

# On creeping minimalism and the nature of minimal entities\*

Luca Moretti  
Centre for Time  
University of Sydney  
[luca.moretti@arts.usyd.edu.au](mailto:luca.moretti@arts.usyd.edu.au)

## 1. Introduction

The general tendency or attitude that Dreier 2004 calls *creeping minimalism* is ramping up in contemporary analytic philosophy. Those who entertain this attitude will take for granted a framework of deflationary or *minimal* notions – principally semantical<sup>1</sup> and ontological – by means of which to analyse problems in different philosophical fields – e.g. theory of truth, metaethics, philosophy of language, the debate on realism and antirealism, etc. Let us call *sweeping minimalist* the philosopher affected by creeping minimalism. The framework of minimal notions that the sweeping minimalist takes for granted encompasses, for instance, the concept of truth, reference, proposition, fact, individual, and property. Minimal notions are characterized in terms of general platitudinous principles expressed by schemata like the following (cf.: 26):

‘*S*’ is true if and only if *S*;

‘*S*’ is true if and only if ‘*S*’ corresponds to the facts;

*a* has the property of being *P* if and only if *a* is *P*.

Where ‘*S*’ and ‘*a* is *P*’ stand for sentences satisfying *superficial* constraints of truth-aptness (i.e. sentences in declarative form subject to communally acknowledged standards of proper use), and

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<sup>1</sup> In semantics, minimalist theories are often opposed to contextualist theories (see, for instance, Borg 2007). In this paper when I speak of minimal semantical notions, I do not mean this specific and technical sense of ‘minimal’, though there might be correlations between my sense of minimalism and that sense.

‘*a*’ and ‘*P*’ stand for expressions with the *syntactical* roles of, respectively, a singular term and a predicate.<sup>2</sup>

Dreier argues that from the time when creeping minimalism has broken through in philosophy, the debate about realism has become more puzzling. For, by appealing to platitudes like the above ones, the sweeping minimalist seems to be entitled to assert everything the realist can assert (cf. 23-31). For instance, in metaethics – the specific field analysed by Dreier – many sentences satisfy superficial constraints of truth-aptness; consequently they satisfy the above three platitudes. Given that some of these sentences do meet proper standards of assertibility (e.g. ‘Hitler is bad man’), the sweeping minimalist can assert them. Hence, she can join the realist in asserting that these sentences are *true* (e.g. ‘Hitler is bad man’ is true), that they correspond to moral *facts* (e.g. ‘Hitler is a bad man’ corresponds to the facts), that there exist moral *properties* (e.g. Hitler has the property of being a bad man), and so on. The bewildering consequence is that, when a *non-realist* goes sweeping minimalist, she will apparently be entitled to assert everything the realist can assert. It is however dubious that this non-realist will actually be turned into a realist. For, principally, it appears implausible that realism could be obtained in such a cheap way! When non-realists go sweeping minimalists, it becomes puzzling to explain why they are not realists though they seem to be so. The problem of creeping minimalism is that it threatens to make non-realism indistinguishable from realism.<sup>3</sup>

This paper has two distinct but intimately related purposes: the first is illuminating the nature of creeping minimalism and its broad implications for the configuration of the debate between realists and non-realists in metaphysics. I found it natural to develop my interpretation of the phenomenon of creeping minimalism through the discussion of views put forward by three philosophers who – it seems to me – may have contributed more than any other to the development of this philosophical

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<sup>2</sup> Dreier 2004 is not explicit on these constraints for the applicability of the platitudes, which – I think – are typically assumed by sweeping minimalists. These constraints qualify the position called *disciplined syntacticism* that I sketch in § 2.2.

<sup>3</sup> To quote Dreier’s own words: ‘Minimalism sucks the substance out of heavy-duty metaphysical concepts. If successful, it can help Expressivism recapture the ordinary realist language of ethics. But in so doing it also threatens to make irrealism indistinguishable from realism. That is the problem of Creeping Minimalism’ (2004: 26). Although Dreier mentions here only the non-realist position called *irrealism*, in other passages he seems to assume that creeping minimalism threatens to make also *antirealism* indistinguishable from realism. I come back to this issue in § 3.

tendency. These philosophers are: Paul Horwich, Crispin Wright and Stephen Schiffer. Papers by these authors are often mentioned by sweeping minimalists.

The sweeping minimalist is often committed to maintaining that there are entities that fall under minimal notions (e.g. facts, properties, etc.). Let us call the latter *minimal* entities. The second purpose of my paper is clarifying the ontological status of these objects (are they *real* entities or mere *linguistic posits*?) and investigating the bearing of their existence on the fate of the debate between realists and non-realists in metaphysics. The upshot of my overall investigation will cast some light on the intriguing problem uncovered by Dreier.

In the next pages, I will venture answers for the following seven questions:

- What exactly is creeping minimalism?
- What precisely is a minimal notion?
- Why is creeping minimalism so captivating and pervasive?
- Does creeping minimalism affect the configuration of the debate between realists and non-realists?
- What engenders commitment to minimal entities?
- What is the ontological status of minimal entities?
- Does the existence of minimal entities bear on the fate of the dispute between realists and non-realists?

The following summarizes my understanding of the phenomenon of creeping minimalism and of its broad consequences for the configuration of the debate between realists and non-realists in metaphysics (i.e. my answers to the first four questions above). The sweeping minimalist attitude is essentially one that prompts the generalized use of a framework of minimal, semantical and ontological notions. This framework is built up through the logical regimentation of a holistic web of semantical and ontological notions implicit in ordinary language. Minimal notions are metaphysically unloaded, as they replicate corresponding folk notions the understanding of which does not require any philosophical training or background. Minimal notions are also platitudinous in

the sense that they reflect uncontentious principles implicit in ordinary language. An important function of minimal notions (and of their correlated ordinary notions) is enabling the explicit formulation of blind generalizations. Creeping minimalism is compatible with conceptual pluralism. For the sweeping minimalist can concede that, in certain fields, we possess or can define notions that represent thicker versions of minimal notions; these notions depend on non-platitudinous principles and may allow for genuine philosophical explanations. The sweeping minimalist attitude is captivating because relies, at the bottom, on familiar notions we already use informally in ordinary discourse. The sweeping minimalist attitude is pervasive because minimal notions are holistically related to one another in the same way as the folk notions that they replicate are holistically related to one another. Accordingly, we cannot use one minimal notion if we do not use many other minimal notions. When creeping minimalism takes place, configuring the debate between realists and non-realists as a dispute between realists and *non-cognitivists* becomes unfruitful. Yet this debate can still be construed as a dispute between realists and *antirealists*, or – with some restrictions – as a dispute between realists and *error-theorists*.

The following summarizes my understanding of the nature of minimal entities and of the consequences of their existence for the fate of dispute on realism and non-realism (i.e. my answers to the last three questions above). Minimal entities are those that fall under minimal notions. Deflationary principles included in the framework of the sweeping minimalist, which replicate platitudinous ordinary principles, ensure ontological commitment to minimal entities. Disallowing such a commitment would impoverish the expressive power of language, as it would prevent the explicit formulation of blind existential generalizations. It is proper to the nature of minimal entities that only deflationary notions of reference can explain our ability to refer to them – these notions of reference can establish no link between language and extra-linguistic world. Minimal entities are thus *intrinsic to language*. Minimal entities are nothing but reifications or hypostatizations of linguistic constructs. Creeping minimalism is compatible with ontological pluralism because the sweeping minimalist can in principle accept that the world is populated by both minimal entities

and, in certain fields, ontologically more substantive entities (where the latter are the extensions of thicker versions of minimal notions that the sweeping minimalist can in principle accept). Although the existence of minimal entities raises minor difficulties to certain forms of error-theory, it has no apparent implication for the acceptability of realism and *antirealism*. As a result, allowing the existence of these entities has no significant consequence for the debate on realism and non-realism as long as this debate is construed as a dispute between realists and antirealists.

This paper aims to substantiate the following general thesis: creeping minimalism does not render non-realism indistinguishable from realism. For when creeping minimalism takes place, it is still possible to distinguish with clarity and precision between realist and non-realist positions. Precisely, positions that entail *realism* about certain entities, positions that entail *antirealism* about the same entities, and positions that entail an *error-theory* about those entities. This also constitutes my answer to Dreier's challenge.

This is the structure of the paper: §§ 2, 2.1-2.3, provide my interpretation of the phenomenon of creeping minimalism and of the notion of a minimal entity *via* analysing and "assembling" views put forward by Horwich, Wright and Schiffer. Precisely, § 2 introduces the topic; § 2.1 focuses on Horwich's Minimalist theory of truth and reference; § 2.2 focuses on Wright's notions of minimal truth and of minimal truth-aptitude; and § 2.3 focuses on Schiffer's pleonastic ontology. § 3 analyses the general configuration assumed by the debate on realism and non-realism once creeping minimalism has taken place. § 4 investigates the ontological status of minimal entities and the bearing of their introduction on the debate about realism and non-realism. § 5 draws the conclusions of the paper, in which Dreier's problem is addressed.

## **2. The nature of creeping minimalism**

I will now consider in succession Horwich's Minimalist theory of truth and reference, Wright's minimalism about truth and truth-aptitude, and Schiffer's pleonastic ontology. I am not going to attempt any substantive defence (or refutation) of these influential philosophical views; any fair and

accurate assessment of them would require a paper far longer than this. Rather, I will try to cast light on the theoretical connections among these positions and on their contribution towards the creation of the sweeping minimalist stance. I will show that once these three positions are suitably interpreted and developed, “assembling” them together in the right way produces almost naturally creeping minimalism.

## 2.1 Horwich’s Minimalist theory of truth and reference

Although Horwich is not the “father” of the sweeping minimalist stance, he can surely be indicated as one of its “grandfathers”. Horwich aims to answer the question: what is truth? The answer comes in the terms of the Minimalist (notice the capital letter ‘M’) theory of truth, presented in *Truth* (1998, first ed. 1990)<sup>4</sup> as a variant of the broader deflationary conception of truth (cf. 1998: ix).

Perhaps, earlier deflationists such as Frege, Ramsey, Ayer and Strawson might also be considered grandfathers (or grand-grandfathers!) of creeping minimalism. One difficulty with this attribution is that the views of these authors involve – or seem to involve – that the predicate ‘is true’ connotes no property at all.<sup>5</sup> This clashes with the creeping minimalist thesis that the truth-predicate – as well as most (if not all) predicates – connotes a property. On Horwich’s Minimalist theory, the truth-predicate connotes ‘a property of *some* sort’ (37) though no *substantive* property – e.g. any complex or naturalistic property (cf.: 10-11 and 37) or any type of justification or idealized justification (cf.: 56-62). I will return to this point at the end of this section.

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<sup>4</sup> I will refer here to the second edition of this book, though the passages I am going to consider have undergone no substantial change or no change at all between the two editions. For further clarification of Horwich’s view, see also Horwich 2001.

<sup>5</sup> Frege 1891 and 1918, Ramsey 1927, and Ayer 1935 and 1936 accepted versions of the *redundancy* theory of truth. Roughly, they agreed in holding that asserting that *S* is true (where ‘*S*’ stands for a sentence) is just asserting that *S*, and it is not asserting something (i.e. a property) of the proposition that *S*. Strawson 1950 and Ayer 1963 accepted the performative (or also expressivist) conception of truth, according to which the expression ‘is true’ is used, not to make descriptions or attribution of properties, but only to perform quite different speech acts, like endorsing and agreeing. More recent versions of deflationism may have played a role in the development of creeping minimalism. However, this would not seem to be the case with the *prosentential* theories defended, for instance, by Grover et al. 1975. The prosententialists interpret expressions such as ‘it is true’ and ‘that is true’ as *prosentences* – namely, as linguistic tools for achieving anaphoric cross-reference to sentences asserted formerly (just as pronouns are devices for achieving anaphoric cross-reference to names uttered previously). Prosententialists believe that the expression ‘is true’ is no genuine predicate (cf. Kirkham 1997: 326-7), with the consequence that it cannot possibly connote any property.

Horwich believes that the conceptions of truth that presuppose substantive and complex accounts of truth cannot survive any serious scrutiny (cf.: 8-10). The central problem is that for any substantive theory that seems to explain what the truth of the propositions in a given domain is, there will in general be many other domains in which that explanation will face counterexamples. Horwich contends that the truth-predicate exists principally to fulfil certain logical functions – basically, for enabling the explicit formulation of generalizations in situations of partial information (shortly, the formulation of blind generalizations) (cf.: 2-4, 31-3 and 37).<sup>6</sup>

Suppose I want to endorse what John said to Katie, though I do not know what he said. If I knew it, I could simply re-assert what John said, but this is not possible now. I can however express my attitude by stating that what John said to Katie *is true*. Or suppose that, since I believe that the Pope is always sincere and infallible, I intend to accept the Pope's all claims. Although I cannot assert everything the Pope said and will say, I can certainly state that everything the Pope says *is true*. On Horwich's view, what enables truth to have these logical functions is simply the fact that all uncontroversial<sup>7</sup> instances of the Equivalence Schema,

[ES] It is true that *S* if and only if *S*,

where '*S*' stands for a sentence,<sup>8</sup> hold valid. Consider again the Pope example. Without appealing to a principle like [ES], to accept all claims of the Pope, I would need to use a turn of phrase that alludes to a potentially infinite conjunction of conditionals such as:

If the Pope says that Sydney is big, then Sydney is big, and if the Pope says that my pizza is indigestible, then my pizza indigestible, and if ... and so on.

Through [ES], the potentially infinite conjunction becomes equivalent to:

<sup>6</sup> Without the truth-predicate, this logical function could be satisfied by a complex language that allows for substitutional quantification. Horwich explicitly admits that the truth-predicate, strictly speaking, *could* be eliminated from our language (cf. 1998: 124-5). Yet the truth-predicate allows for a language that is simpler than it would otherwise be (cf. *ibid.*: 4 note 1, and 31-3).

<sup>7</sup> Uncontroversial instances are those that are non-paradoxical or in some sense "pathological". Typically, paradoxical instances of [ES] are those associated with the liar paradox (cf. Horwich 1998: 40-3).

<sup>8</sup> Precisely, to include true sentences inexpressible in current English, Horwich imposes that '*S*' stands for sentences of any possible extension of current English (cf. 1998: 18, note 3).

If the Pope says that Sydney is big, then it is true that Sydney is big, and if the Pope says my pizza is indigestible, then it is true that my pizza is indigestible, and if ... and so on.

Now, we can express the same content as above by a *finite* universal generalization, that is:

For every  $x$ , if the Pope asserts that  $x$ , then it is true that  $x$ .

More colloquially: Everything the Pope says is true.

Similarly, by appealing to [ES] we can express the potentially infinite *disjunction*

John said that  $S_1$  to Katie and  $S_1$ , or John said that  $S_2$  to Katie and  $S_2$ , or John said that  $S_3$  to Katie and  $S_3$ , or ... and so on,

in terms of the following *finite* existential generalization:

There exists an  $x$  such that John said that  $x$  to Katie and it is true that  $x$ .

Colloquially: what John said to Katie is true.

Horwich takes truth to be a property of propositions; namely, the referents of the that-clause in [ES] (cf.: 16-17).<sup>9</sup> Horwich considers his theory to be minimal because *conceptually* or *metaphysically* minimal: truth has, according to it, a minimal “essence” or “nature” (cf.: 6). For the entire conceptual role of truth can be explicated on the sole grounds of the uncontroversial instances of [ES] (cf.: 5 and 20-3), where the latter constitute all and only the axioms of the Minimalist theory of truth (cf.: 6, 11 and 17-20).<sup>10</sup> Truth does not have any hidden nature or deeper structure awaiting our discovery: the Minimalist theory provides a complete explanation of this notion and of the correlated property (cf.: 4-5, 11, 23-5). In particular, there is no explanation (in any interesting sense of ‘explanation’) of why [ES] holds good. [ES] is conceptually basic (cf.: 50-1).<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> The precise metaphysical nature of proposition is largely irrelevant for the formulation of the Minimalist theory (cf.: 1998: 16-17 and Ch 6). Horwich also formulates a version of the Minimalist theory for utterances (cf.: 98-103).

<sup>10</sup> Clearly, the Minimalist theory cannot be explicitly formulated but only implicitly specified (cf. Horwich 1998: 11, 20 and 25-31).

<sup>11</sup> The Minimalist theory gives no analysis of the notion of truth in terms of sufficient and necessary conditions (cf. Horwich 1998: 10, 20 and 33-6) but provides a definition of the truth-predicate in terms of use by specifying the basic regularity that governs its overall deployment (cf.: 34-5). (This conception of meaning is fully developed in Horwich’s

The Minimalist theory of truth does not define truth contextually in terms of other notions – for instance through the notions of reference or of a fact. Yet Horwich believes that truth and reference are so intimately related ‘that the rationale for a minimal account of truth will equally well motivate a minimal account of reference’ (113). The Minimalist account of reference, sketched in 1998, is fully developed in *Meaning* (1998a). Horwich argues that the expression ‘refers’ connotes no complex property (or relation) and that any attempted naturalistic or conceptual reduction of the notion of reference is probably doomed to fail (cf. 1998: 113-17 and 1998a: 115-18). Horwich is persuaded that the expression ‘refers’ principally exists – just as the predicate ‘is true’ – because it simplifies our language (cf. 1998: 115 and 1998a: 121-3). The use of ‘refers’ is fixed by a schema the instances of which hold trivially valid; precisely:

[R] For every  $x$ , the concept of  $a$  refers to  $x$  if and only if  $a$  is identical to  $x$ ,

where ‘ $a$ ’ stands for a singular term, and the concept of  $a$  is the propositional component expressed by ‘ $a$ ’ (cf.: 1998: 116 and 1998a: 118-20). [R] is explanatorily basic just as [ES] is (cf. 1998: 116, note 6 and 1998a: 120).<sup>12</sup> An important function of the notion of reference is – in analogy with [ES] – that of enabling the explicit formulation of blind generalizations.<sup>13</sup>

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1998a). The meaning of the truth-predicate is fixed by our disposition to accept all uncontroversial instances of [ES] and to use this predicate always in accordance with that disposition (cf. 1998: 33-6).

<sup>12</sup> Horwich’s contends that the meaning of the expression ‘refers’ is fixed by our disposition to accept the instances of R and to use ‘refers’ always in accordance with that disposition. Horwich (1998: 116 and 1998a: 29) suggests an analogous deflationary characterization of the notion of being true of (or being satisfied by). Putnam (1978: 128) has put forward a similar deflationary notion.

<sup>13</sup> Suppose that, though I know nothing about what John said, I believe he referred to Plato. Suppose I want to express my belief. If I had no notion of reference (nor any equivalent notion such as being true of or being about), I would need to assert a potentially infinite disjunction of propositions like the following:

The proposition asserted by John embeds the concept of Socrates’ greatest student and Socrates’ greatest student is identical to Plato, or the proposition asserted by John embeds the concept of the writer of *Republic* and the writer of *Republic* is identical to Plato, or ... and so on.

By appealing to [R], this potentially infinite disjunction becomes equivalent to the following:

The proposition asserted by John embeds the concept of Socrates’ greatest student and the concept of Socrates’ greatest student refers to Plato, or the proposition asserted by John embeds the concept of the writer of *Republic* and the concept of the writer of *Republic* refers to Plato, or ... and so on.

This potentially infinite sentence can now be explicitly expressed by a *finite* existential generalization, that is:

There exists a concept that is part of the proposition asserted John and that refers to Plato.

Colloquially: John spoke of Plato. Without the Minimalist notion of reference, this function could be satisfied by allowing substitutional quantification (cf. Horwich 1998: 115-16). Further functions of minimal reference are illustrated in Horwich (1998a: 121-3).

The principle [R] can be reformulated as follows to apply directly to singular term:

[R\*] For every  $x$ , ‘ $a$ ’ refers to  $x$  if and only if  $a$  is identical to  $x$ .

where «‘ $a$ ’», in the left-hand side, stands for the name of a singular term type exemplified by the replacement for the token ‘ $a$ ’ in the right-hand side.<sup>14</sup>

The contribution by Horwich and, more generally, by deflationists about truth to the creation of the creeping minimalism framework comes in the terms of the substantiation of the thesis that the notion of truth can be characterized on principles as elementary and platitudinous as [ES]. Deflationism about truth has probably been the seed from which the plant of creeping minimalism has sprung up. For the idea that the notion of truth is platitudinous is suggestive of the sweeping minimalist’s conviction that many other important notions in philosophy are also so. Indeed, Horwich himself has made a crucial step to substantiate this conviction by putting forward his Minimalist notion of reference. In § 2.3, I will suggest that this notion (or one strictly analogous) is also part of the sweeping minimalist’s framework and it is vital to ensure ontological commitment to minimal entities in general. Finally, Horwich’s explanation of the logical function of truth and reference as devices to enable blind generalizations can be generalized to clarify an important function of the whole framework of the sweeping minimalism. I will suggest in §§ 2.2 and 2.3 that other important minimal notions can be thought of as having the same logical role.

One reason why Horwich’s deflationism harmonizes with the spirit of creeping minimalism is that it embeds the claim that the truth predicate connotes a *property*, though no substantive property. This is the precise sense in which Horwich is inclined to think of truth as a property:

‘Is true’ is a perfectly good English predicate – and (leaving aside nominalistic concerns about the very notion of ‘property’) one might well take this to be a conclusive criterion for standing for a property of *some* sort. (Horwich 1998: 37. See also: 141-3).

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<sup>14</sup> To cope with issues of context sensitivity and other difficulties, the valid use of [R\*] should be constrained by further stipulations that I will leave implicit here.

On this basis, Horwich would probably assert that his deflationary notion of reference identifies a corresponding thin property (or relation) too. This notion of a property would seem to coincide with the deflationary notion of a property elicited by the sweeping minimalist attitude and characterized in terms of only platitudinous principle (more on this in § 2.2).

Deflationism about truth can be targeted with various objections. For instance, it can be argued that on a deflated notion of truth it becomes impossible to explain why truth has intrinsic value independently of its practical utility, how true propositions can correspond to external facts, how the truth of a proposition depends on the referential properties of its parts, how truth can play any explanatory role – for example: explaining the achievement of practical goals, explaining the empirical success of scientific theories, explaining the nature of logical deduction, and so on. Horwich's defensive strategy is articulated: he argues that some of these features do not pertain to truth at all and that some other features are actually possessed by Minimalist truth. Moreover, some of the functions traditionally attributed to truth, would be explainable, for Horwich, on the grounds of the Minimalist theory in conjunction with other theories – such as a theory of human psychology, a theory of reference, a logical theory, and so on (cf.: 20-5 and Chs 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7).<sup>15</sup> It is difficult not to be sceptical in front of these claims. For it is implausible – if not incredible – that a notion of truth as vacuous as the Minimalist's can actually have any of the substantive properties traditionally attributed to truth and can actually fulfil any of the substantive functions typically attributed to truth – if the fulfilment is claimed to obtain after conjoining the Minimalist theory of truth with another theory, it is reasonable to expect that the latter, and not the Minimalist theory, will do all of the essential jobs.

Could (a version of) Minimalism accommodate a more substantive conception of truth? I want to suggest it can. Horwich is a *monist* about truth. The Minimalist theory is meant to characterize a notion of truth that is assumed to be the only one we possess, and this thin notion is unsuitable to satisfy substantive functions and properties that many philosophers believe truth has to fulfil. An irenic attitude might be that of embracing some form of *pluralism* about truth. Namely, conceding that the

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<sup>15</sup> For criticism of Horwich's Minimalism see, for instance, Dodd 2002, Gupta 2001, O'Leary-Hawthorne and Oppy 1997, Kirkham (1997: 339-49), Field 1992, and Devitt 1991.

Minimalist notion of truth is nothing but the platitudinous notion that we only use for the unsubstantial functions described by Horwich while recognizing that we may also possess further notions of truth, proper to certain areas of discourse, that fulfil more specific and substantive functions. (Consider for instance a form of pluralism involving that the notion of truth proper to, say, *moral* sentences is just platitudinous while the one suitable to *scientific* sentences reflects a complex and naturalistic property). This view is not *prima facie* absurd or implausible. Truth is certainly a fundamental notion in philosophy, but pluralism about key notions is customarily endorsed in many intellectually respectable disciplines. In physics – for instance, there are various notions of energy (kinetic, potential, gravitational, etc.) and various notions of force (electric, magnetic, electromagnetic, gravitational, etc.).<sup>16</sup> In the same way, in philosophical logic, various notions of necessity (logical, nomological, metaphysical) are typically accepted. Prominent metaphysicians of the past were also pluralists about other central notions – for instance, Aristotle, Aquinas and other great figures of scholasticism were pluralists about the very notion of being. A form of pluralism might thus apply to the notion of truth too.<sup>17</sup>

Although Horwich would most likely not accept any interpretation aiming at reconciling his own view with alethic pluralism, I suggest that this is the reading of *Truth* that many sweeping minimalists adopt or tend to adopt. The sweeping minimalist attitude does not elicit the belief that there is just *one* notion of truth, which is a minimal notion. Rather, the sweeping minimalist attitude seems to rely on the assumption that we possess a web of minimal notions that includes the one of truth. This is *prima facie* compatible with the possibility that we also possess more substantive notions of truth (and of reference). Besides, consenting to some form of pluralism about truth will shield sweeping minimalists from some of the objections that trouble Horwich's Minimalism.

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<sup>16</sup> Often, scientific notions belong to the same family because they share the same central principles. For instance, in classical physics, any force must satisfy the second principle of dynamics. We obtain gravitational force by adding Newton's gravitation law, alternatively we obtain electric force by the addition of Coulomb's law, and so on. To produce pluralism about truth, the Equivalence Schema might be assumed to play the most central role, in analogy with the second principle of dynamics. On this view, any notion of truth will have to satisfy [ES]. Different notions of truth will obtain after adding further qualifying principles to [ES]. (I am in debt to Huw Price for suggesting this analogy). This form of pluralism does not entail the oddity that the notion of truth is *equivocal* or *ambiguous* but, rather, that it is susceptible of different *specifications*.

<sup>17</sup> For a survey of the problems of contemporary pluralism about truth, see Lynch 2004.

## 2.2 Wright's minimal truth and minimal truth-aptitude

Pluralism about truth of the sort just outlined appears to be a component of Wright's minimalism.

Wright is a closer parent of the sweeping minimalist stance than Horwich (if parenthood can be a matter of degree). In *Truth and Objectivity* (1992), Wright puts forward a broad philosophical perspective called minimalism (notice the small 'm'), which has further been clarified especially in Wright 2001.<sup>18</sup> Wright's minimalism is 'an account kindred to the spirit of [Horwich's] own [Minimalism]' (1992: 23 continuation of note 15). In Particular, Wright accepts – as one of the central ingredients of minimalism – an enriched version of Horwich's theory of truth as characterizing the most elementary or minimal concept of truth we possess (cf.: 13 note 13, and 21 note 15). This *concept* of truth corresponds to a deflationary or thin *property* of truth in the same sense in which Horwich's Minimalist truth corresponds to a deflationary property (cf. 2001: 753-4 and 783 note 5). Yet whereas Horwich is a monist about truth, Wright is a pluralist: he contends that there are or may be different truth-predicates additional to the minimal truth-predicate, and thus various thicker notions of truth proper to different areas of discourse (cf. 1992: 24-5 and 37-8).<sup>19</sup> To qualify as a notion of truth, any predicate ought at least to satisfy the requisite indicated by Horwich – i.e. the instances of [ES] – and further basic principles – or *platitudes* – about truth (cf.: 38). These requirements characterize the minimal truth-predicate. Wright's minimal notion of truth is thus not conceptually (or metaphysically) minimal in the same sense as Horwich's is. For Wright's minimal notion has a more complex, though platitudinous, structure. Yet Wright's notion can still be considered to be conceptually minimal in the sense of being the most elementary of a plurality of notions of truth that (according to Wright) we do possess or can possess.

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<sup>18</sup> A significant theoretical change between the two papers is that, while in the first minimalism is described as entailing pluralism about both the *notion* and the *property* of truth (see, for instance Wright 1992: 25), in the second, minimalism is claimed to entail pluralism about only the property of truth but *not* the notion of truth (cf. Wright 2001: 751-4). I find the latter position puzzling and – as far as I can understand it – implausible. See also below, note 21.

<sup>19</sup> Wright (1992: 12-24) delivers an argument to the effect that Minimalism – and, more generally, deflationism about truth – is 'an inherently unstable position'. For a reply see Khlentzos (2004: 25-9). Horwich himself has countered this objection in the Postscript of *Truth* (see 1998: 143-4).

The focus of *Truth and Objectivity* is on the issues of realism and antirealism (cf.: 1).

Following Dummett and Putnam,<sup>20</sup> Wright believes that the features of the notion of truth that best suits a given area of discourse determine whether that discourse is to be considered realist or antirealist. Wright suggests that the debate about realism and antirealism will properly be developed only after both parties have accepted the metaphysically neutral framework of minimalism, which allows for the definition of the minimal notion of truth and of the correlated minimal property of truth (cf.: 27, 13 and 76). Wright believes that metaphysically thicker notions of truth can possibly be obtained, and that the debate about the realist commitment of a given discourse should be developed as a debate concerning the presence or absence in that discourse of further features that constitute these more substantial notions of truth (cf.: Ch 3 and 2001: 752).<sup>21</sup> For example, the additional feature of truth of being *potentially evidence-transcendent* would give the discourse to which such a notion of truth applies a realist connotation (cf. 1992: 77-8).<sup>22</sup>

To appreciate Wright's crucial contribution to the development of the sweeping minimalism attitude, we need to go deeper into the framework of minimalism. For Wright, the mere acceptance of [ES] does not suffice to characterize in full the minimal notion of truth; for this purpose, further principles are to be included (cf. 2001: 751). The minimal notion of truth is contextually defined by a set of 'very general, very intuitive *a priori* laws' (1992: 72) that 'chime with ordinary *a priori* thinking about truth' (2001: 759), which Wright calls truth-platitudes (cf. *ibid.* and 1992: 34-5).

While some of the truth-platitudes are expressed by schemata, others are expressed by well-formed sentences. Wright advances no comprehensive list of truth-platitudes (cf.: 35 and 72. See also 2001:

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<sup>20</sup> Mainly Putnam 1981.

<sup>21</sup> Wright (2001: 751-4) claims that pluralism concerns the *property* of truth but not the notion of truth. Wright maintains that the same platitudinous notion of truth may denote different properties in different contexts, and that what counts as a thick property of truth in a discourse must be something that *explains* why the truth-platitudes hold for that discourse. Wright draws an analogy between the concepts of truth and of water. The surface features of water typically described by the concept (or Putnam (1978: 98)'s stereotype) of water (e.g. being a colourless, odourless, tasteless liquid) are explained by the property of being composed of H<sub>2</sub>O molecules (with auxiliary assumptions). Analogously, the property of a sentence '*S*' of corresponding to a given mind-independent fact could explain why '*S*' does satisfy truth-platitudes. Wright admits, however, that this analogy is imperfect because while investigating the nature of water is an *a posteriori* task, investigating the property of truth for a given discourse is a matter of 'further *conceptual* reflection' (2001: 753. Wright's emphasis). What is puzzling is how it could be *conceptually* true that the notion of truth can denote different properties in different discourse if this variability is not reflected by the *notion* of truth itself (see also Lynch 2004: 387).

<sup>22</sup> The intuitive idea behind this is that if a sentence proves evidence-transcendently true, what makes the sentence true is something that is independent of our cognitive operations (cf. Wright 1992: 4).

760), but includes among them [ES]<sup>23</sup> – which holds for propositions – and the version of [ES] for sentences, or Disquotational Schema, namely:

[DS] ‘*S*’ is true if and only if *S*,

where «‘*S*’», in the left-hand side, stands for the name of a sentence type exemplified by the replacement for the sentence token ‘*S*’ in the right-hand side.<sup>24</sup> Other truth-platitudes are, for instance, the following:

[a] The proposition that *S* is true if and only if it is true that *S*.<sup>25</sup>

[b] Asserting the proposition that *S* is asserting that the proposition *S* is true;<sup>26</sup>

[c] ‘*S*’ is truth-apt if and only if ‘not-*S*’ is truth-apt;<sup>27</sup>

[d] Some proposition may be true and not justified, and *vice versa*;

[e] ‘*S*’ is true if and only if ‘*S*’ corresponds to the facts.

[f] Truth is absolute (i.e. not a matter of degrees);

(Cf. 1992: 35 and 72, and 2001: 760).<sup>28</sup>

In [DS] and in the other principles above, ‘*S*’ stands for a sentence that counts as at least *minimally* truth-apt (cf.: 1992: 27-8). I will elucidate this notion below.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Wright appears less prone than Horwich to reject (apparently) problematic instances of [ES]. See Wright (1992: 61-64) and (2001: 782 note 1).

<sup>24</sup> It is unclear whether Wright considers ‘*S*’, in [DS], to be a Quinean “eternal sentence”. If he does not, the valid use of [DS] should be constrained by stipulations that settle arising problems of context sensitivity.

<sup>25</sup> It is not completely clear to me whether Wright believes that the that-clauses refer *univocally* to propositions. At any rate, the fact that Wright explicitly considers [ES] as a schema for propositions commits him to [a].

<sup>26</sup> More generally: any propositional attitude to the proposition that *S* is an attitude to its truth (cf. Wright 2001: 760).

<sup>27</sup> More generally: aptitude for truth is preserved under standard logical operations (cf. Wright 2001: 760).

<sup>28</sup> Wright 1992 also considers the platitude – which he believes to be ‘more contentious’ (72) than others – stating that truth is stable (i.e. if something is true, it is always so). In this paper I will lay no great weight on this truth platitude as definitive of minimal truth. If this platitude is accepted, a suitable antirealist notion of truth can plausibly be thought of in terms of *superassertibility* (cf. 44-70), where a proposition is superassertible if and only if its assertion is ‘justified by some (in principle accessible) state of information and [would remain] justified no matter how that state of information might be enlarged upon or improved’ (47).

<sup>29</sup> There are logical links between some of these platitudes. For example, each instance of [DS] logically follows from the corresponding instance of [ES] in which the same sentence *S* occurs, in conjunction with the platitudinous assumption that ‘*S*’ is true if and only if what ‘*S*’ says (or expresses) is true, and the assumption that ‘*S*’ says that *S* (cf. Wright 1992: 24). Similarly, the instances of [b] are entailed by the corresponding instances of [ES] and other platitudinous assumptions (cf. Wright 2001: 670).

Wright believes that a set of platitudes about truth, which ‘collectively constrain and locate the [truth-predicate] and that sufficiently characterize some of its relations with other [predicates] and its role and purposes’ (2001: 759), will adequately illuminate the notion of truth.<sup>30</sup> Importantly, predicates or notions other than that of truth that figure in the platitudes are also conceived of as deflationary. Consider for instance platitude [e]. For Wright, the expression ‘the facts’, in it, could harmlessly be replaced with ‘reality’, and the whole [e] could be rephrased for instance like this:

‘S’ is true if and only if reality is as ‘S’ says it is,

without any loss of content (cf. 1992: 25-7). If the notions of a fact and of correspondence were characterized in terms of precise metaphysical theses, replacements and reformulations of this sort would result in some loss of content.

In developing the theoretical framework of minimalism, Wright has broadened the family of deflationary notions to include at least the notions of a fact, of correspondence with reality, of truth-aptness.<sup>31</sup> This enlargement is likely to have been the spark that triggered a chain-reaction: as a result of the reception of Wright’s minimalism, philosophers may have started believing that a whole *web* of deflationary notions somehow stems from a deflationary notion of truth (I will outline an argument to corroborate this belief shortly). This might have been the most crucial step in the formation of the sweeping minimalist attitude.

An influential interpretation of Wright’s position – often attributed to Jackson 1994 – describes minimalism as ‘a *common ground* approach to circumscribing the platitudes which constrain [the notion of truth – where] the platitudes are those assumptions which all theorists irrespective of their particular metaphysical commitments are prepared to make’ (Divers and Miller 1994: 15). This interpretation of Wright’s view seems to me not fitting. How could we formulate platitudes of this sort? Following suggestions by Burgess (1997: 262) and Divers and Miller (1994: 15 note 4), the set of the *a priori* principles about truth that ‘all *theorists* irrespective of their particular

<sup>30</sup> Like Horwich, Wright is sceptical about the possibility of giving a *reductive* analysis of the minimal notion truth, i.e. one that provides sufficient and necessary conditions for the application of the truth-predicate (cf. Wright 2001: 759-60 and 784 note 15).

<sup>31</sup> It is not clear to me whether Wright 1992 and 2001 uses the term ‘proposition’ in a deflationary or a thick sense.

metaphysical commitments are prepared to make' should plausibly include philosophical *disjunctions* and *conditionals* that shun any specific ontological commitment. For instance the following:

[i] Fregean thoughts are bearers of truth, or Russellian propositions are bearers of truth, or beliefs are bearers of truth, or sentence-types are bearers of truth, or sentence-tokens are bearers of truth, or utterances are bearers of truth, or ... (and so on to exhaust all known possibilities).

[ii] If there exist Fregean thoughts, then any true Fregean thought denotes the true.

A problem is that neither [i] nor [ii] looks like a truth-platitude of those presented in Wright's examples, which are much more immediate and easier to grasp.<sup>32</sup> The basic reason seems to me this: while accepting [i] or [ii] presupposes the knowledge of what specific philosophical doctrines (e.g. the theory of Fregean thoughts) say about truth – knowledge typically requested by any *theorist* (or, more precisely, *metaphysician*) of truth – accepting what Wright calls truth-platitudes does not appear to require any sort of specialistic knowledge.

I believe that with the expression 'truth-platitude', Wright refers to principles more elementary than [i] and [ii]. Roughly, he refers to those principles about truth that *any speaker* who can be said to understand the *ordinary* meaning of the predicate 'is true'<sup>33</sup> is ready to accept as *a priori* correct.<sup>34</sup> For example, a speaker who could be said to understand the ordinary meaning of 'is true' and had no philosophical training would *not* typically accept [i] and [ii] as *a priori* correct, while she would plausibly endorse all instances of [ES] (in which 'S' appears to her truth-apt) as *a priori* correct. In sum, Wright's minimal notion of truth would seem to aim to provide an elementary

<sup>32</sup> Surprisingly, neither Divers and Miller 1994 nor Burgess 1997 seem to notice this problem.

<sup>33</sup> Since the predicate 'is true' has more than one meaning (consider 'this sentence is true' and 'this painting is not true'), I specifically refer to the meaning of 'is true' ruled by the principle – among others – that to assert something is to assert it as true.

<sup>34</sup> This specific interpretation of Wright's truth-platitudes seems presupposed in Lynch 2004.

logical model (or elementary rational reconstruction) of the *folk* or *ordinary* notion of truth, which is not metaphysically loaded.<sup>35</sup>

The sweeping minimalist attitude elicits massive use of deflationary notions in semantics and ontology. I conjecture that the nature of many of these minimal notions can be characterized in the very same way as Wright's minimal truth according to my interpretation of it; namely, these notions are elementary regimentations of their *ordinary* counterparts, which depend on platitudinous principles implicit in our ordinary language. This conjecture – if correct – casts some light on why the sweeping minimalist attitude is almost irresistible and easy to creep up on us: this attitude essentially consists in yielding to the temptation to deploy in philosophy familiar and comfortable notions we already use in ordinary discourse. Consider also that introducing minimal notions of this kind to philosophical discourse requires only a negligible theoretical effort, as these notions are virtually already available.

I will now sketch an argument to the effect that if we possess a minimal notion of truth that aims to be a logical regimentation of its folk counterpart, we will possess many minimal notions of the same sort. It is hard to deny that there are *a priori* links between the notion of truth and various semantical and ontological notions we use ordinarily – for instance, between the notion of truth and the notions of a proposition and of a fact.<sup>36</sup> It appears also correct or very plausible that if a speaker did not acknowledge the existence of many of these *a priori* links, that speaker could not be

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<sup>35</sup> An objection might be that a speaker who understands the ordinary meaning of 'is true' and had no philosophical training might not accept the instances of [ES] with 'S' replaced with a *philosophical* sentence, as she might not understand its meaning, though that sentence would appear truth-apt to philosophically trained speakers. This might be the case with the replacement for 'S' that yields the following instance of [ES]:

If it is true that there exist Fregean thoughts, then there exist Fregean thoughts.

The same problem arises with other replacements for 'S' in [ES] – and in other principles about truth – the understanding of which requires some specific training (for instance, scientific). I believe that Wright would accept all or most of these instances as truth-platitudes. To address this problem, my characterization of truth-platitude should be refined, perhaps in this way: a truth-platitude is a principle about truth that any speaker who can be said to understand the ordinary meaning of the predicate 'is true' is ready to accept as *a priori* correct unconditionally or conditionally under the assumption that all its embedded sentences are truth-apt. For example, a speaker who understands the ordinary meaning of 'is true' would accept the above instance of [ES] if she were assured that the embedded sentence 'there exist Fregean thoughts' is truth-apt. Notice that if the same speaker were provided with the same assurance and also with the assurance that the sentence 'any true Fregean thought denotes the true' is truth-apt, she would typically *not* accept [ii] as *a priori* correct.

<sup>36</sup> Consider that any competent speakers can ordinarily moves back and forward between 'is is true that it is raining' and 'it is a fact that the proposition that it is raining is true'.

credited with understanding the ordinary concept of truth. Such *a priori* links – perhaps the most central of them – should consequently be interpreted as *definitive* or *essential* to the folk notion of truth. If the minimal notion of truth is a model of the folk notion of truth, these *a priori* connections should be described by some of the platitudes that contextually define minimal truth. Two platitudes that describe these *a priori* links seem to be the following schemata:

[e\*] It is true that *S* if and only if the proposition that *S* corresponds to the fact that *S*;<sup>37</sup>

[g] For every *x*, it is true that *a* is *P* if and only if there exists an *x* such that ‘*a*’ refers to *x* and *x* is *P*,

where ‘*a*’ stands for an expression having the logical (or syntactical) role of a singular term, «‘*a*’» stands for the name of that singular term, and ‘*P*’ stands for an expression having the logical (or syntactical) role of a predicate.<sup>38</sup> If [e\*] and [g] are logical reconstructions of principles implicitly accepted by *any* speaker who understands the folk notion of truth, then the notions of a proposition, correspondence, a fact, and reference appealed to in these platitudes, must be as thin as possible. For these notions reflect ordinary concepts the possession of which does not require any sort of special knowledge or training. The semantical and ontological notions appealed to in [e\*] and [g] can only be characterized in terms of platitudinous principles: these notions are minimal in the very same sense as minimal truth is. The same reasoning can now be reiterated to apply to some of these minimal notions – for example, the one of a fact. A central platitude that regiments the folk notion of a fact is certainly this:

[h] It is a fact that *S* if and only if *S*.

A platitude that regiments an essential link between the folk notion of a fact and the folk notions of an individual and of a property is plausibly the following schema:

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<sup>37</sup> [e\*] is a specification of the platitude [e] in its version for propositions.

<sup>38</sup> An interesting issue I cannot address in this paper concerns the possible restrictions to constrain the proper replacements for ‘*P*’ in this and other platitudes to avert paradoxes that result from allowing higher order predicates and higher order properties. On this, see for instance Schiffer (1996: 164-6), Schiffer (2003: 67-8 and ch. 5) and Hofweber (2006: 169 and 185-7).

[i] It is a fact that  $a$  is  $P$  if and only if the individual (or object)  $a$  has the property of being  $P$ .

If [i] is a logical reconstruction of a principle implicitly accepted by *any* speaker who understands the folk notion of a fact, then the notions of an individual and of a property appealed to in [i] must be as thin as possible. For these notions reflect ordinary concepts the possession of which requires no special knowledge or training. These notions of an individual and of a property must be minimal. In this way we quickly arrive at a whole *web* of minimal notions. This sketched argument casts some light on why the sweeping minimalist attitude is so pervasive (or so invasive): we cannot possess and deploy one minimal notion if we do not possess and deploy many other minimal notions.

An interesting question is why our natural language contains thin semantical and ontological notions of the type just illustrated. An explanation is that these deflated concepts help to formulate explicitly blind generalizations. The arguments made by Horwich substantiate this claim in relation to the folk notions of truth and reference, and similar arguments apply to other semantical and ontological notions implicit in the ordinary language (I will give an example of it in the next section). Minimal notions resulting from regimenting these folk notions retain this important logical role – they satisfy the function of helping to formulate blind generalizations in regimented language. This is certainly one reason why we want them also in philosophical language.

Wright believes that the minimal notion of truth can be made thicker by supplementing the truth-platitudes with substantive philosophical principles about truth. This thesis can plausibly be generalized to the other minimal notions – e.g. the one of property and of an individual – that contribute to define minimal truth contextually and that, as I have conjectured, are part of the framework of creeping minimalism. These notions are characterized in terms of platitudinous principles only, which say nothing about whether, for instance, properties coincide with universals or with sets of tropes, or whether, for example, individuals (conceived of as concrete particulars) are just bundles of properties or are also constituted by independent substrata. For none of these alternative views is entailed by the platitudes definitive of the minimal notions of a property and of

an individual. Minimal notions do not seem to have the function of providing any interesting philosophical *explanation*. Yet the sweeping minimalist as such does not seem to be committed to maintaining that all of our semantical and ontological notions are just minimal. She could in principle concede that in certain areas of discourse we also possess, or we can define, thicker versions of these notions that rely on substantive philosophical assumptions that may allow for genuine philosophical explanations.<sup>39</sup>

Let us consider now the minimal notion of *truth-aptitude*, which plays a central role in both creeping minimalism and Wright's minimalism. For Wright, the truth-aptitudes hold valid of any sentence *S* that counts as at least minimally truth-apt. While the problem of how to characterize truth-aptitude is not central in Horwich's investigation,<sup>40</sup> this issue is crucial in Wright 1992. Wright introduces his minimal notion of truth-aptitude in opposition to various forms of irrealism – such as expressivism and quasi-realism<sup>41</sup> in meta-ethics, and instrumentalism in philosophy of science – which rely on more substantive notions of truth-aptitude (cf.: 35-6). Expressivists and quasi-realists claim, for example, that while the sentence 'Buster Keaton was blown away by a tornado' is truth-apt, the sentence 'Buster Keaton was a pious man' is not truth-apt, though it may appear to be so. They believe that moral sentences cannot be *asserted*, as their contents are not assertoric; consequently, moral sentences are not true or false. Expressivists and quasi-realists claim that when we utter 'Buster Keaton was a pious man', we typically do not aim at describing any feature of

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<sup>39</sup> Against forms of conceptual pluralism of this type, some philosopher might insist that the function of semantical and ontological notions is *only* that of helping to formulate blind generalizations, and that these notions cannot provide any deep philosophical explanation. On this view, the alleged need for philosophical explanations would just arise from misunderstanding the essentially *superficial* character of semantical and ontological notions in general. (I am glad to Thomasson for making this point in discussion). Yet it is not evident to me that this conception of semantical and ontological notions is correct or even plausible – the burden of proof is on those who believe so. Furthermore, some sort of conceptual pluralism would seem to be already accepted in everyday discourse. For example, we generally have the tendency to distinguish between physical (or scientific) facts from facts of different type – for instance, moral or esthetical. And we generally assume that the facts of the first type are more objective or "real" than the facts of the second type. It is unclear why philosophers should reject or revise these pluralist intuitions instead of trying to develop and clarify them.

<sup>40</sup> More precisely, this problem is not central in the philosophical agenda of *Truth*. Stoljar 1993 contends that Horwich, in *Truth*, accepts however a specific form of minimalism about truth-aptitude called syntacticism, according to which any sentence with the superficial syntactical features of a declarative sentence is truth-apt. This contention is questioned by Jackson et al. (1994: 191, note 6). Indeed, Horwich 1993 and 1994 explicitly focus on the problem of truth-aptitude, but the role played by these two short papers in the development of creeping minimalism is less relevant than that of *Truth*.

<sup>41</sup> I refer, specifically, to Blackburn 1984's version of quasi-realism.

Buster Keaton but we do something else. For instance, we *express* our reverence for Buster Keaton's actions. Likewise, instrumentalists claim that certain theoretical sentences are not actually truth-apt, and that scientists use them in non-assertoric ways to produce observational consequences.

Wright 1992 contends that while no form of irrealism is satisfactory, it would be less problematic and philosophically more fruitful to maintain that if certain sentences *appear* to be truth-apt (in a qualified sense of appearing), such sentences *are* in fact truth-apt at least in the elementary sense of being predicable of the minimal truth-predicate (cf.: 10-11, 27-9 and 74-5).<sup>42</sup> For Wright, a sentence '*S*' is truth-apt if '*S*' satisfies *surface* constraints of syntax and discipline that characterize assertoric discourse (cf.: 27-8). The constraints of syntax only require '*S*' to be declarative in form (hence, if a sentence '*S*' is truth-apt, for instance, '*S*' can occur as the antecedent of a meaningful conditional, '*S*' possesses a significant negation, '*S*' can occur in meaningful sentences expressing propositional attitudes – e.g. 'I believe that *S*' – and so on). The constraints of discipline only require *S* to be subjected to communally acknowledged standards of proper use. (Cf.: 29).<sup>43</sup> This conception of truth-aptitude is often called *disciplined syntacticism* (cf. Jackson et al. 1994). Many moral and scientific sentences will satisfy Wright's light constraints of truth-aptitude. Disciplined syntacticism has been the target of several objections but none of them has yet proven compelling or sufficiently persuasive.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Wright presses especially the so-called embedding problem. This problem was originally raised in Geach 1972 and Searle 1969: 136-41.

<sup>43</sup> Notice that the same constraints of minimal truth-aptitude put forward by Wright 1992 were independently introduced by Boghossian 1990.

<sup>44</sup> Here are some of these criticisms. Smith 1994 and Jackson et al. 1994 have raised important objections to the adequacy of disciplined syntacticism in metaethics. Smith 1994 argues as follows: if '*S*' is any moral sentence, the sincere utterance of '*S*' expresses a moral commitment that indicates how the utterer is motivated to act. If '*S*' is (minimally) truth-apt, the utterance of '*S*' will normally correspond to the *assertion* of '*S*'. It also appears platitudinous that:

[B] If one asserts that *S* and one is sincere, one *believes* that *S*.

The problem is that no belief in itself can be a motivational state (Hume's principle). Thus, if '*S*' is (minimally) truth-apt, '*S*' cannot express any moral commitment and cannot be a moral sentence. Divers and Miller 1994 respond that Hume's principle is controversial and thus not platitudinous, and that if Hume's principle is true, it applies to a *thick* notion of belief, which is plausibly not the one the minimalist is committed to on the ground of the sole [B]. Wright 1998 seems to reject [B] as a platitudinous principle. Jackson et al. 1994 put forward an argument somehow similar to Smith 1994's. Any adequate analysis of the notion of truth-aptitude has to sustain relevant platitudes about the notion of belief. These platitudes include [B] and further principles like: beliefs are states designed to fit the facts, and beliefs tend to evolve in a rational manner under the impact of information. No minimal notion of truth-aptitude can sustain principles like the latter two. Therefore, no such

Wright's minimal notion of truth-aptitude can be said to be conceptually minimal – just as his minimal notion of truth – in a *relative* sense of this expression. As it would seem to be the most elementary notion of truth-aptitude we can accept, in the sense of placing the most liberal possible constraints on what it is to count as truth-apt (cf. Burgess 1997: 260).<sup>45</sup>

Wright has apparently made no explicit argument to link the minimal notion of truth with the minimal notion of truth-aptitude. The minimal conception of truth-aptitude gives rise to the minimal conception of truth because any minimally truth-apt sentence, if true at all, is true at least in a minimal sense (cf. Smith 1994: 2). The reversed claim – that minimalism about truth involves minimalism about truth-aptitude – has however been questioned. For example, Jackson et al. (1994: 289) urge that the mere assumption that the truth-predicate is implicitly defined by the *appropriate* instances of:

[ES] It is true that *S* if and only if *S*,

does not involve by itself any commitment to claiming that, for instance:

It is true that torture is morally wrong if and only if torture is morally wrong.

For the initial assumption says nothing about whether the replacement of '*S*', in [ES], with 'torture is morally wrong' will yield an *appropriate* instance. Rather, if 'torture is morally wrong' is not truth-apt, the replacement will be inappropriate.

The above argument certainly works for *some* minimal notions of truth, but – I believe – it probably does not work when referred to a minimal notion of truth that is intended to be a simple

notion is adequate. In response, Divers and Miller 1995 contend that a minimal notion of truth-aptitude can sustain principles like these if properly interpreted in a *platitudinous* manner, and that, on the other hand, non-platitudinous principles about belief cannot constrain the adequacy of a *minimal* notion of truth-aptitude. (This reply counts also as a response to Smith 1994a, written against Divers and Miller 1994).

Blackburn 1998 and, independently, Timmons 1999 recognize that moral discourse is superficially truth-apt but argue that it is not *representational*. If this were true, there would be a sense in which minimalism about truth-aptitude is not incompatible with the forms of moral expressivism asserting that moral discourse is minimally truth-apt but not representational. Wright 1998 and, independently, Dreier 2004 respond that while criticism of this kind seems to presuppose a "robust" notion of representation, it is very hard to question that *superficially* truth-apt discourse is also *superficially* representational.

<sup>45</sup> Jackson et al. (1994: 291-3) have made a convincing case that the position called *syntacticism* – which appears even weaker than disciplined syntacticism – is incoherent. According to syntacticism, any sentence with the superficial syntactical features of a declarative sentence is truth-apt independently on whether it satisfies any constraints of discipline.

regimentation of the *folk* notion of truth.<sup>46</sup> For our folk notion of truth would seem to apply just to sentences that satisfy elementary constraints of syntax and discipline of the same kind as those proper to disciplined syntacticism (i.e. superficially declarative sentences subject to communally acknowledged standards of acceptance and rejection). Consequently, the platitudes that contextually define minimal truth and the related minimal notions should apply to sentences lightly truth-apt in this very same sense. If this is correct, the minimal notion of truth – as long as it is meant to be a regimentation of the folk notion of truth – goes along with the minimal notion of truth-aptitude that qualifies disciplined syntacticism. The sweeping minimalist has to possess this minimal notion of truth-aptitude, for this is the one that individuates the sentences suitable to the schematic platitudes that define many minimal notions.

As our folk notion of truth is to some extent fuzzy, incoherent, and easy to yield logical paradoxes, we can obtain a viable model of it only if we revise and amend our natural linguistic practices to some extent. It might be argued that a consequence of this is that the sentences to which this minimal notion will end up applying will satisfy constraints of truth-aptitude less liberal than those proposed by Wright; for instance, constraints not fulfilled by moral sentences in general. This *might* be true, but it is not obviously so. The burden of proof is on those who make this claim. Clearly, if we aim at defining a notion of truth that satisfies many substantive philosophical assumptions, we will end up with a demanding notion of truth-aptitude unsuitable to many kinds of sentences. This would however be no elementary regimentation of our *folk* notion of truth.

Wright's minimalism has set the stage for the rise of creeping minimalism by introducing a deflationary notion of truth defined contextually in terms of platitudes that link this concept with other deflationary notions. In doing this, Wright has broadened the family of thin notions available to the sweeping minimalist. Wright's minimal notion of truth seems to amount to nothing but an elementary refinement of the folk notion of truth. I have conjectured that many or most sweeping minimalists conceive of the minimal notion of truth in these exact terms. I have suggested that

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<sup>46</sup> As the predicate 'is true' has different ordinary meanings (see above note 33), I specifically refer here to the folk notion of truth that links truth with assertion.

accepting a minimal notion of truth consisting in an elementary regimentation of the folk notion of truth involves accepting many of (if not all) the additional minimal notions that play a key role in creeping minimalism, including the minimal notion of truth-aptitude.

### 2.3 Schiffer's pleonastic ontology

The sweeping minimalist attitude not only involve the possession of and the propensity to use a whole battery of minimal notions but it also engenders *commitment* to the existence of the entities that fall under these minimal notions – namely, commitment to the existence of *minimal* entities.

For instance, a sweeping minimalist disposed to assert that Ribot is an energetic penguin will prepared to claim not only that it is a fact that Ribot is an energetic penguin and that Ribot has the property of being an energetic penguin, but also that this fact and this property actually exist.

Stephen Schiffer's work on pleonastic entities may have suggested the basic conceptual devices to justify this commitment.

Schiffer's most influential paper on pleonastic entities is probably 'Language-Created Language-Independent Entities' (1996).<sup>47</sup> The conception of pleonastic entities has been clarified and extensively developed in relation to propositions in Schiffer 2003. Schiffer argues that propositions, properties, states and events are pleonastic entities – that is, entities whose existence is typically secured by *something-from-nothing* transformations. The latter are *a priori* conceptually valid inferences that take us from a true sentence in which no reference is made to a thing of a certain kind to a sentence in which there is a reference to a thing of that kind. (Cf. 1996: 149 and 2003: 2 and 51).<sup>48</sup> Pleonastic entities can also be characterized by saying that their existence typically supervenes on the premises of something-from-nothing inferences (cf. 1996: 159 and

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<sup>47</sup> The view proposed in Schiffer 1996 was already outlined in Schiffer 1994. Schiffer (1996: 167 note 9) recognizes that his conception of pleonastic ontology was influenced by the view about meaning put forward in Johnston 1988. Forms of deflationary realism similar to Schiffer's, in various philosophical fields, have been put forward by Azzouni 1991, Barber 1998, Resnick 1997, and Stalnaker 1997.

<sup>48</sup> Valid interpretations and criticisms of Schiffer's conception of pleonastic entities are given in Sainsbury 2005 and, especially, in Thomasson 2001. Reading the latter paper has been crucial for many of the claims I make in this section and in § 4 of this article. Two important papers for the analysis of the something-from-nothing feature and issues of pleonastic ontology are Hofweber 2005 and 2007. Hofweber's interesting and sophisticated theses are often at odds with mine and would deserve throughout analysis and discussion in a separate paper.

2003: 61).<sup>49</sup> I will give examples of these inferences below. Pleonastic entities have no hidden and substantial nature waiting to be uncovered. The essential truths about them are fully determined by the linguistic practices that are constitutive of the concepts of them together with other necessary *a priori* truths applicable to things of any kind.<sup>50</sup> (Cf. 1996: 160-4 and 2003: 61-3). It is not clear to me whether Schiffer believes that the ‘essential truths’ about pleonastic entities are just platitudinous principles,<sup>51</sup> and – if he believes so – in what sense of ‘platitudinous’ – for example, in the sense of being part of an allegedly shared *metaphysical* background or in the sense of constituting a mere regimentation of the folk theory of those entities. Despite this, Schiffer’s central claims straightforwardly apply to *minimal* entities – precisely, to entities defined in terms of platitudinous notions conceived of as regimentations of correlate folk notions. Indeed, it is nearly irresistible to interpret Schiffer’s arguments as attempting to substantiate the claim that we are committed to the existence of minimal entities of the latter type.

The something-from-nothing inferences come, in general, in the terms of two consequent steps that I will call *nominalization* (as we infer a sentence including a noun phrase) and *quantification* (as we infer an existential generalization).<sup>52</sup> The following is a typical something-from-nothing inference that secures the existence of properties. Consider a truth-apt sentence with form:

[1] *a* is *P*,

(Nominalization). After nominalising the predicate ‘*P*’ with ‘the property of being *P*’, we infer [1]’s pleonastic equivalent:

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<sup>49</sup> For a very precise definition of a pleonastic entity, see Schiffer (2003: 56-7 and 62-3). Two important properties of pleonastic entities are that if we add them to a theory, we *conservatively* extend that theory, and that they do not disturb the pre-existing causal order.

<sup>50</sup> Such as if *x* is identical to *y*, then whatever property *x* has, *y* has, and *vice versa*.

<sup>51</sup> A reason for doubting it is, for instance, that Schiffer claims that a property, ‘assuming that there to be such a thing, is abstract, or immaterial, in that it doesn’t occupy space or have any other physical properties’ (1996: 150). These characteristics of a property appear to me not to be platitudinous in any sense.

<sup>52</sup> These two expressions are borrowed from Hofweber 2005. I will present here a *cut down* version of Schiffer’s conception of pleonastic propositions and properties. Schiffer (1996: 159-60) delivers two condensed arguments to the effect that propositions and properties exist *necessarily*. Only the argument about properties, but not the one about propositions, is restated in Schiffer 2003. For limits of space, I cannot examine these arguments here. Iacona (2003: 340-3) has argued – persuasively, in my opinion – that the argument for the necessary existence of propositions is invalid or unsound. In Moretti 2007b, I contend that Iacona’s considerations can be applied to undermine Schiffer’s argument for the necessary existence of properties too.

[2]  $a$  has the property of being  $P$ . (Cf. 1996: 149 and 159).<sup>53</sup>

(Quantification). From [2], we then infer:

[3] There is something possessed by  $a$ ; that is, the property of being  $P$ . (Cf.: 151).

The following is a typical something-from-nothing inference that secures the existence of propositions. Consider a truth-apt sentence:

[4]  $S$ .

(Nominalization). After nominalising ‘ $S$ ’ with ‘the proposition that  $S$ ’, we infer [4]’s pleonastic equivalent:

[5] The proposition that  $S$  is true. (Cf.: 149-50 and 159).<sup>54</sup>

(Quantification). From [5], we then infer:

[6] There is something true; that is, the proposition that  $S$ . (Cf.: 160).

What are the grounds of the inferential step of nominalisation? Schiffer emphasizes that it is hard to override the natural conviction that all correlated instances of [1] and [2] share necessarily the same truth-value as a matter of necessity, and that also all correlated instances of [4] and [5] share the same truth-value as a matter of necessity (cf.: 152). For it seems to be a *conceptual* truth that  $a$  is  $P$  if and only if  $a$  has the property of being  $P$ , and that  $S$  if and only if the proposition that  $S$  is true (cf. 2003: 61). In particular, the mere possession of the notion of a property enables us to

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<sup>53</sup> According to Schiffer, the existence of pleonastic entities cannot *always* be secured by something from nothing inferences (cf. 2003: 51). For there are sentences including a singular term whose referent is a property that are not entailed by sentences not including singular terms whose referents are properties. For example, the sentence ‘humility is a virtue’ (or ‘the property of being humble is a virtue’) cannot probably be entailed by any sentence that contain no term referring to humility (cf.: 70).

<sup>54</sup> I am simplifying. To be more accurate, Schiffer obtain [5] from [4] *via* first inferring ‘that  $S$  is true’ (or ‘it is true that  $S$ ’) from [4] through the Equivalence Schema (cf. 1996: 160 and 2003: 71-2), and then by arguing that the that-clauses refer *univocally* to propositions if they refer at all (cf. 1996: 150-1 and 2003: 12-15 and 92-5). I find the latter thesis questionable; for instance, there are contexts in which that-clauses appear *prima facie* to refer to facts and not to propositions (see Moffett 2003). I cannot go deeper into this delicate issue here.

infer [2] from [1] and *vice versa*, and the mere possession of the notion of a proposition enables us to infer [4] from [5] and *vice versa*.<sup>55</sup>

For our concern here, notice that the equivalence between all correlated instances of [1] and [2] holds valid for any *minimal* notion of a property characterized at least in terms of the platitude:

[j] *a* has the property of being *P* if and only if *a* is *P*.

On the other hand, the equivalence between all correlated instances of [4] and [5] holds valid for any minimal notion of a proposition characterized at least in terms of the Equivalence Schema plus the platitude:

[a] The proposition that *S* is true if and only if it is true that *S*.

Consider now the inferential step of quantification – that is, the inference from [2] to [3] and the inference from [5] to [6]. Schiffer emphasizes that the expression ‘the property of being *P*’ (when *P* is replaced with a predicate) has in many contexts the syntactical function of a singular term (cf. 1996: 150 and 2006: 61). Schiffer also argues that the expression ‘the proposition that *S*’ (when ‘*S*’ is replaced with a truth-apt sentence) has in many contexts the syntactical function of a singular term (cf. 1996: 150-1 and 2003: 12-15 and 92-5).<sup>56</sup> In particular, the expression ‘the proposition that *S*’ (when ‘*S*’ is replaced with a truth-apt sentence) does play the syntactical role of a singular term in [5] (i.e. ‘the proposition that *S* is true’). On the other hand, [2] (i.e. ‘*a* has the property of being *P*’) admits of innocent reformulations in which the expression ‘the property of being *P*’ (when ‘*P*’ is replaced with a predicate) does play the syntactical role of a singular term (cf.: 63). For instance, this happens in the equivalent reformulation of [2],

[2\*] The property of being *P* is instantiated by *a*,

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<sup>55</sup> Schiffer (1996: 52 and 2003: 89) stresses that it is the conviction that the step of nominalization rests on conceptual truths that *prima facie* prevents us from endorsing an error-theory of pleonastic entities. If instances of [1] and [4] are true and the respectively correlated instances of [2] and [5] conceptually follow them, there is no room for *errors*: these instances of [2] and [5] must be true too.

<sup>56</sup> More exactly, Schiffer first argues that the expression ‘that *S*’ functions as a singular term, and then that ‘that *S*’ refers to the proposition that *S*, if it refers at all. See also note 54 above.

deduced from [2] *via* the following platitude:

[k] The property of being *P* is instantiated by *a* if and only if *a* has the property of being *P*.

Schiffer stresses that we normally accept that '[existential] quantifiers can bind variables that occupy the positions of the singular terms in question' (1996: 151); which implies that we normally accept that [2\*] – and so [2] – entails:

[3] There exists an *x* such that *x* is instantiated by *a* and *x* is identical to the property of being *P* (Colloquially: There is something possessed by *a*; that is, the property of being *P*),

and that [5] entails:

[6] There exists an *x* such that *x* is true and *x* is identical to the proposition that *S* (Colloquially: There is something true; that is, the proposition that *S*).<sup>57</sup>

The general intuitive principle implicitly appealed to by Schiffer to ground both these inferences seems to be the following: something has a given feature if and only if there is something that has that feature. The following schema expresses the same principle in a slightly more regimented way:

[E] *b* is *Q* if and only if there exists an *x* such that *x* is *Q* and *x* is identical to *b*.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Schiffer (1996: 51-2), and in much more detail Schiffer (2003: 74-87), also argues that a given proposition exists if a sentence expressing a propositional attitude towards that proposition is true. For example, the proposition that *S* exists if the sentence 'I believe that *S*' is true. Schiffer contends that what is special with sentences expressing propositional attitudes is that we can determine their truth independently of identifying the referent of their that-clause. That their that-clauses do refer *follows* from the truth of these sentences. Schiffer (2003: 87-9) also argues that the that-clause included in a sentence obtained *via* a something-from-nothing inference (e.g. 'that *S* is true') and the that-clause included in a corresponding sentence expressing a propositional attitude (e.g. 'I believe that *S*') do refer to the same proposition (i.e. 'that *S*'). Since I aim to individuate a principle of ontological commitment for minimal entities *in general*, and not just for propositions, I will not analyse these arguments by Schiffer here.

<sup>58</sup> Notice that [E] is conceptually analogous to the *syntax priority thesis* introduced by Wright 1983 as the result of applying Frege's *context principle* to reference (or 'Bedeutung'). The syntax priority thesis is employed by Wright and other contemporary neo-Fregeans to defend arithmetical Platonism. Wright formulates the syntax priority thesis as follows:

Once it has been settled that a class of expressions functions as singular terms by syntactic criteria, there can be no further question about whether they succeed in objectual reference which can be raised by someone who is prepared to allow that appropriate contexts in which they figure are true. (1992: 28)

It is unclear to me whether Wright considers the syntax priority thesis to be a component of his minimalism about truth. At any rate, I believe that the syntax priority thesis and the discussions of recent neo-Fregeans may also have played a

(In which ‘ $b$  is  $Q$ ’ stands for a truth-apt sentence, ‘ $b$ ’ stands for an expression that has the syntactical function of a singular term, and ‘ $Q$ ’ stands for an expression that has the syntactical function of a predicate). We can use [E] to infer instances of its left-hand side from instances of its right-hand side: we first establish that there exists an  $x$  that is  $Q$  and is identical to  $b$ , and from this we infer that  $b$  is  $Q$ . Yet, in case of pleonastic (and minimal) entities, we proceed the other way round: we first infer that  $b$  is  $Q$  on purely *conceptual* grounds through the step of nominalization (or through a relevant platitude). From it, we then infer that there exists an  $x$  that is  $Q$  and is identical to  $b$ .

There might perhaps be reasons to question the validity of instances of [E].<sup>59</sup> Notice however that colloquial versions of the instances of [E] that quantify over the entities that fall under the folk notion of a proposition and under the folk notion of a property (and, plausibly, under the folk notions of a fact and of an individual)<sup>60</sup> are typically accepted as valid in ordinary language. (For example, we can ordinarily infer the sentence ‘there is something possessed by fire; that is, the property of burning’ from the sentence ‘the property of burning is possessed by fire’, and *vice*

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significant role in the development of creeping minimalism.

<sup>59</sup> A worry might be that [E] commits the sweeping minimalist to asserting that *fictional* entities do exist. Precisely, the problem would be that many sentences having form ‘ $b$  is  $Q$ ’, where ‘ $b$ ’ stands for the name of a fictional entity, are minimally truth-apt because they fulfil minimal constraints of syntax and discipline; consequently, these sentences can be replaced in [E]. The absurd consequence would then follow. Divers and Miller 1995a have exposed a very similar concern about Wright’s syntax priority thesis (for the content of this thesis, see above, note 58). I believe that a slightly modified version of Wright 1994’s response to Divers and Miller might help to dispel the concern about [E]. Wright 1994 (and 1998) emphasizes that his minimalist view is compatible with the fact that a truth-apt sentence can be subject to different standards of acceptability other than the ones that aim at warranting its truth. For example, truth-apt *fictional* sentences are also subject, in all probability, to standards of acceptability *as conformity to the relevant fiction*. A sweeping minimalist who accepts [E] can make the same claim as Wright. Consider now the truth-apt sentence ‘Godzilla is huge’. Although from ‘Godzilla is huge’ and [E] we can derive logically ‘there is something huge; that is, Godzilla’, we are not justified in *asserting* the latter existential sentence because we are not justified in *asserting* ‘Godzilla is huge’. We would be justified in asserting ‘Godzilla is huge’ if, for instance, we *actually* saw Godzilla out there and we observed that this monster is huge. (Evidence of this type would plausibly satisfy the commonly acknowledged conditions of acceptance that make the declarative sentence ‘Godzilla is huge’ truth-apt). Yet, given that Godzilla does not exist, this cannot happen. On the other hand, the ordinary assumption that we are in some sense justified in saying ‘Godzilla is huge’ should properly be intended in the sense that we are justified in uttering ‘Godzilla is huge’ *because it conforms to the content of the relevant fiction*. The same applies to other fictional sentences. At any rate, if [E] is accepted, some restrictions on the expressions that can be replaced for ‘ $Q$ ’ should however be imposed. For example, if ‘ $b$ ’ is, again, ‘Godzilla’ and ‘ $Q$ ’ is ‘a non-existent entity’, ‘ $b$  is  $Q$ ’ is clearly *true*. From this, we can derive, through [E], the oddity that there exists a non-existent entity, which sounds weird even in ordinary language. This is, of course, just one instance of the very complex problem of the negative existentials that I cannot analyse in this paper.

<sup>60</sup> For example, an informal instance of [E] that quantifies over the entities that fall under the folk notion of a fact may be: that today is Saturday is a fact if and only if there is a fact; namely, that today is Saturday. An informal instance of [E] that quantifies over the entities that fall under the folk notion of an individual (or object) may be: the individual John is tall if and only if there is someone tall; that is, the individual John.

*versa*. Also, we can ordinarily infer the sentence ‘there is something false; that is, the proposition asserted by John’ from the sentence ‘the proposition asserted by John is false’, and *vice versa*). Thus, the minimalist who aims to provide a regimentation of folk semantical and ontological notions should probably accept as valid at least the correlated regimented instances of [E]; and so will do the sweeping minimalist. If these instances of [E] are valid, the step of quantification is justified on the whole.

There is, indeed, a quite general reason why existential quantification over minimal entities should be allowed. As Hofweber 2006 has emphasized, quantification over these entities will increase the expressive power of our language by enabling the explicit formulation of generalizations in situations of partial information (cf.: 157-8). To illustrate this point, let us focus on minimal properties. Suppose John knows nearly nothing about marmite and vegemite. Suppose however that he believes, for some reason, that marmite and vegemite share some property, and that he expresses his belief by asserting that marmite and vegemite share some property. The quantifier implicit in John’s assertion can be made explicit by formulating that assertion for instance as follows:

There exist an  $x$  such that  $x$  is a property of marmite and  $x$  is a property of vegemite.

Another way to formulate John’s assertion is *via* the following sentence:

There exist an  $x$  such that  $x$  is instantiated by marmite and  $x$  is instantiated by vegemite.

It might not be obvious that also the second generalization quantifies over minimal properties. That the second generalization does so becomes apparent as we consider that it is platitudinous that, for every  $x$ ,  $x$  is instantiated by  $a$ , if and only if  $x$  is a property of  $a$ . There are many equivalent ways to express the same existential generalization over minimal properties, where it is not essential that the term ‘property’ explicitly occur in all of them (this is true *mutans mutandis* for other minimal entities).

If existential quantification over minimal entities were not permitted, John could express his belief only with a turn of phrase that alludes to a potentially infinite disjunction of sentences; for instance this:

Marmite is baldness-curative and vegemite is baldness-curative, or marmite is shyness-curative and vegemite is shyness-curative, or ... and so on.<sup>61</sup>

Similar examples that apply to minimal propositions and to other minimal entities can easily be found.<sup>62</sup> In conclusion, the accomplishment of an important function of minimal notions – i.e. enabling the explicit formulation of blind generalizations – engenders commitment to the existence of minimal entities.

As Schiffer (1996: 51-2 and 2003: 89-90) observes, though the friend of pleonastic entities can probably vindicate the inference of [3] from [2] and the inference of [6] from [5], it might still be argued that the truth of instances of [3] and [6] ensure no definite commitment to the existence of properties and propositions, despite the fact that we can say – by asserting these sentences – that properties and propositions exist. Precisely, the argument would be to the effect that it is not necessary to assume that the expressions in these true instances of [3] and [6] that play the *syntactical* role of a singular term – namely, ‘the property of being *P*’ and ‘the proposition that *S*’ (where ‘*P*’ is replaced with a predicate and ‘*S*’ with a truth-apt sentence) – actually refer. This is so because – it might be argued – the existential quantifiers in [3] and [6] can be thought of as some *non-objectual* quantifiers<sup>63</sup> (for instance, *substitutional* quantifiers or *internal* quantifiers).<sup>64</sup> Non-objectual quantification would allow for the truth of instances of [3] and [6] without requiring the existence of entities in the domain of quantification that satisfy the open sentences ‘*x* is instantiated by *a* and *x* is identical to the property of being *P*’ and ‘*x* is true and *x* is the proposition that *S*’

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<sup>61</sup> That this potentially infinite disjunction expresses the same content as the above generalizations can be shown by applying [j] and [k] to its disjuncts.

<sup>62</sup> Consider for instance explicit existential generalizations like ‘there are facts about Hegel’s life we still do not know’ and ‘in China, there are two identical individuals’.

<sup>63</sup> Clearly, to license the inferences of [3] from [2\*] and of [6] from [5], the quantifier in [E] should also be interpreted as non-objectual.

<sup>64</sup> For the notion of internal quantification, see Hofweber 2005.

(when ‘*a*’ is replaced with a singular term, ‘*P*’ is replaced with a predicate, and ‘*S*’ with a truth-apt sentence).

Schiffer gives a quite convoluted response to this potential objection that I am not sure I understand in full (cf.: 90-1). I have, anyway, a simpler response that becomes straightforward when the objection aims to undermine reference to – specifically – minimal entities (i.e. entities defined in terms of regimentations of correlated ordinary notions). Consider that any competent speaker of ordinary language is certainly entitled to *deflationary* semantical notions and that, consequently, the sweeping minimalist is also entitled to them (i.e. to their regimented versions). On these deflationary notions, it is hard to deny that the singular terms in the instances of [3] and [6] do refer and that the quantification in the instances of [3] and [6] is objectual. Consequently, the singular terms in these instances do refer (though in a deflationary sense of it) and the quantification in the same instances is objectual (though in a deflationary sense of it).

Let us go in more details. Consider again the platitudinous principle about reference introduced in § 2.1:

[R\*] For every *x*, ‘*b*’ refers to *x* if and only if *b* is identical to *x*.

The conjunction of [3] and the relevant instance of [R\*] entails:

There exists an *x* such that *x* is instantiated by *a* and ‘the property of being *P*’ refers to *x*.

On the other hand, the conjunction of [6] and the relevant instance of [R\*] entails:

There exists an *x* such that *x* is true and ‘the proposition that *S*’ refers to *x*.

This shows that the sweeping minimalist as such possesses the semantical tools to refer to minimal properties and minimal propositions.

A platitudinous principle characterizing the notion of satisfaction may be the following:

[S] For every  $x$ ,  $x$  satisfies ‘ $x$  is  $Q$  and  $x$  is identical to  $b$ ’ if and only if  $x$  is  $Q$  and  $x$  is identical to  $b$ .

The conjunction of [3] and the relevant instance of [S] entails:

There exists an  $x$  such that  $x$  satisfies ‘ $x$  is instantiated by  $a$  and  $x$  is identical to the property of being  $P$ ’.

The conjunction of [6] and the relevant instance of [S] entails:

There exists an  $x$  such that  $x$  satisfies ‘ $x$  is true and  $x$  is identical to the proposition that  $S$ ’.

This shows that the sweeping minimalist as such possesses the semantical tools that permit objectual quantification in generalizations over minimal properties and minimal propositions.

Principles [R\*] and [S] can plausibly be employed to ensure reference to and objectual quantification over other minimal entities, such as individuals and facts.

The claim that mere deflationary semantical principles enable the sweeping minimalist to refer to minimal entities and to apply objectual quantification to them should not appear surprising or odd. For minimal entities are themselves deflationary entities – they are mere hypostatizations of our linguistic practices. Rather, it would make a little sense to try to apply more substantive semantical principles to cheap entities of this kind – for instance, a causal notion of reference or one that postulates a *sui generis* reference relation.<sup>65</sup> Minimal entities are essentially such that only deflationary semantical notions can properly apply to them. As we will see in § 4, this claim entails a decisive consequence for the issue of the ontological status of minimal entities.

It is worth emphasizing that Schiffer is a *monist* – and not a pluralist – about properties and propositions. What Schiffer 1996 and 2003 aim at is providing a truthful account of properties and propositions *tout court* – on his account, properties and proposition turn out to be just pleonastic entities. Apparently, for Schiffer, there cannot be properties and propositions other than these (and

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<sup>65</sup> I refer to the implausible conjecture – for instance considered and dropped by Putnam 1981 – that our minds have *special* semantical powers, inexplicable in naturalistic terms (or in both naturalistic and normative terms), which allow us to refer to external things.

this plausibly hold for states and events too). I do not see, however, why philosophers affected by sweeping minimalism should necessarily subscribe to Schiffer's ontological *monism*. Minimal entities are "shallow" entities in the sense of being characterized in terms of platitudinous principles only, which do not allow for genuine philosophical explanations. Yet it is not self-evident that all semantical and ontological entities are just minimal (the onus of proof would seem to be on those who make this claim). Philosophers who believe that philosophical explanations are possible can entertain the sweeping minimalist attitude. For the sweeping minimalist is not committed to rejecting the thesis that there exist *also* thick entities, characterized in terms of substantive principles.<sup>66</sup> The sweeping minimalist can *prima facie* be an ontological pluralist – she could accept that the world is populated by both thin entities, which are useful in virtue of their logical function, and – at least in some ontological domains – thick entities, which are also functional to give philosophical explanations. Consider for example Armstrong 1983's account of laws of nature grounded in the assumption that only *substantial* properties – or universals – possess the (non-platitudinous) feature of instantiating relations of non-logical or contingent necessitation. A philosopher affected by creeping minimalism could *prima facie* accept this account. She could maintain that, for any given predicate, the corresponding property is either unsubstantial (i.e. it coincides with a minimal property) or substantial (i.e. it coincides with an universal in Armstrong's sense).

The contribution by Schiffer to the creation of the creeping minimalism framework comes in the terms of the explanation of the typical way in which the minimalist can become committed to the existence of minimal entities. That is, *via* using something-from-nothing inferences. I have argued that these inferences can be thought of as grounded in central platitudes for the introduction of minimal notions, principles that govern the logical role of the existential quantifier, and deflationary semantical principles. I have suggested that all these principles are probably included

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<sup>66</sup> In the next section, I will argue that the sweeping minimalist can be an ontological realist, in the sense that she can coherently believe that given entities exist and are mind-independent. From this it seems to follow that a sweeping minimalist who embraced a form of ontological pluralism could plausibly accept that thick entities such that facts, propositions and properties are mind-independent.

in the conceptual framework of sweeping minimalism, for they all can be interpreted to be logical regimentations of correlated assumptions implicit in our natural languages.

### *Résumé*

Let us recap the findings of the last three sections. I have described the sweeping minimalist attitude as essentially one that prompts a massive use of deflationary notions in semantics and ontology, where these notions are defined through the regimentation of corresponding folk notions implicit in natural language. Minimal notions of this sort are metaphysically unloaded and platitudinous.

This interpretation of creeping minimalism is somewhat corroborated by the fact that it explains (or at least it casts some lights on) two perceptible features of this philosophical tendency: its strong appeal and its pervasiveness. The sweeping minimalist attitude is captivating, on this interpretation, because it consists essentially in deploying in philosophy familiar notions we already use in ordinary discourse and that we can introduce to technical language with only a negligible theoretical effort. Sweeping minimalism is pervasive because minimal notions are holistically related to one another as the folk notions that they replicate are.

I have suggested that the framework of creeping minimalism can be constructed as a natural extension of the framework of Wright's minimal truth. I have also suggested that Horwich's explanation of the logical function of deflationary truth and deflationary reference as devices to enable blind generalizations can be generalized to clarify the logical role of many other minimal notions. I have argued that deflationary principles included in the framework of the sweeping minimalist ensure ontological commitment to minimal entities; principles of this kind have been presupposed or explicitly introduced in papers by Schiffer and Horwich. I have emphasized that the very accomplishment of the function of minimal notions of enabling blind generalizations engenders commitment to the existence of minimal entities. Finally, I have suggested that Wright's pluralism about truth can be extended to other minimal concepts deployed by the sweeping minimalist and to the correlated minimal entities.

### 3. Realism and its antagonists in the age of creeping minimalism

In this section, I am going to analyse the consequences of the rise of creeping minimalist for the general configuration of the debate between realists and non-realists in metaphysics. This enquiry is not only interesting in itself but it will also pave the way for the discussion of the next section, in which I will investigate the nature of minimal entities and what follows from the assumption that these entities exist for the dispute about realism and non-realism. The reader might worry that the upshot of the *next* section may prove relevant for what is discussed in *this* section, as entertaining the sweeping minimalist attitude involves allowing the existence of minimal entities, and this might in turn have implications for the general configuration of the debate on realism and non-realism. (Indeed, I will argue in the next section that there are implications in this sense when non-realism is construed as a form of error-theory). The proper way to understand the enquiry of the present section therefore let be this: I will investigate the consequences of creeping minimalism for the general configuration of the debate between realists and non-realists while neglecting – for the moment – the possible implications that result from allowing the existence of minimal entities. On this understanding, the investigation of the next section will constitute the completion – or at least, the intensification – of the one of this section.

As we have seen in § 2.2, Wright thinks of realism as a doctrine essentially concerning the nature of truth. This way of characterizing realism is however highly controversial.<sup>67</sup> Devitt 1997 and Horwich (1998: 53-60)<sup>68</sup> – among many others – have argued that realism is essentially an *ontological* doctrine, which is quite independent of any specific notion of truth. Since I find the ontological characterization of realism more natural and immediate than the alethic characterization, I will stick to the former in the discussion of the next pages.

In accordance with the ontological characterization, one is a realist about entities of type X if and only if one believes [I] that X-entities do exist and [II] that X-entities (and at least some of their

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<sup>67</sup> Notice that this does not undermine Wright's input to the creation of the creeping minimalism framework, which appears largely independent of this controversial conception of realism.

<sup>68</sup> On this issue, see also Horwich 1996.

features) are mind-independent (cf. Miller 2005).<sup>69</sup> The general notion of mind-independence can be spelled out in various manners – for instance, as independence of anyone’s beliefs, theories, linguistic practices, and so on. (I will give examples of more precise notions of mind-independence below, pp. 45-7). If the existence condition [I] or the independence condition [II] is not satisfied, *non-realism* about X-entities obtains. In contemporary metaphysics, *irrealists* – such as expressivists, quasi-realists and instrumentalists on the one hand, and error-theorists on the other – typically reject the existence dimension, while *antirealists* typically accept the existence dimension but reject the independence dimension (cf.: *ibid.*).<sup>70</sup>

From an ontological point of view, expressivists, quasi-realists and instrumentalists about X-entities – let us name all of them non-cognitivists about X-entities – are committed to rejecting the thesis that these entities exist. For, according to these philosophers, the sentences that *appear* to fulfil constraints of truth-aptitude and that *appear* to be about X-entities are not really truth-apt, and so cannot be about X-entities. The consequence is that, for them, the claim that there are X-entities makes no sense (or cannot be interpreted literally). What happens when non-cognitivists become sweeping minimalists? They will concede that the sentences that *appear* to fulfil constraints of truth-aptitude and that *appear* to be about X-entities are at least minimally truth-apt and are about X-entities in a deflationary sense of being about something. Once this step is made, they will no longer be entitled to maintain that the thesis that there exist X-entities is meaningless. Quite the opposite, the non-cognitivists who fall prey of creeping minimalism appear committed to maintaining that X-entities do exist whenever they can warrantably assert certain sentences about X-entities – for instance, sentences in subject-predicate form in which the name of an X-entity features as the subject. For this follows from the acceptance of deflationary principles that ensure ontological commitment, such as the above [E], [R\*] and [S]. Given that some of the sentences

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<sup>69</sup> This characterization of realism appears to rule out realism about mental states at the outset, as these entities are *trivially* mind-dependent, in the sense that my mental states cannot exist without my mind. A way out may be that of imposing that realism about mental states obtains only if these states do not prove mind-dependent in some *more substantive* sense of mind-dependence. I cannot go deeper into this very complex issue here. An interesting paper on this problem is Vinuesa 2001.

<sup>70</sup> Here, I do not follow closely Dreier (2004: 25)’s characterization of the different kinds of non-realism, which I find slightly confusing.

about X-entities (e.g. moral properties, numbers, theoretical entities etc.) that entail the existence of the latter *via* deflationary principles typically satisfy the standards of assertibility that inform the relevant discourses, these philosophers are often committed to maintaining that X-entities do exist.<sup>71</sup>

There are two distinct questions here: one is whether non-cognitivists affected by creeping minimalism still remain non-cognitivists, and the other is whether non-cognitivists affected by creeping minimalism can still challenge realism. Concerning the first question, O’Leary-Hawthorne and Price 1996 have argued that one can properly be said to be a non-cognitivist about X-entities on the grounds of the specific *functional role* one attributes to the sentences about these entities. This would allow philosophers who acknowledge that sentences about X-entities are minimally truth-apt to qualify, at least in some cases, as non-cognitivists.<sup>72</sup> This consideration is certainly interesting but does not answer by itself the second question.

Non-cognitivists about X-entities affected by creeping minimalism might perhaps insist that the X-entities they are committed to accepting as existent are just *deflationary* and that, because of this, they are not fully real. It is however dubious that the non-cognitivists *as such* do possess the conceptual apparatus to elucidate, beyond rhetoric, the meaning the expressions ‘fully real’ (or a similar expression) and ‘deflationary’ to explain why deflationary entities are not fully real. For instance, a non-cognitivist might try to play on the thesis that deflationary entities are not fully real because they are not *mind-independent*. The problem is that our non-cognitivist should give *arguments* for the conclusion that deflationary entities are not mind-independent, and this would mean settling the debate between realists and non-realists as a dispute between realists and *antirealists* rather than between realists and non-cognitivists, as it is the antirealist who essentially

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<sup>71</sup> To be more accurate, sophisticated expressivists and sophisticated quasi-realists seem to believe that certain sentences can at the same time be minimally truth-apt but *non-descriptive*. When sophisticated expressivists and sophisticated quasi-realists become sweeping minimalists, they should however recognize that the same sentences are descriptive in some deflationary or minimal sense (see above, note 44).

<sup>72</sup> O’Leary-Hawthorne and Price 1996 focus on expressivism. They contend that what is distinctive about expressivism – independently of issues of truth-aptitude – is its *functional pluralism*. According to them, ‘most generally construed, non-cognitivism is a doctrine about the functions of parts of language. ... [T]he non-cognitivist’s essential claim is that the function of ethical discourse is different from that of, say, scientific discourse, in some philosophically significant respect—in such a way, for example, as to make attempts to reduce ethical talk to scientific talk inappropriate’ (285). Plausibly, as an expressivist goes sweeping minimalist, she can still be considered to be an expressivist (and so a non-cognitivist) in this sense.

questions realism *via* questioning the independence dimension. In that case, the challenge to realism would come from the antirealist side, and not from the non-cognitivist side.

Alternatively, a non-cognitivist affected by creeping minimalism could perhaps attempt to rebuff her commitment to the existence of X-entities by substantiating the thesis that we all have, for some reason, a propensity to apply *erroneously* the justification standards of the sentences about X-entities, with the consequence that the sentences about X-entities that appear warrantably assertible are in fact not so. The problem is that this strategy would amount to settling the debate between realists and non-realists as a dispute between realists and *error-theorists* rather than between realists and non-cognitivists, as it is the error-theorist who essentially questions realism (*via* questioning the existence dimension) by adducing the presence of generalized errors in our factual claims. In that case, the challenge to realism would come from the error-theorist side, and not from the non-cognitivist side.

Indeed, Dreier 2004 (drawing from Fine 2001, O’Leary-Hawthorne and Price 1996, and Gibbard 2003) contends that expressivists and quasi-realists can still challenge realism even while entertaining the sweeping minimalist attitude. Briefly, expressivists and quasi-realists should argue that even though elucidating what a moral judgment is may involve describing it as representational and cognitive in character (e.g. judging that Hitler is evil consists in believing that the fact that Hitler is evil obtains), the deepest explanation of what a moral judgment is can only describe it as non-representational and non-cognitive in character. In a few words, this explanation would say that making a moral judgment *consists of nothing more than* being in ‘a [mental] state that plays a certain non-cognitive psychological role, a role more like desire than it is like factual belief’ (Dreier 2004: 39).<sup>73</sup> A consequence one should draw from being *this* explanation the deepest available is – if I get Dreier right – that moral discourse is *essentially* non-cognitive, with the effect that the claim that there are moral properties and moral facts should not be taken seriously.

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<sup>73</sup> Dreier emphasizes that, according to this view, ‘expressivism doesn’t merely *attribute* a distinctive functional role to [moral] judgment, but also makes the stronger claim that having the functional role *constitutes* being the [moral] judgment’ (2004: 40).

Although Dreier's proposal is interesting and encouraging, a reason of discontent with it is that the notion of 'consisting of nothing more than' is not perspicuous<sup>74</sup> – perhaps it is even more obscure than notions it is meant to illuminate. Suppose, for example, we want to analyse this notion in terms of possible worlds semantics. If making a moral judgment consists of nothing more than being in a (given) *non-cognitive* mental state, then – plausibly – there should be a possible world in which one makes a moral judgment without being in any cognitive mental state. This would explicate, to some extent, why cognitive features are not constitutive of moral judgments. Unfortunately, this analysis is not available to the sweeping minimalist. The problem is that the philosopher entertaining the creeping minimalist attitude will very plausibly consider the (non-paradoxical) instances of the following schemata as *a priori* – and so *necessarily* – true:

If one judges that *S*, one judges that it is true that *S*;

If one judges that *S*, one judges that it is a fact that *S*.

(Where '*S*' stands for a minimally truth-apt sentence). The sweeping minimalist will thus conclude that, *in any possible world*, if one judges that Hitler is evil, one judges that it is true and that it is a fact that Hitler is evil. But this would seem to show that factual and cognitive features are constitutive of moral judgments. Unless some substantive clarification is given, I cannot see Dreier's suggestion as satisfactory.

In conclusion, it seems to me that when creeping minimalism comes into play, the challenge raised by non-cognitivism to realism loses most of its original bite (at least, when realism is defined in ontological terms through the theses [I] and [II]). When creeping minimalism takes place, to construe the debate about realism and non-realism as a dispute between realists and non-cognitivists would probably be fruitless (or too problematic). For it becomes very hard to understand in what sense non-cognitivism (or the position non-cognitivism is turned into) still constitutes a challenge for realism. Of course, *mixed* positions – e.g. O'Leary-Hawthorne and Price's non-cognitivism *plus* antirealism, or *plus* error-theory – could probably still challenge realism. But in that case, what

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<sup>74</sup> Dreier himself acknowledges this as a (non-devastating) problem (cf.: 2004: 35).

would accomplish the essential task of *denying* the realist doctrine would be, not non-cognitivism, but rather antirealism or error-theory. In sum, a mixed position would be a form of *non-realism* because of its antirealist or its error-theory component, and not because of its non-cognitivist component.

Setting aside non-cognitivism, realism can still be questioned either on the error-theory side (*via* denying the existence dimension) or on the antirealist side (*via* denying the independence dimension). Traditionally, error-theorists about X-entities have argued that truth-apt and warrantably assertible sentences about X-entities are systematically false because no X-entity actually exists.<sup>75</sup> For instance, Mackie 1977 questioned the existence of moral properties by casting doubts – principally – on their alleged ontological features; namely, by contending that it is strongly implausible that entities with the queer feature of being objectively prescriptive actually exist. Field 1989 questioned the existence of numbers conceived of as Platonic entities by arguing that – roughly – there cannot be any adequate epistemology of entities of this sort, for there is no acceptable explanation of how our knowledge of them could be reliable.

Let ' $S(X)$ ' stand for a minimally truth-apt and contingent sentence that purports to describe – in accordance with its surface grammar – entities of some kind X. For many different kinds of entities (e.g. kangaroos, protons, desires, stars, etc.), the sweeping minimalist is apparently *uncommitted* to the *a priori* truth of the instances of the following schema:

If it is warrantably assertible that  $S(X)$ , then  $S(X)$ .<sup>76</sup>

A consequence is that the sweeping minimalist could in principle accept an error-theory about all these entities without facing any immediate conceptual incoherence or logical inconsistency. Precisely – supposing that the relevant entities are of kind X – the sweeping minimalist might try to argue that there are compelling reasons (ontological, epistemological or whatever) for believing that

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<sup>75</sup> Precisely, this would hold for the sentences that entail that X-entities exist.

<sup>76</sup> The same would seem to hold for the reverse schema:

If  $S(X)$ , then it is warrantably assertible that  $S(X)$ .

no X-entity actually exists. The consequence would be that no warrantably assertible sentence that entails the existence of X-entities could prove (even minimally) true.

A typical tacit presupposition of arguments of error-theorists about X-entities is that these entities would exist *mind-independently* if they existed at all.<sup>77</sup> This presupposition appears acceptable by the sweeping minimalist too, who can *prima facie* maintain that mind-independent entities exist or may exist (more on this below). At any rate, though typical, this presupposition is not strictly necessary for the formulation of an error-theory.<sup>78</sup> A general limit of the applicability of the error-theory approach is that, though it proves appropriate in the domains where it is reasonable to cast doubts on the existence of the target entities – e.g. in metaethics, in philosophy of mathematics and in philosophy of theoretical science<sup>79</sup> – the error-theory approach cannot apply globally, that is to say, to the whole of reality. For no sensible person would endorse a comprehensive error-theory asserting that nothing at all exists! (Further restrictions to the applicability range of the error-theory strategy that depend on allowing the existence of minimal entities are suggested in the next section).

Let us turn to antirealism. The antirealist approach can probably apply to most ontological fields.<sup>80</sup> Indeed, antirealist arguments against realism have been put forward to apply globally. For instance, the arguments for internal realism made in Putnam 1978 and 1981 can be interpreted as aiming to show that reality as a whole is mind-dependent. What consequences follow from the introduction of creeping minimalism for the dispute between realists and antirealists? Dreier (2004:

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<sup>77</sup> For example, if the existence of X-entities were thought of as *mind-dependent* – precisely, dependent on our warranted sentences about them – the traditional arguments of error-theorists would no longer go through. For many sentences that entail the existence of X-entities (e.g. moral properties and numbers) are plausibly warrantably assertible, with the consequence that the error-theorist would be forced to conclude that X-entities do exist and that the sentences that entail the existence of these entities are true and not false.

<sup>78</sup> For instance, as I have suggested before, a non-cognitivist affected by creeping minimalism could try to rebuff her commitment to the existence of X-entities by substantiating the thesis that we all have a propensity to apply incorrectly the justification standards of the sentences about X-entities, with the result that whenever a sentence of this type appears warrantably assertible it is in fact not so. This error-theory strategy does not require assuming that X-entities are *mind-independent*. Indeed, Wright (1992: 86-7) includes this strategy among those available to error-theorists about *mind-dependent* entities.

<sup>79</sup> For instance, Van Fraassen 1980's constructive empiricism can be seen as a form of error-theory about unobservable entities grounded, principally, in the theory underdetermination thesis.

<sup>80</sup> Notice that also *non-cognitivist* positions have been proposed to apply globally to the whole reality. See for instance Macarthur and Price 2007. In accordance with my arguments before, I tend to believe that as creeping minimalism breaks through, the advocates of such global positions could effectively challenge realism only if they resorted to antirealist arguments.

29-30) seems to contend that when creeping minimalism breaks through, appealing to the notion of mind-independence to characterize realism and to distinguish it from antirealism produces conceptual puzzlement, so that it is no longer effective.<sup>81</sup>

The problem would arise from the fact that many things prove mind-independent in accordance with some *everyday* sense of ‘mind-independence’. Dreier assumes that the sweeping minimalist can use these trivial notions of mind-independence together with her minimal semantical and ontological notions. This is indeed plausible. Dreier gives this example: it is a commonsense truth that slavery would not cease to be morally wrong if only everyone started believing that slavery is not so.<sup>82</sup> The sweeping minimalist can say that the moral wrongness of slavery is independent – in this trivial sense – of everyone’s beliefs and so of everyone’s mind (cf.: *ibid.*). Similar examples can be found in other fields. For example, it appears true that, say, penguins would not stop populating the South Pole and the earth would not stop orbiting around the sun if we only ceased believing so, or if we had no knowledge of these facts at all. These things – and many others – can be said to be mind-independent in such trivial senses by the sweeping minimalist. Thus, if realism is characterized through notions of mind-independence, it seems that the *antirealist* who falls prey to sweeping minimalist can assert just what the realist can assert, though it is dubious that the antirealist actually becomes a realist. For it is implausible that realism (about, say, moral wrongness, penguins and many other things) could be obtained in such a cheap way.

I think that Dreier is too quick in drawing his sceptical conclusion. I believe that the problem just exposed can be dissolved in this way: what it is at stake here is the characterization of realism as a *philosophical* position rather than a commonsense view. Ordinary ascriptions of mind-independence do not characterize realism conceived of as a philosophical position simply because realism, in philosophy, is typically *not* characterized in terms of these ordinary ascriptions, but in terms of more qualified and thus more sophisticated ascriptions of mind-independence (I give some

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<sup>81</sup> More exactly, Dreier writes that trying to distinguish between real and non-real entities on the basis of a distinction between substantive senses of mind-independence and trivial senses of it ‘doesn’t look very promising’ (2004: 30).

<sup>82</sup> Precisely, for Dreier, what is commonly accepted is that ‘slavery would not be morally wrong, if only we slavery-haters mellowed out a little’ (2004: 29-30).

examples below).<sup>83</sup> Furthermore, the mere fact that there exist ordinary or commonsense notions of mind-independence does not disqualify the more sophisticated notions of mind-independence typically used in philosophy to characterize realism from having *this* function. Why should this ever happen? Finally, ordinary ascriptions of mind-independence can possibly sustain some forms of “realism” – perhaps *everyday* or *ordinary* forms of realism – but these positions would not coincide with the forms of realism that are central to the debate on realism and antirealism in contemporary metaphysics.<sup>84</sup>

To strengthen my point consider also that, in the contemporary debate on realism and antirealism in metaphysics, the *antirealist* is typically supposed to accept ordinary ascriptions of mind-independence as true. In other words, it is generally assumed that also the antirealist – and not just the realist – should avoid revising ordinary beliefs, on pain of rendering her philosophical position implausible. The antirealist should be able to endorse claims normally made in everyday life, which include – very plausibly – commonsense ascriptions of mind-independence like the above ones.<sup>85</sup> Consequently, these ascriptions cannot by themselves entail realism, according to the philosophical sense of ‘realism’.

A couple of examples might clarify and support these points. A notion of mind-independence deployed by metaphysicians to characterize realism – at least in certain ontological fields – is the one of *potential evidence-transcendence* (cf. Wright 1992: 77-8). Accordingly, one is a realist about entities of type X if one believes that [I] X-entities exist and that [II\*] they are potentially evidence-transcendent. Condition [II\*] can be spelled out by stating that the existence of X-entities is not

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<sup>83</sup> Consider for instance the commonsense claim that penguins would not stop populating the South Pole if we only ceased believing so. A more qualified claim that might provide a philosophical sense of mind-independence characterizing realism could be this: it would still be the case that penguins populate the South Pole even if *a rational agent in sufficiently good (or ideal) epistemic conditions* would believe that penguins do not populate the South Pole. (Notice that this claim is philosophically more controversial than the original). The notion of mind-independence presupposed here does not seem to be part of our ordinary conceptual background.

<sup>84</sup> It is worth emphasizing that the *philosophical* position called *commonsense realism* typically does not state that everyday notions of mind-independence like those considered above define or characterize realism. ‘Commonsense realism’ typically refers to the position according to which the world of commonsense is real – for instance, ordinary objects with their ordinary features (e.g. colours, shapes, etc.) exist really.

<sup>85</sup> It might be helpful to notice that *idealist* positions stating that everything is just mental play no role – or no significant role – in contemporary antirealism.

*essentially* (or necessarily) knowable.<sup>86</sup> This allows the existence of X-entities to be only *contingently* knowable. The complementary characterization of antirealism says that one is an antirealist about entities of type X if one believes that [I] X-entities exist and that [~II\*] these entities are evidence-*constrained* – namely, that their existence and, plausibly, their characteristic features are *essentially* (or necessarily) knowable.<sup>87</sup> Typically, the claim is that it is *a priori* true that the existence and the characteristic features of X-entities are knowable.

These characterizations of realism and antirealism appear *prima facie* suitable to apply to middle-sized objects, and so to penguins. Both the realist and the antirealist about penguins and their habits will agree with commonsense that penguins would not stop populating the South Pole if we only ceased to believe so, or if we had no knowledge of these facts. Yet the realist about penguins and their habits will not be a realist because of these trivial convictions – she will be so because she believes that penguins and their habits exist and they are potentially evidence-transcendent. On the other hand, the antirealist about penguins and their habits can share the trivial convictions of the realist, for these convictions are compatible with the antirealist's qualifying thesis about penguins and their habits. In other words, the thesis that the existence of penguins and their habits is essentially knowable is compatible with the conviction that we could (mistakenly) change our beliefs about these things and with the conviction that we could have known nothing at all about these things.<sup>88</sup>

In metaethics, Harman 1977, Wiggins 1987 and N. Sturgeon 1988 – among others – consider variants of a criterion for moral realism that can be interpreted as based on a notion of mind-independence alternative to the one described before. On a crude version of this criterion, one is a moral realist if one believes that [I] moral facts or properties exist and that [II\*\*] they figure

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<sup>86</sup> This condition might in turn be spelled out by saying – for instance – that there is a possible world in which there exist X-entities and such that *it is not the case* that if there were a rational agent in good (or ideal) epistemic conditions for judging whether there exist X-entities, she would believe that there exist X-entities.

<sup>87</sup> This condition might in turn be spelled out by saying – for instance – that (1) *in all possible worlds*, there exist X-entities if and only if, if there were a rational agent in good (or ideal) epistemic conditions for judging whether there exist X-entities, she would believe that there are X-entities, and (2) being in good (or ideal) epistemic conditions for judging whether there exist X-entities does not entail by itself that there exist X-entities.

<sup>88</sup> Or, at least, there are several straightforward qualifications of 'knowable' available to the antirealist that entail that the former claim is compatible with the latter two.

*ineliminably* in the *best* explanation of how moral experience is produced.<sup>89</sup> Condition [II\*\*] seems to provide the alternative notion of mind-independence. For, intuitively, the feature of a fact or property of figuring ineliminably in the best explanation of how a certain experience is produced marks out that fact or property as a piece of the furniture of reality we can interact with and distinguishes that entity from what should rather be considered to be a mere “linguistic projection” or a reification of our concepts. The complementary condition qualifying moral antirealism can be formulated as follows: one is a moral antirealist if one believes that [I] moral facts or properties – in some deflationary sense of ‘facts’ and ‘properties’ – do exist, and that [~II\*\*] they do *not* figure in the best explanation of our moral experience.<sup>90</sup>

On this framework, the debate between moral realists and moral antirealists can plausibly proceed independently of questions concerning the capacity of moral facts to be potentially evidence-transcendent. Also, on this framework, both the moral realist and the moral antirealist appear entitled to endorse commonsense ascriptions of mind-independence about moral facts and moral properties. Thus, both the realist and the antirealist can accept that slavery would not cease to be morally wrong if only everyone started believing (mistakenly) that slavery is not so. The difference is that while the realist will assert that the fact that slavery is morally wrong figures ineliminably in the best explanation of our moral experience, the antirealist will deny it.

The sweeping minimalist can plausibly endorse characterizations of realism and antirealism that come in the terms of the notions of mind-independence discussed above. Clearly, to do so, she has to acknowledge that, together with everyday notions of mind-independence, we also possess philosophically more substantive notions of mind-independence, but this does not seem to be a

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<sup>89</sup> For criticism of criteria for moral realism of this type, see for instance Wright (1992: 176-201).

<sup>90</sup> Suppose, for instance, I see John kill Bob for the mere fun of it, and that I come to believe, as a reaction, that John’s act is horribly wrong. The moral realist will explain my belief by mentioning – among other things – the moral fact that John’s act is wrong. The moral realist will contend that I was somehow *sensitive* to the moral wrongness of that act. She will insist that, without mentioning that moral fact (and that moral property), no satisfactory explanation of why I entertained my belief in that context is possible. On the other hand, the moral antirealist will accept that the sentence ‘John’s act is morally wrong’ is justifiable; consequently, the moral antirealist will be enabled to assert both ‘it is a fact that John’s act is morally wrong’ and ‘John’s act has the property of being morally wrong’, in accordance with *deflationary* senses of ‘fact’ and ‘property’. The moral antirealist will however explain my belief that John’s act is horribly wrong by adducing – among other things – my sensitivity to *non-evaluative* features of John’s act (and of the situation I witnessed), and she will consider *redundant* to this explanation mentioning the fact that John’s act is morally wrong and the property of being morally wrong possessed by John’s act.

problem for the sweeping minimalist. For, as I have said, creeping minimalism is *prima facie* compatible with pluralism about notions and entities.<sup>91</sup>

To recap, in this section I have accepted a generic characterization of realism according to which one is a realist about certain entities if and only if one believes that [I] these entities exist and [II] they are mind-independent. This ontological characterization of realism is intuitive and less controversial than alethic characterizations of realism. I have argued that, as creeping minimalism takes place, framing the debate between realists and non-realists as a dispute between realists and non-cognitivists is probably fruitless. I have suggested that there are two further ways to frame this debate that look interesting and productive: one consists in construing it as a dispute between realists and error-theorists, and the other consists in construing it as a dispute between realists and antirealists.

#### **4. The ontological status of minimal entities and the debate on realism and non-realism**

I have shown in § 2.3 that the sweeping minimalist becomes committed to the existence of minimal entities through, typically, performing something-from-nothing inferences. Indeed, this will happen quite often, as the sweeping minimalist will frequently be in circumstances that justify sentences from which a something-from-nothing inference can stem. Does any crucial consequence for the debate on realism and non-realism follow from the claim that minimal entities do exist? Answering this question presupposes clarifying the ontological status of minimal entities. I will substantiate the thesis that minimal entities are language-dependent, in the strong sense that they do not exist outside of language. Minimal entities are nothing but linguistic posits – that is, hypostatizations or reifications of linguistic constructs introduced *via* certain linguistic practices. From this it follows – I will contend – that the thesis that minimal entities do exist has no significant consequence for the debate between realists and non-realists, at least when this dispute is framed as a one between realists and *antirealists*.

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<sup>91</sup> Further substantive notions of mind-dependence/independence are plausibly available to the sweeping minimalist – for instance, the important notion of judgment-dependence/independence. For a careful analysis of this notion, see Wright (1992: 108-39) and Miller 2005.

Schiffer has put forward an interesting explanation of why minimal entities should be considered to be linguistic posits. (This explanation has originally been formulated to apply to *pleonastic* entities but – if correct – it could apply to minimal entities too). Briefly, Schiffer contends that:

There is an important difference between, on the one hand, “linguistic posits” like ... [pleonastic] properties and propositions and, on the other hand, those entities that are not linguistic posits, entities enjoying the highest degree of independence from our linguistic and conceptual practices. The difference is that the essences of the latter can be discovered by a posteriori scientific investigation, whereas those of the former can’t be discovered in any such way. Whatever belongs to their essence can be read off the something-from-nothing linguistic practices that posit them in our ontology. (2003: 161).

(In this passage, Schiffer evidently refers to Kripke’s and Putnam’s celebrated views that the essential features of real things and kinds of real things can be determined by a posteriori investigation).

Schiffer’s suggestion amounts to claim that what marks out the language-dependent nature of a minimal entity is the fact that its essential features can be known *a priori* by reading them off the relevant linguistic practices. I find Schiffer’s suggestion questionable. Consider a full-blooded realist about certain entities of type X. She surely believes that X-entities enjoy ‘the highest degree of independence from our linguistic practices’. Yet such a realist does not appear *prima facie* committed to believing that the essential features of these language-independent entities ‘can be discovered by a posteriori scientific investigation’. For she could believe, instead, that the essential features of the X-entities can be known *a priori* through the knowledge of relevant *analytical* sentences (or of the correlated linguistic practices). Entertaining this belief requires endorsing the thesis that there are analytical sentences and the thesis that analytical sentences can be known *a priori* to be true of language-independent facts. This does not seem particularly problematic.

Philosophers – prominently, Boghossian 1996 and 2003<sup>92</sup> – have given powerful arguments to support both theses.<sup>93</sup> In conclusion, Schiffer claims that what marks out the language-dependent nature of minimal entities is the fact that the essential features of these entities can be known *a priori*. This claim is dubious, as it can be argued that this very characteristic could be shared by fully language-independent entities.<sup>94</sup>

To obtain a persuasive clarification of why minimal entities are nothing but linguistic posits, we have to shift from epistemology to semantics. That minimal entities are language-dependent becomes clear as we realize that the deepest and most complete explanation of our ability to refer to thin entities of this type can be given by making use of a mere *deflationary* notion of reference; for example, a notion of reference grounded in principle [R\*] introduced in § 2.1 and used in § 2.3. Indeed, it seems to be correct to say that reference to minimal entities can be explained *only* if a deflationary semantical notion of this type is made use of. For it would make no sense to try to use any substantive – e.g. naturalistic – notion of reference to explain it. Intuitively, if we could use complex semantical notions to explain reference to minimal entities, the latter would also possess a complex nature that would be described by principles well more substantive than mere platitudes. For instance, a causal notion of reference could apply to minimal entities if the latter had causal powers (like tables, cats and electrons). Yet that minimal entities have causal powers is not stated

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<sup>92</sup> Boghossian 1996 and 2003 give quite persuasive arguments to salvage the notion of analyticity from Quine's famous criticism and to show that analytical sentences can be known *a priori* to be true of fully objective facts. Precisely, Boghossian distinguishes between *metaphysical* and *epistemic* analyticity. A sentence '*S*' is metaphysically analytical if and only if '*S*' is true solely in virtue of its meaning, while '*S*' is epistemically analytical if and only if the grasp of the meaning of '*S*' suffices to justify the belief that '*S*' is true. Boghossian argues that only the notion of metaphysical analyticity but not the one of epistemic analyticity falls under Quine's objections. He also argues that, while metaphysically analytical sentences are supposed to owe their truth to their meanings only, without any contribution from the facts, epistemically analytical sentences are true of independent facts. For Boghossian, epistemically analytical sentences divide into Frege-analytical and Carnap-analytical sentences. A sentence is Frege-analytical if and only if its analyticity is to be explained by the fact that it is transformable into a logical truth by substitution of synonyms for synonyms. A sentence is Carnap-analytical if and only if it is part of an *implicit definition* of certain of its component terms. The platitudes characterizing minimal entities can probably be interpreted as Carnap-analytical.

<sup>93</sup> The clear articulation of my reply to Schiffer has greatly benefited from discussion with Tommaso Piazza. I am especially in debt with him for the reference to Boghossian's work.

<sup>94</sup> Someone might suggest alternative reasons to substantiate the claim that minimal entities are linguistic posits. For instance, Schiffer (2003: 62-3) emphasizes that the introduction of pleonastic – and thus minimal – entities in our ontology will not change the pre-existent causal order. Accordingly, it might be thought that minimal entities are linguistic posits because they do not satisfy the Eleatic Criterion according to which everything that really exists makes a difference to the causal powers of something (cf. Armstrong 1997: 41). A problem is that the Eleatic Criterion is not unanimously accepted. For instance, realists about possibilities and abstract entities typically reject it.

by the platitudinous principles that define the nature of these objects. Consequently, minimal entities are very plausibly causally inert.<sup>95</sup> (I return to this shortly).

If minimal entities were independent of our linguistic practices, the deepest and most complete explanation of our ability to refer to them would certainly have to involve a different and more complex notion of reference. For we would have to clarify how our words can hook up to entities extrinsic to language. Yet [R\*] and deflationary notions of reference in general establish no link between language and extra-linguistic world. The conclusion we should draw is that minimal entities cannot but be *intrinsic* to language.

As Thomasson (2001: 323-4) has emphasized, to claim that minimal entities depend on our linguistic practices does not mean, however, to claim that minimal entities are *created* by our linguistic practices. For the mere existence of those practices does not bring about, by itself, the existence of minimal entities. Reality has to collaborate to some extent to make true the basic sentences from which the appropriate something-from-nothing inferences start off.<sup>96</sup>

The above consideration involves that, in explaining reference to minimal entities, the sweeping minimalist may need to mention the attainment of conditions that are *extrinsic* to language. For instance, the full account of how we refer to the minimal property of being round involves maintaining that a sentence asserting that this property exists is true; for example, the sentence ‘there exists something instantiated by this ball; that is, the property of being round’. This in turn involves maintaining that the more basic sentence ‘this ball is round’ – which implies the former – is true. Finally, contending that ‘this ball is round’ is true requires substantiating the claim

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<sup>95</sup> It seems plausible that whether entities of a given type are (completely) causally inert or have causal powers must be something *essential* to those entities and not merely contingent.

<sup>96</sup> That minimal entities are language-dependent in the sense explained plausibly entails that minimal entities are *mind*-dependent. It is very important to appreciate that mind-dependence, in this sense, does not coincide with being evidence-*constrained*, for it is not absurd to think of minimal entities the existence of which is only contingently but not essentially knowable. Suppose, for instance, I’m a realist about this ball and I believe that it is potentially evidence-transcendent (though contingently knowable) that this ball is round. Through a pleonastic transformation, I am committed to believing that it is potentially evidence-transcendent that this ball has the property of being round. This could in turn be clarified by saying – for instance (cf. note 86 above) – that there is a possible world *w* at which this ball has the property of being round and such that *it is not the case* that if there were a rational agent in good (or ideal) epistemic conditions to judge whether this ball has the property of being round, she would believe that this ball has the property of being round. Notice that the expression ‘the property of being round’ does not refer to anything that exists at *w* language-independently. Minimal entities are intrinsic to language because the *actual* and the *possible* referents of the terms that refer to them are intrinsic to language.

that the truth-conditions of this sentence – *which may be extrinsic to language* – actually obtain.

Thomasson has suggested (in personal communication) that if one appeals to the attainment of conditions that are extrinsic to language in the explanation of reference to minimal entities, one can probably develop a *semi-causal* (or hybrid) account of reference to these entities. The upshot would be that it is false that minimal entities are just intrinsic to language. For a semi-causal account of reference would just explicate how terms that refer to minimal entities hook up to things extrinsic to language.

I quite am sceptical about the possibility of developing a semi-causal account of reference to minimal entities.<sup>97</sup> What is a semi-causal theory of reference? *Pure* causal theories of reference face the *qua* problem, which arises because, as long as a pure causal connection allows a speaker to refer to something, it cannot in general determine the exact sort of thing she refers to. This holds for both singular terms and sortal terms. (See for instance Devitt and Sterelny 1999: 63-5 and 72-5). For example, suppose I want to ground the reference of the term ‘cat’ through a causal link by pointing to my cat Birba. What makes it to be the case that ‘cat’ refers just to the natural kind cats rather than, say, to the natural kind felids, or to the individual Birba, or to a spatial or temporal part of her? Devitt and Sterelny suggest that we could answer this question by endorsing a semi-causal or hybrid theory of reference according to which, basically, those who intend to ground the reference of a term by pointing to something must have in mind some descriptive category under which that thing falls. And ‘the grounding will fail if the cause of the perceptual experience does not fit the general [descriptive] term used to conceptualise it’ (80). Thomasson 2007 has developed in detail and enhanced Devitt and Sterelny’s initial suggestion (see mostly: 38-45). Thomasson argues that, on a semi-causal theory of reference:

To disambiguate whether or not singular and general terms refer, and if so to what they refer, these must have some minimal associated conceptual content. This conceptual content

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<sup>97</sup> Although I will not pursue this issue here, semi-causal accounts of reference have been found problematic in different respects. For typical objections and some interesting reply, see Thomasson (2007: 48-53).

establishes the sort of individual (or kind) that the term is to pick out, outlining frame-level conditions for the existence and identity of the referent, if any.’ (161-2).

An interesting result is that:

The conceptual content in these terms is enough to ground certain conceptual truths based on interrelations among these terms, since the conditions for application of one term (or set of terms) may be necessary, sufficient, or otherwise relevant to the application of the other, or the satisfaction of the truth-conditions for one sentence may be sufficient for the application of the new nominative term (162).

An example of how the satisfaction of the application conditions of a term is sufficient to satisfy the application conditions of another term concerns the predicates ‘house’ and ‘building’ (cf.: *ibid.*). It seems correct to say that, if the former predicate applies to a given entity, the latter must apply to it too, for everything is denoted by the latter predicate is denoted by the former predicate. The result is that if ‘building’ denotes only language-independent entities, ‘house’ must denote only language-independent entities too.

Thomasson recognizes that, in case of minimal (or pleonastic) entities, it is typically the satisfaction of the *truth-conditions for one sentence* that suffices to satisfy the application conditions of a term referring to entities of this kind (cf.: *ibid.*). For example, the satisfaction of the truth-conditions of the sentence ‘this ball is round’ is sufficient to satisfy the application conditions of the singular term ‘the property of being round’, in the sense that this term is guaranteed to refer (cf.: 163). Thomasson would seem to believe that the existence of conceptual links of this type is sufficient to ground a semi-causal account of reference to minimal entities. I believe that this is probably false.

As we have seen in 2.3, the sweeping minimalist is plausibly committed to accepting the existence of conceptual links of this type. The difference between the sweeping minimalist as such and Thomasson is that while the sweeping minimalist as such thinks of the relation of reference to

minimal entities only in deflationary terms, Thomasson seems to believe that this relation can in certain cases be identified with something more substantive. What Thomasson has plausibly in mind is that when the truth-conditions of the sentence ‘this ball is round’ are satisfied by some *objective* state of affairs – i.e. by a state of affairs fully independent of language – the abstract singular term ‘the property of being round’ can be argued to refer to the property of being round – whatever this entity might be – *through a semi-causal connection*, and so through (also) a *causal* link. The problem with this claim is that as long as the property of being round is a minimal entity, which involves that its nature is characterized entirely *a priori* in terms of general and platitudinous principles like those considered in § 2.2 and 2.3, we are not allowed to assert that this entity can sustain causal links. And if we conceive of the nature of this property as something ontologically more substantive – by introducing metaphysical assumptions – this entity will no longer be minimal. For example, if the referent of the abstract singular term ‘the property of being round’ were identified with the class of all round-tropes, where each of these tropes were conceived of as provided with causal powers, we could probably work out a semi-causal account of reference to this property. But a property characterized in this way is no longer minimal! Analogous considerations apply to the other minimal properties and to other minimal entities.<sup>98</sup>

Now, let me clarify how the thesis that there are minimal entities can be settled into the *realist’s* metaphysical background without evident difficulties. The existence of minimal entities is typically ensured by inferences based on certain platitudes. These inferences are such that, from a true sentence containing no term that refers to a minimal entity, one gets a sentence embedding a term that does refer to a minimal entity. For example, a sweeping minimalist can conclude that the property of being approximately cylindrical is instantiated by Ribot, so that there exists a given

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<sup>98</sup> For instance, the mere fulfilment of the language-independent truth-conditions of ‘this ball is round’ does not seem to commit the sweeping minimalist to maintaining that the individual term ‘that this ball is round’ and the predicates ‘is a fact’ respectively refers to and denotes facts through a semi-causal link. For the platitudinous notion of a fact is not characterized in terms of principles that enable minimal facts to entertain causal relations.

property, if and only if it is true that Ribot is approximately cylindrical. Hence, minimal entities typically exist *if and only if* reality collaborates to make true certain relevant basic sentences.<sup>99</sup>

Let ‘*S*’ be a true sentence containing no term that refers to a minimal entity. Suppose ‘*S*’ is ‘Ribot is approximately cylindrical’ (where Ribot is a penguin). A realist about penguins is committed to maintaining that the truth-conditions of ‘*S*’ obtain and that what fulfils these conditions is mind-independent in some not trivial sense of mind-independence. As our realist goes sweeping minimalist, she will be able infer from ‘*S*’ the sentence ‘*S*<sub>1</sub>’ = ‘Ribot has the property of being approximately cylindrical’ and the sentence ‘*S*<sub>2</sub>’ = ‘there is something instantiated by Ribot; that is, the property of being approximately cylindrical’. Given that, for the sweeping minimalist, ‘*S*’, ‘*S*<sub>1</sub>’ and ‘*S*<sub>2</sub>’ can be logically inferred from one another, the realist will be committed to holding that these three sentences are true and share the same mind-independent truth-conditions. Notice however that the contents of ‘*S*’, ‘*S*<sub>1</sub>’ and ‘*S*<sub>2</sub>’ are *apparently* very different. For ‘*S*’ says nothing at all about properties, ‘*S*<sub>1</sub>’ says something of a property, and ‘*S*<sub>2</sub>’ asserts the existence of that property. Let us also assume that our realist about penguins is an austere nominalist who claims that no property exists. How could such a realist reconcile all these apparently incoherent claims?

Consider first that many realists endorse a commonsense view according to which our descriptions often include among their components linguistic constructs that reflect no objective feature of the world. Accordingly, many realists believe that the same reality can often be described in different and alternative ways *via* incorporating linguistic constructs that reflect no objective

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<sup>99</sup> There might however be minimal entities depending on principles entailing that they exist *necessarily* (i.e. in all possible worlds). As I have emphasized above, in note 52, Schiffer’s arguments for the claim that pleonastic propositions and pleonastic properties exist necessarily are dubious. Yet, in Moretti 2007, I have independently argued, from less disputable premises, that the framework of Wright’s minimalism – and thus of creeping minimalism – entails that at least *tautological* and *analytical* propositions exist necessarily. I have also argued that this consequence commits the minimalist to the thesis that tautological and analytical propositions are *real* entities in that they exist *mind-independently*, because they exist in possible worlds where there is no speaker or rational agent. (Schiffer 2003: 50 and 59-60 argues for the same conclusion in relation to *all* propositions). I no longer claim that the minimalist is committed to the thesis that tautological and analytical propositions are real, at least in the sense explained. For an also an *antirealist* about propositions could probably accept that propositions exist in all possible worlds, and so in those where there is no rational agent. For the *mind-dependence* of propositions could be defined – in accordance with what suggested in note 87 – in terms of a counterfactual condition that does not require the existence of a rational agent. Roughly, in terms of the satisfaction of the following *a priori* true biconditional: there are propositions if and only if, if there were a rational agent in good (or ideal) epistemic conditions to judge whether there are propositions, she would believe that there are propositions (cf. Moretti 2007: 32). Brogaard and Salerno 2005 have made a case that counterfactual definitions this sort are unacceptable because entail a conditional fallacy. In Moretti 2007a, I have however shown that Brogaard and Salerno’s argument is inconclusive.

feature of the world in our descriptions or replacing some of the constructs of this type already in use with different constructs of the some sort. These considerations plausibly apply also to the mind-independent states of affairs that, according to realists, fulfil the truth-conditions of ‘*S*’.

Suppose that one of these realists – let us call her Mary – is both a philosopher and an anatomist. Mary gives at least two alternative descriptions of the truth-conditions of ‘*S*’: in certain cases, she uses ‘*S*’ itself to describe them and, on other occasions, she uses the sentence ‘*S*<sub>1</sub>\*’ = ‘the sum of the undetached parts of Ribot is approximately cylindric’ (imagine that, for an anatomist, it is sometimes more natural to speak of a sum of organic parts rather than a whole). Suppose finally that from ‘*S*<sub>1</sub>\*’, Mary is prone to infer back and forward the sentence ‘*S*<sub>2</sub>\*’ = ‘there is something approximately cylindric; that is, the sum of the undetached parts of Ribot’. Mary considers ‘*S*<sub>2</sub>\*’ to be an innocent reformulation of ‘*S*<sub>1</sub>\*’, and so as a further alternative way to describe the truth-conditions of the original sentence *S*. As a philosopher, Mary believes that the expression ‘the sum of the undetached parts of Ribot’ is just a linguistic construct that, if interpreted literally, refers to nothing that exists in the independent world. Yet, when Mary infers ‘*S*<sub>2</sub>\*’, she just asserts that the sum of the undetached parts of Ribot does exist. To make her inferential practices coherent with her ontological convictions, Mary can stipulate that the expression ‘the sum of all undetached parts of Ribot’ refers just in a deflationary sense of ‘refers’. She can argue that, consequently, the referent of this expression exists only intrinsically to her language. This entity could be described as a reification or hypostatisation of her linguistic construct ‘the sum of all undetached parts of Ribot’.

Realists affected by creeping minimalism could treat minimal entities in the very same way as Mary does with her linguistic posit. Indeed, it seems plausible to me that once a realist comes to realize that the only notion of reference suitable to minimal entities is platitudinous, she will naturally conclude that these entities are nothing but reifications of linguistic constructs (or something like this). Let us go back to our austere nominalist realist who falls prey to creeping minimalism. Our philosopher accepts the sentence ‘*S*’ = ‘Ribot is approximately cylindric’ as mind-independently true. Consider now how she deduces ‘*S*<sub>2</sub>’ from ‘*S*’. First, she derives from ‘*S*’, *via*

nominalization, ‘ $S_1$ ’ = ‘Ribot has the property of being approximately cylindric’. The step of nominalization is just one that introduces a linguistic construct (in this case: ‘the property of being approximately cylindric’). The realist can interpret this linguistic construct as one that picks up nothing that exists in the independent world. The realist then derives from (a platitudinous reformulation of) ‘ $S_1$ ’,<sup>100</sup> via quantification, ‘ $S_2$ ’ = ‘there is something instantiated by Ribot; that is, the property of being approximately cylindric’. The realist can interpret the step of quantification as one that reifies or hypostatizes the linguistic construct introduced formerly. She can at this point maintain that ‘ $S$ ’, ‘ $S_1$ ’ and ‘ $S_2$ ’ are equivalent descriptions of the same mind-independent states of affairs, and that the difference in factual content between these sentences is just apparent. For it arises from the introduction – in ‘ $S_1$ ’ and ‘ $S_2$ ’ – of a construct that reflects no objective feature of reality. The realist can emphasize that asserting ‘ $S_2$ ’ does not commit herself to holding that the property of being approximately cylindric exists objectively, for this entity is just a reification of a linguistic construct. Realists can plausibly deal with the other minimal entities considered in this paper in a similar fashion.

The foregoing discussion shows that the thesis that there are minimal entities can be settled into the metaphysical background of the realist without apparent difficulties. Allowing the existence of minimal entities does not seem to undermine the realist position, but it does not appear to bolster its plausibility either. Using minimal notions and allowing quantification over minimal entities will increase the expressive power of the *language* of the realist, but this apparently involves nothing about the truth or the plausibility of the *content* of the realist doctrine.

Let us now turn to the two forms of non-realism that, as I have argued in § 3, are apparently unharmed by the phenomenon of creeping minimalism – namely, *antirealism* and the *error-theory*. Let us consider first antirealism. As minimal entities are intrinsic to language, the thesis that there are minimal entities can plausibly be settled into the metaphysical background of the antirealist without problems. For allowing the existence of these reifications of linguistic constructs will result in, so to say, a mere extension of the stock of furniture of mind-dependent reality. Furthermore – to

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<sup>100</sup> Namely, ‘the property of being approximately cylindric is instantiated by Ribot’.

accomplish a parallelism with the realist position – the existence of minimal entities would seem, on the one hand, not to undermine the antirealist position but, on the other, not to enhance its plausibility either.

Let us turn to non-realism construed as an *error-theory*. In this case too allowing the existence of minimal entities might appear harmless. The error-theorist's typical claims are *negative*: she asserts that the target entities do *not* exist and that sentences that aim at describing them are *false*. It might appear implausible that a something-from-nothing inference stemming from sentences like these could yield problems for the error-theorist. Indeed, some difficulty emerges when the objects constituting the targets of the error-theory have a counterpart among the minimal entities. Consider for example an error-theorist about propositions who becomes sweeping minimalist. She will assert, as an error-theorist, that propositions do not exist. Yet, as a sweeping minimalist, she will be committed to asserting that many propositions do exist. For example, given her statement that propositions do not exist, she will be committed to claiming, *via* platitudinous inference, 'there exists something true; that is, the proposition that propositions do not exist'. This does not turn the error-theorist into a realist, as the proposition that propositions do not exist is a minimal entity, which – as I have argued – exists only language-dependently. The snag is, however, that error-theorists as such are not conceptually equipped to make this rejoinder. For this reply relies on – plausibly – an *antirealist* argument (briefly, the error-theorist will have to distinguish between thick propositions and thin propositions, and argue that thin propositions are language-dependent and thus not fully mind-independent). Analogous examples can be found concerning other entities – for instance, facts and properties. In conclusion, when an error-theorist gets sweeping minimalist, she can no longer target objects that have counterparts among the minimal entities by *only* applying error-theory arguments – she ought to appeal to antirealist arguments too. The phenomenon of sweeping minimalism has thus some interesting consequence at least for the debate between realists and error-theorists.

In this section, I have attained two important results: first, I have established that minimal entities are just intrinsic to language; second, I have given reasons to believe that the introduction of minimal entities in ontology is inconsequential for fate of the dispute between realists and antirealists. A conclusion that can be drawn now, on the grounds of the upshots of this and the former section, is that the phenomenon of creeping minimalism has no significant consequence for the debate on realism and non-realism, as long as this debate is framed as a dispute between realists and *antirealists*.

### **5 Concluding remarks and back to Dreier's problem**

In the first part of the paper (i.e. §§ 2, 2.1-2.3), I have ventured an explanation of the ramping up phenomenon that Dreier calls creeping minimalism by interpreting it, not as a *doctrine*, but as a widespread *tendency*. On this interpretation, creeping minimalism coincides with a propensity to make a massive use in philosophical discussion of elementary regimentations of folk semantical and ontological notions – that is, of concepts implicit in natural language that have functions other than giving illuminating explanations. One important function of many minimal notions is – I have suggested – that of enhancing the expressive power of language by allowing the explicit formulation of generalizations. Sweeping minimalists are not necessarily dogmatic and may embrace forms of pluralism about notions and entities, in the sense that they may believe that we also possess or can define thicker and more controversial versions of our minimal notions for the purpose of achieving genuine philosophical explanations.

I have suggested that the sweeping minimalist attitude might have been triggered by independent works by Paul Horwich (and other deflationists about truth), Crispin Wright and Stephan Schiffer. These philosophers do not aim to provide elementary regimentations of ordinary notions (at least, they do not say it explicitly), but this interpretation of their works emerges quite naturally. I have shown that the views defended by these authors can be “assembled” together to

produce a conspicuous part of or even the entire framework apparently presupposed by the sweeping minimalism.

In the second part of the paper (i.e. §§ 4 and 5), I have investigated whether entertaining the sweeping minimalist attitude produces any significant consequence for the debate on realism and non-realism in metaphysics; this has involved looking into the ontological status of minimal entities. I have characterized realism about X-entities as the ontological (or metaphysical) position according to which X-entities exist and are mind-independent. An interesting result concerns alterations in the “geography” of the possible non-realist positions brought about by the rise of creeping minimalism. When creeping minimalism breaks through, the *irrealist* perspectives, which challenge realism by questioning the *existence* dimension, face difficulties. Precisely, a serious problem that afflicts the non-cognitivist positions, like expressivism and instrumentalism, is that it becomes hard to understand in what sense these positions still constitute a challenge for realism. Probably, when creeping minimalism takes place, non-cognitivism (i.e. the position it turns into) can no longer be considered to be a form of non-realism. A minor difficulty, which affects the error-theory, is that certain possible forms of error-theory that target specific objects (e.g. propositions) could still stand up only with supplementation of antirealist arguments.

A significant – though perhaps expected – outcome of my investigation is that creeping minimalism has no substantial consequence for the acceptability of realism and antirealism, in the sense that that neither the realist nor the antirealist can take advantage of the framework of creeping minimalism to the detriment of the opponent. This result is important because the realist-antirealist construal of the debate about realism and non-realism is apparently the most comprehensive of all in terms of possible applications – disputes between realists and antirealists can possibly be developed to apply globally, to the whole of reality. Creeping minimalism leaves disputes like these untouched.

Another important result is the definite answer I have given to the question of the ontological status of minimal entities: these entities are language-dependent in the strong sense that they do not

exist outside language. The reason being that it is proper to the nature of these entities that only deflationary notions of reference can explain our ability to refer to them – these notions of reference can establish no link between language and extra-linguistic world. This does not mean, however, that minimal entities are just created by our linguistic practices. Reality has to collaborate to fulfil the conditions of truth of the basic sentences that entail that there are minimal entities.

At the end, after this long journey, let us return to the fascinating problem uncovered by Dreier that has originally elicited my investigation into creeping minimalism and the nature of minimal entities. Dreier's puzzle is the following: the sweeping minimalist appears to be entitled to assert everything the realist can assert; so, when a non-realist goes sweeping minimalist, she will be entitled to assert everything the realist can assert. Yet it is strongly implausible that the non-realist will actually become a realist. For it is absurd to believe that realism could be obtained by just implementing the vacuous principles of creeping minimalism. How can we make sense of this? We are now in the position to unravel Dreier's puzzle. This is my solution: when creeping minimalism takes place, many forms of non-realism can still be distinguished from realism because it is *false* that the sweeping minimalist is entitled to assert everything the realist can assert; consequently, it is *false* that, when a non-realist goes sweeping minimalist, she is entitled to assert everything the realist can assert.

The following examples will clarify my point. Consider first a realist – or Platonist – about numbers. The Platonist about numbers can be a realist about the entities that coincide with *facts* about numbers (e.g. the fact that 3 has the property of being odd) and *properties* of numbers (e.g. the property of being odd). Since the sentence '3 is odd' is warrantably assertible, a sweeping minimalist can assert: 'it is a fact that 3 has the property of being odd'. Does this make the sweeping minimalist indistinguishable from the Platonist? No. For the Platonist who is a realist about facts and properties of numbers is committed to claiming that such facts and properties are mind-independent in a non-platitudinous sense of this term. Yet the sweeping minimalist *as such* is not entitled to this claim, for her conceptual framework does not include non-platitudinous notions

of mind-independence. A Platonist about numbers may however not want to be committed to the existence of entities such as facts and proprieties, so that she may consider facts and properties to be mere reifications of linguistic constructs (i.e. minimal entities). Is the sweeping minimalist who asserts ‘it is a fact that 3 has the property of being odd’ indistinguishable from a Platonist of this kind? No, because the Platonist about numbers is anyway committed to claiming that *numbers* are mind-independent in a non-platitudinous sense of it, while the sweeping minimalist *as such* is not entitled to this claim.

Consider now an *antirealist* about numbers who becomes sweeping minimalist. She will be entitled to assert sentences like: ‘it is a fact that 3 has the property of being odd’. Does this or similar entitlements turn the antirealist into a Platonist about numbers? No. For this and similar entitlements do not commit the antirealist to the thesis that numbers (or facts about numbers and properties of numbers) are mind-independent in a non-platitudinous sense.

Consider finally an error-theorist about numbers. She will contend, basically, that all warrantably assertible (or provable) sentences about numbers are false, for there are no such entities. Consequently, for her, ‘3 is odd’ is false. As this error-theorist gets sweeping minimalist, she will be enabled to claim that the sentence ‘it is a fact that 3 has the property of being odd’ is false too (and similar claims involving minimal notions will be allowed through different something-from-nothing inference). But this does not seem to raise evident difficulty.

These examples teach that creeping minimalism does not render non-realism indistinguishable from realism. When creeping minimalism takes place, it is still possible to distinguish with clarity and precision between positions that entail *realism* about X-entities, positions that entail *antirealism* about X-entities and positions that entail an *error-theory* about X-entities. This completes my answer to Dreier’s problem.

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