Revenge for Alethic Nihilism

Bradley Armour-Garb and James A. Woodbridge

In "Nothing is True,"[1] Will Gamester defends a form of alethic nihilism against a variety of objections, offering it as a viable and potentially superior approach to theorizing about truth and falsity. Gamester's alethic nihilism is somewhat more permissive than the earlier version from David Liggins,[2] since Gamester is willing to allow uses of the truth predicate to remain legitimate, in the sense of being what we will call "conventionally ok to utter",[3] by employing a fictionalist or pretense-based understanding of truth-talk. Since he allows truth-talk to play a kind of expressive role, *via* a pretense, he maintains that his alethic nihilism has all of the strengths of deflationism about truth, plus the added benefit of an elegant resolution of the semantic pathology that the Liar Paradox, Curry's Paradox, Yablo's Paradox, and presumably even the Truth-Teller appear to present. According to alethic nihilism, none of the sentences involved in these cases are true (or have true subsentences). For the alethic nihilist, that is the end of the story—contradiction does not arise, e.g., for a liar sentence, since it does not then follow that the sentence is true (despite its saying of itself that it is not true and its being not true). It is simply not true, since nothing is true. Gamester thus rejects the principle True-In (from 'p' infer "'p' is true") and seemingly True-Out (from "'p' is true" infer 'p') as well. He

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[1] This JOURNAL, CXX, 6 (June 2023): 314-38.

[2] David Liggins, "Constructive Methodological Deflationism, Dialetheism and the Liar," *Analysis* 74 (2014), pp. 566–574, and "In Defence of Radical Restrictionism," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 98 (2019), pp. 3-25.

[3] This status label is derived from Gamester's discussion (*op. cit.*, p. 329) of there being within his alethic nihilism a convention (described below) governing the utterance of truth-attributions.

concludes that the simplicity of this response to alethic pathology makes alethic nihilism an attractive approach, especially for deflationists.

We disagree with Gamester's assessment of the situation. While he does an admirable job of defending his permissive alethic nihilism from a variety of objections, he does not notice that there is a revenge problem for his view and for any form of alethic nihilism that affords truth-talk a kind of legitimacy.[4] He allows that truth-talk can be used to express agreement with other sentences (or utterances, beliefs, etc.) and specifies a convention to restrict the application of the truth predicate to the effect that one should utter "'p' is true" only if one accepts 'p'.[5] He points out that this does not yield an endorsement of the principle that one should *accept* "'p' is true" only if one accepts 'p', since according to alethic nihilism one should never *accept* "'p' is true". After all, on this view, nothing is true.

With that in mind, consider the following sentence,

(R) If sentence (R) is acceptable, then sentence (R) is true,

where the intended sense of 'acceptable' has it that a sentence is acceptable provided it should be accepted.[6] Before explaining the problem that (R) generates for Gamester, we highlight two plausible principles regarding the notion of acceptability. These principles should be considered rational constraints on making "acceptability evaluations". The first principle is that if a sentence is acceptable, then the claim that it is acceptable is itself acceptable, and that if a

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[4] For a very different revenge problem directed at a form of alethic nihilism that does not explicitly grant truth-talk a kind of legitimacy (e.g., Liggins's view), see Bradley Armour-Garb and James A. Woodbridge, "Alethic fictionalism, Alethic Nihilism, and the Liar Paradox," *Philosophical Studies* 174 (2017), pp. 3083-3096.

[5] Gamester, *op. cit.*, p. 329.

[6] Gamester discusses matters in terms of "accepting sentences" and contrasts *accepting* with *denying*, though the more accurate contrast is between *accepting* and *rejecting* versus *affirming* and *denying*. To simplify matters, we will follow his usage, though everything we say also goes through in terms of *affirming*, or if one insists on contrasting *accepting* from *rejecting*.

sentence is not acceptable (and so is unacceptable), then the claim that it is unacceptable is itself acceptable. In support of this principle, consider a situation in which someone evaluates 'Snow is white' as acceptable and evaluates 'Snow is black' as unacceptable. Could this person then rationally refuse to evaluate "'Snow is white' is acceptable" as acceptable or to evaluate "'Snow is black' is unacceptable" as acceptable (equivalently, rationally endorse evaluating these sentences as unacceptable)? In both cases, we think not and, so, maintain that anyone making an acceptability evaluation must take her evaluation, whether it be of some sentence as acceptable or as unacceptable, as itself acceptable.

The second principle regarding acceptability evaluations is that if someone claims that some evaluation of a sentence as acceptable is itself acceptable, or if that person claims that some evaluation of a sentence as unacceptable is itself acceptable, then those mentioned lower-level evaluations are the only ones that the person could rationally make.[7] To see this, assume that someone claims that "'Snow is white' is acceptable" is acceptable and claims that "'Snow is black' is unacceptable" is acceptable. Could the person making these meta-level evaluations then rationally refuse to evaluate 'Snow is white' as acceptable or refuse to evaluate 'Snow is black' as unacceptable? We think not and, so, maintain that anyone making a meta-level evaluation of some lower-level acceptability evaluation as acceptable must also make that lower-level evaluation, whether it be of some sentence as acceptable or of some sentence as unacceptable.

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[7] Note that while these principles involve forms of "acceptability ascent and descent", they do not make 'acceptable' operate like a truth predicate. This is because any ascent must start with a claim that is already an acceptability evaluation, and the descent cannot extend all the way out of acceptability evaluations to a claim about the world.

Returning to (R), note that there is nothing ill-formed about this sentence for Gamester's alethic nihilism, and his proposed fictionalism makes it legitimate to use truth-talk and to apply the truth predicate to sentences. In discussing the alethic nihilist's acceptance of the conditionalized truth-schema, (TC),[8] Gamester also indicates that he accepts a classical conception of the acceptance and rejection of conditionals, in noting that a conditional with an unacceptable ("denied") antecedent is an acceptable conditional. Reasoning classically with the acceptability of (R), note that, for (R) to be evaluated as acceptable one must either evaluate its consequent as acceptable, or evaluate its antecedent as unacceptable. It follows that if someone evaluates the antecedent of (R) as unacceptable, they must also evaluate (R) as acceptable. By our first principle regarding acceptability evaluations, this would require that this person evaluate '(R) is acceptable', i.e., the antecedent of (R), as acceptable. So, attempting to evaluate the antecedent of (R) as unacceptable requires an evaluation of the antecedent as acceptable. Thus, rationally speaking, the antecedent of (R) can only be evaluated as acceptable. Because of this, classically, (R) as a whole must be evaluated as acceptable if its consequent is evaluated as acceptable, and (R) must be evaluated as unacceptable if its consequent is evaluated as unacceptable. But the latter option is ruled out. Since the antecedent of (R) must be evaluated as acceptable, that means that '(R) is acceptable' must be evaluated as acceptable, and so, by our second principle of acceptability evaluations, (R) must be evaluated as acceptable. Since (R) can only be evaluated as acceptable, it can only be taken as an acceptable conditional with an acceptable antecedent.

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[8] Gamester, *op. cit.*, p. 325.

The foregoing reasoning regarding (R) yields a problem for Gamester's alethic nihilism, since the consequent of (R) is not a sentence that such a theorist can evaluate as acceptable. So, for Gamester's alethic nihilist, this sentence is a conditional with an acceptable antecedent and an unacceptable consequent. Classically, this requires that the alethic nihilist evaluate (R) as unacceptable. But the reasoning above showed that (R) must be evaluated as acceptable. So, athletic nihilism requires an evaluation that is rationally disallowed.

Notice that an alethic non-nihilist has no problem resolving (R).[9] The above reasoning shows that (R) must be evaluated as acceptable with an acceptable antecedent. Since non-nihilists allow that some sentences are true, they can accept that (R) is true, thereby evaluating the consequent of (R) as acceptable, in keeping with the evaluation of (R) as a whole as acceptable with an acceptable antecedent.

We think that (R) is sufficient to demonstrate the inadequacy of Gamester's alethic nihilism, but we will consider a few possible replies to the challenge on his behalf. One move Gamester might try, to parallel the non-nihilist resolution of (R), is to claim that, since it can be "conventionally ok to utter" truth attributions (*via* a pretense), his alethic nihilist can claim that the consequent of (R) has this status. He might then claim that this is sufficient to evaluate (R) as a whole as acceptable. This seems inadequate by Gamester's own lights, however, since, as noted above, when he introduces the convention to utter "'p' is true" only if one accepts 'p', he points out that that does not yield the principle that one should *accept* "'p' is true" only if one accepts 'p'. Since it being conventionally ok to utter some instance of "'p' is true" does not yield

[9] For present purposes, an alethic non-nihilist is not necessarily someone who claims that there is a property of truth but just someone who rejects the nihilist thesis that nothing is true.

acceptance of that truth attribution, it seems unmotivated to say that a conditional with a consequent that it is conventionally ok to utter but unacceptable can underwrite an evaluation of the whole conditional as acceptable.

As a next move, Gamester might note that taking '(R) is true' to be conventionally ok to utter requires that it satisfy the convention in place for truth-talk, i.e., that (R) is accepted, and therefore is evaluated as acceptable. So, while classical reasoning directly with the components of the conditional does not underwrite an evaluation of the conditional as acceptable, he might try to argue that a kind of "meta-level" assessment of the conditional and its components (a level induced *via* the fact that the consequent is to be understood as involving an appeal to fiction or pretense) resolves into an evaluation of (R) as acceptable, taking it as having the same status that a non-nihilist assigns to it.

Since the appeal to a "meta-level" assessment that we just offered on Gamester's alethic nihilist's behalf is fairly "hand-wavy", if not simply *ad hoc*, consider the following more detailed account of how Gamester might try to argue that evaluating (R) as acceptable can fit with not accepting its consequent. We assume, as we also think is plausible, that if a sentence is acceptable, then it can function as a premise in an argument. As shown above, (R) must be evaluated as acceptable, and the claim that (R) is acceptable must be evaluated as acceptable. So, both (R) and its antecedent can be taken as potential premises in an argument. *Modus ponens* will then yield its consequent as a conclusion. So, we have the following valid argument.

(1)	If (R) is acceptable, then (R) is true.	Datum
(2)	(R) is acceptable.	Datum
(3)	(R) is true.	(1),(2)

Classical reasoning thus saddles Gamester's alethic nihilist with the conclusion that (R) is true. That seems to conflict with alethic nihilism, given its claim that nothing is true. However, we need to keep in mind that Gamester's brand of alethic nihilism is a permissive one that grants truth-talk a kind of legitimacy for expressive purposes, *via* a revolutionary alethic fictionalism. This brand of nihilist can acknowledge the conclusion drawn above as legitimate, so long as it is understood to involve a kind of pretense (presumably both when freestanding and when functioning as the consequent of (R)). While Gamester leaves the details of this pretense vague, he does note the aforementioned convention that uttering "'p' is true" requires that 'p' be accepted. Thus, he might say, all that the conclusion drawn above really establishes is that (R) must be accepted. Since the earlier reasoning regarding (R) has already established this, drawing this "fiction-involving" conclusion with the upshot that (R) gets evaluated as acceptable is unproblematic. Everything fits together, just as it does for the alethic non-nihilist.

We are not convinced that this reasoning regarding (R) actually solves the problem for Gamester's alethic nihilist. One might think that acceptability is something that is transferred through valid reasoning. Since the premises of the argument above are acknowledged as acceptable, the same should be claimed for the conclusion. Gamester might try to counter this thought by arguing that the pretense invoked in the conclusion allows for the alethic nihilist to "pretend-accept" it, and that this weaker pretend-acceptance accommodates the idea of the transference of acceptability sufficiently.[10] This seems *ad hoc* to us, but we can leave that worry

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[10] Gamester, *op*. *cit*., p. 329, introduces the idea of pretend-accepting claims, e.g., truth-attributions, when discussing the idea of pretend-accepting the principles T-In and T-Out. No alethic nihilist can seriously accept any truth-attributions, although Gamester allows that they can sometimes pretend-accept them.

aside. The reason is because even it the above resolution of (R) for alethic nihilism were to go through, we can move from (R) to a strengthened version of our revenge problem,

(R+) If sentence (R+) is acceptable, then 'Sentence (R+) is true' is seriously acceptable,

where the serious acceptance of a sentence involves a genuine commitment to it, in contrast with the merely pretend-acceptance of a sentence that is not seriously accepted.

Both (R+) as a whole and its antecedent must be evaluated as acceptable by the same reasoning that we applied to (R). As with (R), alethic non-nihilists have no problem with (R+), since they can claim that (R+) is true and that this truth attribution is (seriously) acceptable, thereby evaluating the consequent of (R+) as acceptable, in keeping with evaluating (R+) as acceptable. The alethic nihilist, by contrast, cannot evaluate the consequent of (R+) as acceptable (no claim that a truth-attribution is seriously acceptable can itself be evaluated as acceptable by an alethic nihilist). Since the antecedent of (R+) must be evaluated as acceptable, classically this means that Gamester's alethic nihilist must evaluate (R+) as unacceptable. But this evaluation has been ruled out. Moreover, since neither the consequent here nor the truth attribution it mentions is something that any alethic nihilist can (seriously) accept, the consequent is also not a sentence that Gamester's alethic fictionalist nihilist can consider to be conventionally ok to utter. Thus, an alethic nihilist cannot try to argue from an assumption that the consequent has that weaker status to an evaluation of (R+) as acceptable; no bootstrapping argument of this sort can be attempted here.

As a final response to this revenge problem, Gamester might attempt to appeal to the "weighing of costs and benefits" strategy that he considers when comparing alethic nihilism to various restrictionist views and when discussing the putative explanatory role of truth that

substantivists about truth claim for it.[11] In response to our revenge problems, Gamester might

argue as follows. Consider the set of "acceptability conditionals" that all have antecedents

stating that the conditional it is the antecedent of is acceptable. This set contains two subsets:

i) conditionals with consequents that are also acceptable; ii) conditionals with consequents that

are unacceptable. Subset i) includes sentences like

(AC1) If (AC1) is acceptable, then 1 = 1.

Subset ii) involves sentences like

(AC2) If (AC2) is acceptable, then 1 = 0.

No one has a problem with the members of subset i), such as (AC1), but everyone (alethic

nihilists and non-nihilists alike) faces a challenge with the members of subset ii), such as (AC2).

The latter appear to yield a violation of rationality in that the reasoning we have presented here

establishes that each such conditional must be evaluated as acceptable, but rejection of the

consequent (finding it unacceptable) appears classically to require evaluating the conditional as

unacceptable. Notice too that each of these subsets contains an (at least countably) infinite

number of instances.

Gamester might attempt to appeal to the results of the last paragraph to point out that

(R+) (or (R)) is an interesting case that belongs to subset ii) for alethic nihilists but belongs to

subset i) for alethic non-nihilists. That is a difference, but in the grand scheme of things it turns

out not to be much of one. After all, each subset already contains an infinite number of

instances, so finding one sentence that differs between nihilism and non-nihilism does not yield

that one approach faces a greater number of challenges than the other. In the context of

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[11] Gamester, *op*. *cit*., pp. 327-28 and 331-32.

accepting classical reasoning and the principles of acceptability evaluations that we laid out above, the cases in subset ii) pose a challenge for everyone, and still an equal problem for everyone. If some deflationary resolution for this problem emerges, the alethic nihilist can make use of that resolution as well. In the meantime, Gamester would claim, alethic nihilism can solve the "purely" semantic pathologies, whereas non-nihilists do not have an adequate resolution to those. Thus, weighing the costs and benefits, alethic nihilism still comes out on top.

In reply to this argument, we would point out that it assumes that a deflationary resolution of the subset ii) cases will be compatible with alethic nihilism. It is by no means clear that this is correct. For example, since a non-nihilist can work with truth values as well as with acceptability statuses, and it is recognized that truth and acceptability can come apart (since acceptability seems to involve the idea of warrant, which is widely recognized to be "potentially extensionally divergent from", i.e., to come apart from, truth[12]), it might be possible for a non-nihilist to approach a case like (AC2) by saying that it is true but unacceptable, where its being true does not thereby render it acceptable.[13] We are not endorsing such an approach, but it is at least something that is not ruled out automatically for a non-nihilist (including a non-nihilist deflationist) in the way that it is ruled out for the alethic nihilist. All the nihilist has to work with is the acceptability and unacceptability of the conditional and its subsentences, and classical

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[12] See Crispin Wright, *Truth and Objectivity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 21.

[13] That we can have true but unacceptable statements is evident when we consider a case of a fair lottery. If a lottery is fair, then someone will win. But the claim 'I will win the lottery' may be deemed unacceptable for every speaker, including the lucky winner for whom the statement ends up being true.

reasoning with just those statuses (and our principles of acceptability evaluation) results in a

violation of rational requirements for an alethic nihilist.

Note also that a "weighing the costs and benefits" response of the sort suggested above

assumes that only alethic nihilists can solve the "purely semantic" instances of pathology. But,

in a footnote, Gamester points to the different type of alethic fictionalism that we have

developed, one that includes a different sort of resolution (or "dissolution") of semantic

pathology.[14] Gamester notes that our approach is not a "good fit" with alethic nihilism and

elaborates that we therefore cannot resolve semantic pathology via nihilism's simple and direct

moves. That seems correct,[15] but while Gamester points to a range of work in which we

develop our different approach, he offers no critique of it in the service of promoting his

version of alethic nihilism over our approach and the non-nihilist alethic fictionalism on which it

is based. We argue that our dissolution of semantic pathology is a unified, revenge-immune

approach that applies to semantic pathology across the board.[16] Our evaluation of putatively

pathological cases as "semantically defective" in the specific way we explain is a fallout of the

diagnosis of these cases that is generated by the details of the pretense-based accounts of

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[14] Gamester, *op*. *cit*., pp. 330-31, fn. 37. See Bradley Armour-Garb and James A. Woodbridge, "Semantic Defectiveness and the Liar." *Philosophical Studies*, CLXIV, 3 (March 2013): 845-63, "Semantic Defectiveness: A Dissolution of Semantic Pathology," in R. Ciuni, H. Wansing, and C. Willkommen, eds., *Recent Trends in Philosophical Logic (Trends in Logic, Vol. 41)*, (Cham: Springer International Publishing Switzerland, 2014): 1-12, and *op*. *cit*. (2015).

[15] There is a sense in which Gamester's "not a good fit" claim is debatable. Based on what we claim in the works Gamester cites, it is possible for us to maintain that nothing has a property attributed by 'is true'. That seems like a kind of nihilism (one potentially based on an explicit claim that there is no property of truth). However, given that our view is, as Gamester notes, a *hermeneutic* fictionalism about truth-talk, and we (*op*. *cit*., (2015)) claim that truth-talk already invokes pretense in every use, we would not accept a nihilist thesis that *uses* the truth predicate to claim that nothing is true. That use would invoke the pretense behind truth-talk, the operation of which yields that many things, for example, the proposition that snow is white, are true. So, we would reject the claim made in Gamester's title and thus need to handle semantic pathology in a different way.

[16] Armour-Garb and Woodbridge, *op*. *cit*., (2013, 2014, 2015).

truth-talk, reference-talk, and predicate-satisfaction-talk that we have developed. If our non-nihilist approach is in fact revenge-immune,[17] then, since as non-nihilists we can resolve both (R) and (R+), the overall situation would not favor Gamester's alethic nihilism over our alternative version of alethic fictionalism. Gamester's view would still face a revenge problem not faced by non-nihilists, while not offering a benefit unavailable to non-nihilists, at least so long as the latter were alethic fictionalists of the right sort. For this reason, along with those presented earlier in this paper, we conclude that Gamester's alethic nihilism joins a long history of approaches to theorizing about truth which fail to provide an adequate resolution of the Liar Paradox and other cases of apparent semantic pathology.

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[17] Frederick Kroon, "Pushing the Boundaries of Pretence," *Analysis Reviews*, LXXVIII, 4 (October 2018): 703-12, attempts, on pp. 711-12, to generate a revenge problem for our approach beyond those that we (*op. cit.*) address explicitly. However, we answer his new challenge in Bradley Armour-Garb and James A. Woodbridge, "Replies," *Analysis Reviews*, LXXVIII, 4 (October 2018): 718-36, on pp. 734-35.