DISCUSSION NOTES

GOODNESS DEFLATED?

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In his 2009 Presidential Address to the Aristotelian Society, Simon Black-
burn draws an analogy between the deflationist's view of the truth predi-
cate and the quasi-realist's view of the good predicate, one that he has
further elaborated elsewhere. The purpose of this note is to establish that
Blackburn's analogy fails.

In his 2009 Presidential Address to the Aristotelian Society, Simon
Blackburn (2010*a*) draws an analogy between the deflationist's view
of the truth predicate and his quasi-realist's view of the good predi-
cate, one that he has further elaborated in Blackburn (2010*b*). In
this note, I show that Blackburn's analogy does not hold.

I

The 'True' and the 'Good'. Blackburn (2010*a*, p. 14) sees an analo-
gy between the deflationist's view of 'true' and his quasi-realist's
view of 'good'. Let us begin by saying a bit about these two posi-
tions.

 He takes 'deflationism', in the theory of truth, to be a combina-
tion of three theses (Blackburn 2010*b*, p. 3):

(A) That there is complete 'cognitive equivalence' between T*p*
 and *p*;

(B) That conforming to the equivalence mentioned in (A) is all
 that is required to manifest complete understanding of the
 truth predicate; and

(C) That the truth predicate is a device of indirect reference
 and generalization, the utility of which is purely logical.

 Two brief comments. First, while we can grant (A) and (B), as we

will see, (C) is incorrect—'true' is neither a device *of* indirect reference nor *of* generalization.

Second, since, for deflationists, the relevant instances of the equivalence schema,

(T)   <*p*> is true iff *p*,[1]

are a priori and necessary, this suggests that, in addition to (A), we have as a further premiss

(D)   All (non-pathological) instances of (T) are *correct*.

As we will see (§3), this will matter when we evaluate the final aspect of Blackburn's analogy.

Turn now to Blackburn's quasi-realist's view of 'good' (2010*a*, 2010*b*). Following Blackburn, we will assume that our language has a device—an operator—with which to voice, or express, approval, viz. 'Hooray!', and will further assume that the things that we are to approve are *doings*, which is to say *acts*.

Although central to our grasp and use of the truth predicate are instances of (T), for standard Frege-Geach reasons, Blackburn (2010*a*, p. 14; 2010*b*, p. 11) rejects the 'G-schema', viz.

(G)   Hooray! act *A* iff act *A* is good,

and opts instead for a 'commitment schema' according to which, with reference to an act *A*,

(G*) One assents to the assertion using '*A* is good' iff one is disposed to endorse *A*.

Although (G*) is not strictly analogous to the deflationist's truth schema, Blackburn (2010*b*, p. 11) sees the difference as merely superficial, since both schemas are said to capture what understanding those predicates consists in. That is, just as understanding the truth predicate, according to deflationists, is fundamentally one's possession of the disposition to accept every (non-pathological) instance of (T), understanding the goodness predicate, according to Blackburn's quasi-realists, is fundamentally one's possession of the disposition to assent to any instance of the form '*A* is good' when, and only when, disposed to endorse *A*. If this is right then perhaps Blackburn's quasi-realist's view of 'good' is somewhat closer to the deflationist's

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[1] Here, '<' and '>' nominalize any sentence that goes in for '*p*'.

view of 'true' than we would have initially thought.

Now, in order to establish an analogy between the deflationist's view of 'true' and his quasi-realist's view of 'good', Blackburn (2010*a*, 2010*b*) notes three apparent similarities regarding the function of those predicates. First, he claims that, like 'true', 'good' is a device of indirect reference and generalization, and that '[a]s a device of generalization, the good predicate will indeed resist analysis'. Second, he contends that, like 'true', 'good' is a device of indirect (or, as I prefer, *opaque*) endorsement. And, third, he declares that there is an 'exact parallel' between the way that 'true' enables us to generalize and the way that 'good' does. I shall address each claim in turn, beginning with Blackburn's characterization of 'deflationism'.

II

What 'True' is Not. As a number of philosophers have pointed out (e.g. Field 1994, 1999) there are certain cases under which the truth predicate seems to be *expressively indispensable*. For example, consider a 'true'-free theory, τ, understood as a body of sentences, which is not finitely axiomatizable, and say that we are committed to τ. Question: How can we express our commitment to it?

We certainly cannot express our commitment to τ by asserting singly each of the sentences that comprise it. What we want is a device that will enable us to express, in a finite manner, the same commitment that we would express by singly asserting, *per impossibile*, all of τ's members. And with the truth predicate, we can do that— by asserting that all members of τ are true.

Deflationists and non-deflationists alike recognize the truth predicate's role in this expressive task. But many deflationists have gone further—e.g. David (1994), Field (1994), and Horwich (1998*b*, p. 104; 2009, p. 270), amongst others—claiming that the truth predicate is a device *of* opaque endorsement, or, as Blackburn (2010*a*, 2010*b*) contends, that it is a device *of* indirect reference and generalization. A related claim is that the truth predicate is a device *of* infinite conjunctions and disjunctions (Field 1994, p. 264).

But the truth predicate is not a device *of* opaque endorsement, indirect reference, generalization, or infinite conjunctions and disjunctions. Rather, together with other machinery (notably, quantifiers

and variables), the truth predicate can serve as a device for *expressing* opaque endorsement and it, together with a quantifier, can serve as a device for *expressing* generalizations, infinite conjunctions and disjunctions, etc.[2] Now, if deflationists should not identify the truth predicate with these particular roles, how should they think about that predicate?

We can say something about what kind of device 'true' is if we consider what the truth predicate has to be like, in order for it to perform the aforementioned roles. Here I endorse a slightly generalized version of the account offered by Quine (1986). In setting out his *disquotational* account, Quine discusses the role of the truth predicate in cancelling out the *semantic ascent* achieved by forming the quotation name of a sentence. More generally, what the truth-predicate does is *undo* some nominalization of a content-vehicle, where this nominalization can occur in a number of ways.

In addition to forming the quotation name of a sentence, some of the other (familiar) ways include: forming some structural description of a sentence uttered; forming a 'that'-clause of a sentence that is or could be uttered or that expresses the content of a mental state; offering a definite description of an utterance or mental state; etc. These operations all result in ascent, viz. from the use of a content-vehicle to express that content to a kind of mention of the vehicle. The truth predicate undoes this ascent to provide something equivalent to the direct presentation of the content that attaches to the content-vehicle.

I will use 'semantic descent' to capture this operation of the truth predicate in general. Now, being a device *of* semantic descent is part of what allows 'true' so to serve the useful functions that it does. It is a device of semantic descent which, when coupled with other resources (e.g. quantifiers, descriptions, etc.), can be employed to express opaque endorsement, in the performance of a kind of 'expressive role', enabling its users to express agreement with a certain body of claims. In addition, the truth predicate's function as a device of semantic descent also allows it to serve in the expression of infinite conjunctions and disjunctions, in the performance of a kind of 'generalizing role'.

But some philosophers (e.g. Azzouni 2006; Blackburn 2010*a*,

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[2] Quine (1986) notes that all we need is the truth predicate and suitable quantifiers, which will allow us to generalize over a body of claims.

2010*b*; Field 1994) contend that the truth predicate *is* a device of opaque endorsement, or that it is exclusively a device *for* opaque endorsement. Both of these claims are false, however, for sometimes the truth predicate, while it aids in the expression of a generalization or an infinite conjunction, does not serve as a device for facilitating the expression of opaque endorsement. For example, when a truth predicate appears in the antecedent of a conditional, it is not serving as a device for any sort of endorsement at all, though it does enable language-users to express certain generalizations.[3]

To see this, consider

(0) If everything Pascal said is true, then we are in trouble.

In (0), 'true' is playing the role of a device for expressing infinite conjunctions and disjunctions, but it is *not* serving as a device for facilitating opaque endorsement. Hence, not only is it a mistake to claim that 'true' is a device *of* opaque endorsement, it is also a mistake to assume that it always serves as a device *for* expressing opaque endorsement, as examples like (0) make clear.

So, 'true', for the deflationist, is a device of semantic descent; it is not a device of generalization and it is not always a device for opaque endorsement. Hence, Blackburn's original claim is false. But is 'good', like 'true', a device of semantic descent?

It is not. One way to see this is by noting the 'transparent' nature of the deflationist's view of 'true' as captured, for example, by (D) or by a suitable rule of substitution whereby '<*p*> is true' and '*p*' are intersubstitutable. Truth's transparency explains the sort of device that it is. But 'good' does not possess such transparency, as Blackburn (2010*a*, p. 14; 2010*b*, p. 11) acknowledges. Hence, we do not appear to have a reason for thinking that it is the same sort of device that 'true' seems to be.

III

'Good', 'True', and Opaque Endorsement. As we have seen, 'true' is not a device *of* opaque endorsement, nor does it always function as a device *for* expressing opaque endorsement. Blackburn (2010*a*, 2010*b*) claims that, like 'true', 'good' at least sometimes serves as a

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[3] For a related point, see Field (2008).

device for expressing opaque endorsement. But does it do so in the way that 'true' does? In order to see why it does not, let us briefly consider how this works in the case of 'true'.

Deflationists claim that if what Isabel said yesterday was that snow is white, and if you assert

> (1) What Isabel said yesterday is true

then, given the relevant instance of (T), together with what Isabel said, you thereby express a commitment to the whiteness of snow. Moreover, it is through expressing this that you manage indirectly (indeed, *opaquely*) to endorse what Isabel said.

Does something analogous work in a 'good'-involving case? Well, suppose that you are inclined to endorse the act that Zev performed yesterday but that you cannot recall what it was that he did. Blackburn (2010*a*) notes that with 'good' you can indirectly endorse Zev's performing that act, for example, by asserting

> (2) What Zev did yesterday—the act that he performed yesterday—was good.

But this is not correct. To be sure, through that assertion, you express a *commitment* to endorse what Zev did. But, for so doing, you endorse neither the act that he performed nor his having performed that act, for being committed to endorsing an act is different from actually endorsing that act.

To see why this matters, notice that when you assert (1), you thereby (opaquely) endorse that to which you are committed, which, in this case, is the whiteness of snow. When you assert (2), you likewise endorse that to which you are committed. But in that case you are committed to the endorsement of what Zev did. At best, through asserting (2), you endorse your endorsement of what Zev did. But, contra Blackburn (2010*a*), through that assertion, you do not thereby endorse what he did.[4] Hence, Blackburn's second claim is incorrect.

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[4] Of course, upon hearing your utterance of (2), we might conclude that you *would* endorse Zev's having performed that act, or, perhaps, that you asserted what you did in order to *indicate* or *convey*—perhaps pragmatically—that you do, or, again, would, endorse what he did. But that is different from concluding that, *through your assertion*, you have thereby endorsed Zev's having performed that act.

IV

Deriving Generalizations. Turn now to Blackburn's third claim (2010*a*, p. 14; 2010*b*, p. 10), relating the deflationist's view of 'true' to his quasi-realist's view of 'good', viz. that there is an 'exact parallel' between the way in which we are able to establish (and so to assert) certain 'true'-involving generalizations and the way in which we are able to do it in the case of 'good'. In order to determine whether there is an exact parallel, let us see how this works in the case of 'true'.

Consider a conjunction of the following form:

(3) Isabel said yesterday that snow is white ∧ snow is white ∧ … ∧ Isabel said yesterday that grass is green ∧ grass is green,

together with a claim to the effect that that is all that Isabel said yesterday. From that and the relevant instances of (T) we can deduce and, so, can assert

(4) Everything Isabel said yesterday is true.

Blackburn (2010*b*, p. 8) tells us that something similar occurs in the case of 'good'. In particular, from

(5) Zev did such-and-such and hooray! for that ∧ Zev did so-and-so and hooray! for that ∧ … and that is all that Zev did,

we can 'sum up' and, so, should be able to assert

(6) Everything Zev did was good.

Is there, as Blackburn maintains, an 'exact parallel' here? Well, if by 'sum up' Blackburn means *deduce* then the parallel goes through; if, alternatively, he intends something other than deduction then even though there might be a *similarity* between the two sorts of implications, no exact parallel can be forged.

Unfortunately, Blackburn does not tell us what it is to 'sum up'. But whatever it is we know that it cannot be to deduce. In order to deduce (6) from (5) we would either need the G-schema, which he rejects, or something analogous (e.g. a substitution (or inference) rule), which, if it is anything like standard implication, would imply (at least one direction of) the G-schema.

Of course, it is possible that Blackburn will introduce a suitable *non-logical* relation whereby (5) will imply (6). But that relation—whatever it would be—will not be the one that is employed when deflationists conclude (4) on the basis of (3). As such, even if there could be a *similarity*, it is certainly not an exact parallel, in which case it is insufficient to establish the analogy that Blackburn aimed to draw.

V

Conclusion. As we have seen, the analogy that Blackburn aimed to forge, between the deflationist's view of truth and his quasi-realist's view of good, cannot be maintained; thus, we cannot (yet) identify their treatment of 'good' with the deflationist's treatment of 'true'. This is so, even if, in some (metaphorical) sense, both groups are 'deflating' their respective, target notions.[5]

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[5] Thanks to Rachel Cohon and Simon Blackburn for helpful discussion of the topics addressed in this note.

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