclined to manifest certain patterns of linguistic behaviour in response to certain stimulations – reveals how the model of the understanding of a sentence is 'functionalistic', as if the

¹⁶ Cf. for instance HORWICH 1998: 104-105.

¹⁷ See also PUTNAM 1999: 113. For an application of the notion of "level of confidence" by Horwich, see HORWICH 1998: 35.

speaker were a computer¹⁸. And even more interesting is that Rorty involves this analogy too – approvingly, unlike Putnam:

human beings' only "confrontation" with the world is the sort that computers also have. Computers are programmed to respond to certain causal transactions with input devices by entering certain program states. We humans program ourselves to respond to causal transactions between the higher brain centers and the sense organs with dispositions to make assertions. There is no epistemologically interesting difference between a machine's program state and our dispositions, and both may equally well be called "beliefs" or "judgments" (RORTY 1994b: 141).

Analogously to what I have hinted above with the example of the computer running the "equivalence software", Putnam seems here to think that the most remarkable fact regarding the verificationist account of understanding – the fact which is *crucial* for a general evaluation of deflationism – is that the things in the world are either bracketed or downright expunged. To put it roughly, if 'what exists' is being taken as 'what exists for a subject *S*' (even a collective subject *S*) thanks to her best verificationist procedures, then the *idealistic danger* of losing the world becomes fairly concrete. It seems an obvious danger to Putnam:

Deflationism about truth – as long as it involves (as it has since Ramsey introduced the position in the 1920s) a verificationist account of understanding – adopts the most disastrous feature of the antirealist view, the very feature that brings about the loss of the world (and the past). It differs from antirealism in this regard only in that it attempts to disguise that feature by means of a superficial terminological conservatism (PUTNAM 1999: 55).

Putnam's idea seems to be that, if we stick to what they literally say, deflationists do involve the world in their picture of understanding. And in fact – to take just a few examples – Horwich's is a theory of use where «the meaning of a word also includes its use in relation to the external world» (HORWICH 1998: 94). Hartry Field's is a version of conceptual role semantics with externalist (and social) aspects to account for the relation to the world¹⁹. Michael Williams' is a broadly inferentialist approach which envisages sentence usage as centred on a particular kind of normatively constrained practice, with a special role played by observation sentences to ensure contact with the world²⁰. This allows them to claim that «assertibility conditions sometimes include truth-conditions»²¹ (WILLIAMS 2001: 156) and hence reference

¹⁸ This is actually what Putnam critically imputes to his own thought of the Eighties, when he still subscribed to the functionalist hypothesis in philosophy of mind and adopted verificationist semantics (given up by the Autumn of 1990): «strange as it may sound, it was functionalism that pushed me in the direction of verificationism [...] In short, if functionalism is the right philosophy of mind, and the 'natural semantics for functionalist psychology' is verificationist, then verificationism must be the right account of the 'mind/brain's' understanding of its own internal language» (PUTNAM 2012: 77-78).

¹⁹ Cf. FIELD 1994: 55 ff.

²⁰ Cf. WILLIAMS 2001: 154 ff.

²¹ Cf.: «even a crude verificationist can grant the legitimacy of talk of truth *conditions* of his own utterances» (FIELD 1994: 53). And: «while understanding a sentence does indeed usually *coincide*

to the world. But – the *crucial* point again – the fact is that in their statements of truth conditions «true’ is playing precisely the generalizing and expressive role that [...] deflationism attributes to it» (*Ibidem*), given that a «pure disquotational notion of truth gives rise to a purely disquotational way of talking about truth conditions»²² (FIELD 1994: 53). And then one wonders whether these really deserve to be called ‘truth conditions’.

In fact, the deflationists will argue that acknowledging the (merely) generalizing and expressive role played by the truth predicate in stating the truth conditions of a language’s sentences is perfectly compatible with asserting, for example, that the right-hand side of the biconditional ‘The sentence “Rome is in Italy” is true if, and only if, Rome is in Italy’ expresses *worldly* truth conditions²³. However, according to them that right-hand side is understood thanks to a grasp of its *assertibility* conditions – conditions which humans and computers have in common (see again the last quotation from Rorty) and thus are of no help in discriminating between the two. This is where the aforementioned impression of a bracketing of the things in the world imposes itself. It is as if, in their will to strip truth of any explanatory strength (including the relation to the world as part of that strength), on the one hand, and in their effort to retrieve that relation via assertibility conditions (with externalist aspects) on the other, the deflationists tried to let the world in through the window after having let it out through the door, so to speak. Ineffectively though, given that the generalizing and expressive role of the truth predicate which should guarantee the relation to the world has a purely *formal* character. Thus, the deflationists’ claims sound realistic, but just in virtue of a “superficial terminological conservatism”, and the upshot is that the world is only *formally* saved.

In brief, it seems Putnam is here claiming that, because of the formal level they place truth-talk on, deflationists do not have a right to truth-conditions-talk (insofar as it is meant to imply a connection with the world). See the following passage by a leading deflationist, Stephen Leeds:

To explain the utility of disquotation we need say nothing about the relation between language and the world [...] [Our theory of the concept of truth] seems to rest only on the most general *formal* features of our language – for instance, the fact that our language has somewhat the structure of quantificational languages – the utility for us of the concept of truth seems to be a fact which is quite independent of the existence or non-existence of interesting ‘picturing’ or referential relations between our language and the world (LEEDS 1978: 44).

If “our theory of the concept of truth”, the one centred on the utility of disquotation, is all the explanation of truth we have to give (as that utility is all there is to say about truth), and this theory is only based on the *formal* features of language, it follows that the connections between statements and their worldly truth-conditions are of little or no importance in the explanation of statements’ truth. Although the disquotational role of “true” does not *per se* imply the bracketing of things in the world, it does not even help to show how a connection between a statement and its

with an explicit knowledge of its truth condition, understanding does not *consist* in such knowledge» (HORWICH 1998: 69).

²² Here I am overlooking the different ways in which these authors express their deflationism.

²³ I owe the wording of this paragraph to an anonymous referee.

worldly truth conditions can be guaranteed. Therefore, the idea that all there is to truth is a formal feature of our language, i.e. disquotation, appears to be at odds with the intuition according to which the truth of our statements is a question of accurately reflecting how matters stand – platitude c) – thus thwarting the deflationists’ talk of truth conditions and their efforts to involve the world in their accounts of understanding.

But – and this is what I would like to focus attention on – if deflationists pay lip service to, and so virtually abandon

the view that the meaningfulness of an expression depends on – and, thus, can be explained in terms of – the relation it would have to bear to things in the world in order to be true (or ‘true of’ something, in the case of a predicate) [then they have to give up on] the idea that we can explain semantic content in terms of *objective correctness conditions* (ARMOUR-GARB & BEALL 2005: 18, my italics),

i.e., conditions rooted in something deeper than what mere *audiences* of a Rortyan variety can provide – deeper than what we can get on the purely formal level of language. And, in its turn, dethroning objective correctness conditions from their place in thinking and speaking amounts to acknowledging the concept of objectivity (and that of norm) only in a Pickwickian sense, paying lip service to the norms involving truth. And this – again – does not seem to be something our actual practice recognizes. Indeed, our practice includes the intuition that words, predicates and sentences have genuine reference and truth-conditions, respectively, and that these conditions mould a general *normative* dimension permeating practice itself. This is something to which Putnam’s account gives due stress: «to regard an assertion or a belief or a thought as true or false is to regard it as being right or wrong» (PUTNAM 1999: 69). As a matter of fact, «to say that truth is a *normative* property is to emphasize that calling statements true and false is *evaluating* them» (PUTNAM 1992: 436).

In view of all this, I think it is correct to attribute to Putnam the idea according to which the defect of deflationism is that of failing to recognize the actual role truth and reference do have in our lives as speakers and thinkers – a role guaranteed by the world, not just by language. He concludes in this way:

What is wrong in deflationism is that it cannot properly accommodate the truism that certain claims about the world are (not merely assertable or verifiable but) *true*. What is right in deflationism is that if I assert that “it is true that *p*”, then I assert the same thing as if I simply assert *p* (PUTNAM 1999: 56).

But – it may be asked – does not the second part of this passage open the possibility of Putnam being an alethic deflationist at the end of the day?

6. Putnam’s stance on truth

Not really. Recall Leeds’ passage. Putnam would subscribe to that passage word for word, but only insofar as it is an explanation of “the utility for us of the concept of truth”, in particular the utility of disquotation. In fact, what Leeds is describing in that passage are

the logical properties, in particular disquotation, that appertain to “true”. In that respect “true” belongs to the family of the logical words (for example, the connectives and quantifiers), which also are used in every area of discourse (PUTNAM 2015b: 559-560).

But Putnam is far from thinking that “true” and “refers to” are *merely* devices for disquotation – i.e. devices which provide us with nothing but *tautologies*²⁴. Quite the contrary, these predicates correspond to a genuine property and a genuine relation, respectively. “Refers to” corresponds to a relation between linguistic items and extralinguistic objects, whereas “true” corresponds to a property enlightening the connection between bits of language and (known, knowable and also unknowable) bits of the world, reminding us that it is not only our conventions but the world – in the broadest possible sense of the word – which at the same time gives life to our verbal expressions and rise to a normative dimension within which these verbal expressions can be evaluated.

However, according to Putnam the genuineness of the property of truth and the relation of reference does not amount to their being *substantive*. As to truth, there is no

single thing we are saying (over and above what we are claiming) whenever we make a truth claim, no matter what sort of statement we are discussing, no matter what the circumstances under which the statement is said to be true, and no matter what the pragmatic point of calling it true is said to be [...]. [There is no] “substantive property” whose existence underwrites the very possibility of using the word *true* (PUTNAM 1999: 55-56),

as traditional *passe-partout* theories of truth would have it. Rather, there is an extendable family of uses of the terms “true” and “refers to” – an extendable family of ways of characterizing the answerability to reality truth and reference consist of in new areas of discourse. Thus, the idea that truth is a genuine normative property makes room for a sort of *alethic pluralism* according to which

just what sort of rightness or wrongness is in question varies enormously with the sort of discourse. Statement, true, refers, indeed, belief, assertion, thought, language [...] have a plurality of uses, and new uses are constantly added as new forms of discourse come into existence (*Ivi*: 69).

Far from having a fixed nature, truth possesses what I would call a *physiognomy* of its own: a quite recognizable profile for all the competent speakers of a language. This is the physiognomy truth acquires thanks to the internal relations it bears to concepts such as meaning, reference, world, assertion, belief, norm, and knowledge, among others. Indeed, there are cases in which we «use the word ‘true’ when we can confirm or disconfirm statements», so that «to call a statement ‘true’ [...] is to make a claim about our epistemic position» (ELLENBOGEN 2003: XIV). Likewise, «to affirm something or to make an assertion by means of a statement, is to express one’s *belief* that the statement is true» (RORTY & ENGEL 2007: 13-14; this is of course Engel), whether we can confirm the statement or not. As I said in the course of my analysis of Horwich’s stance, these concepts form a *coalescence* that serve to elucidate every concept which contributes to it – especially, regarding our topic here,

²⁴ Cf. PUTNAM 2012: 81.

the concept of truth. It is because of the centrality this coalescence has in our practice that we can appreciate how the T-biconditionals do not exhaust our grasp of the concept of truth, on the one hand, and dispel the impression of the loss of the world so inseparable from deflationism, on the other.

So, to conclude, the normative and plural physiognomy of truth which arises from Putnam's account represents one of the best ways to meet the pragmatist criterion with which I started. In particular, compared with Rorty's and Horwich's accounts the best way of avoiding the famous baby being thrown out with the traditional alethic bathwater²⁵.

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²⁵ Many thanks to Stefano Caputo, Pietro Salis and an anonymous referee for their invaluable comments and suggestions.

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