

CHAPTER TWO

AN EXPLANATORY ROLE FOR THE CONCEPT OF TRUTH

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1. Introduction

Deflationism about truth (henceforth, deflationism) comes in a variety of versions¹ Variety notwithstanding, there is widespread consensus among advocates of different stripes of deflationism (disquotationalism, minimalism, prosententialism, etc.) with respect to the following no-explanatory-role claim concerning the concept of truth:

(NER) The concept of truth has no *explanatory* role to play in philosophical explanations (nor, for that matter, in non-philosophical explanations).

Versions of (NER) can be found in Armour-Garb (2012), Brandom (2002), Dodd (2013), Field (2001), Grover (2002), Horwich (1998, 2010), Soames (1999) and Williams (2002, 2007), to give just a few examples. In one way or another, all of these authors seem to hold that (NER) follows from their respective deflationary accounts of truth. To be sure, they do not intend to deny that truth talk is sometimes useful (or even indispensable) for the purposes of formulating and expressing explanations of, say, our epistemic practices, meaning and propositional content, practical success or the success of scientific theories. But, they insist, truth talk does not and cannot contribute any genuinely *explanatory* content to the explanations which we formulate with its help. Its contribution to them is, as Michael Williams puts it, “*wholly* expressive, thus *never* explanatory” (Williams 1999, p. 547).

In what follows I argue that (NER) is false. My argument begins with the question of why the following conditional holds:

An assertion of <some dogs are vicious> is correct only if some dogs are vicious.²

My contention is that the best available answer to this question—the best available explanation of why the conditional holds—is in terms of an explanatory “because”-statement whose explanans-clause contains truth talk that is both inaccessible to standard deflationary treatment *and* explanatory.³ I take this to amount to a counterexample against (NER). Of course, nothing in what follows hinges on the peculiarities of assertions of <DOGS>.

Michael Williams (2002, p. 157) suggests that an example of a genuinely explanatory use of the concept of truth, i.e. a counterexample to (NER), would amount to a refutation of deflationism—not just of this or that specific deflationary account of truth but of the deflationary outlook on truth quite generally. I will be cautious with regard to the question of whether Williams is right. Maybe a counterexample to (NER) should not *per se* be taken to amount to a refutation of deflationism because, maybe, there is no good reason for deflationists *qua* deflationists to commit themselves to (NER) in the first place—contrary to what many of them seem to think. In fact, the claim that deflationism entails or in some other, logically weaker, way requires acceptance of (NER) has recently come under criticism. Nic Damnjanovic (2005, 2010), for instance, points to a way in which, arguably, one can be a deflationist about truth without committing oneself to (NER), and Leon Horsten, in outlining his inferentialist version of deflationism, suggests that “perhaps we should divorce deflationism from the claim that the concept of truth has no explanatory function in specific philosophical disciplines” (Horsten 2011, p. 92; see also 2009, 2010).

The next two sections prepare the ground by rehearsing the standard deflationary account of the role and function of truth talk. In the fourth section I present a counterexample to (NER). The fifth section discusses various objections that my line argument is likely to provoke. The final one contains a very brief discussion concerning the question of whether my counterexample to (NER) should be taken to show the deflationary outlook on truth to be mistaken.

In what follows the focus is on deflationary accounts of truth for propositions. However, what I have to say carries over, *mutatis mutandis*, to deflationary accounts of truth for (utterances of) sentences.

2. Deflationism and the no-explanatory-role claim

Consider the distinction between revealing and unrevealing contexts or environments of truth talk (see Soames 1999, p. 230). A context, C , of truth talk, is revealing if and only if the proposition(s) which truth is predicated of in C is (are) immediately recoverable from C alone. By way of example:

<Some dogs are vicious> is true.

If NASA's press releases are to be believed, then <Curiosity has found traces of water on Mars> is true.

Notice that, in the sense intended here, predicating truth of a proposition does not always amount to asserting or endorsing that proposition. In the antecedent of "if <DOGS> is true, then some dogs are dangerous" truth is predicated of <DOGS>, but <DOGS> is not asserted or endorsed. The same holds for the consequent in the second example of revealing truth talk given above.

A context C , of truth talk, is unrevealing if and only if C is such that the propositions which are at issue are not immediately recoverable from it—either because we have no information as to what they are or because there are too many of them:

Some of what Khrushchev asserted in 1960 is true.

Every proposition of the form " $p \rightarrow p$ " is true.

Deflationists sometimes say that unrevealing environments of truth talk give us a hint as to the *raison d'être* of truth locutions in our languages (see, for instance, Horwich 2010, pp. 4-5). If it were not for the utility of the truth predicate in formulating general statements of the kind just displayed, use of that predicate would be dispensable quite generally (see Soames 1999, p. 230; Horwich 1998, p. 39). Assuming, plausibly, that all contexts of truth talk are either revealing or unrevealing, the deflationist can be interpreted as offering the conjunction of the following two claims as an account of the role of the truth predicate in our discourses:

(a) When the truth predicate is used in a revealing environment, use of that predicate is usually dispensable in the following sense: what is said by predicating truth of some given proposition can be said without loss of, or other changes in, *relevant* content by directly expressing that proposition.

(b) Whenever the truth predicate is used in unrevealing contexts, its contribution to the expression of what is said in those contexts can be *exhaustively* accounted for in terms of its role as a device for facilitating the formulation of a specific kind of generalisation over propositions.

There are two qualifiers in (a), “usually” and “relevant”. The qualifier “relevant” is needed to make room for denying the simple redundancy claim according to which the meaning of a revealing truth ascription (“<DOGS> is true”, say) just *is* the proposition that truth is ascribed to (<DOGS>)—a claim that most contemporary deflationists want to deny (see, for instance, Horwich 1998, p. 124; Damjanovic 2010, p. 45). The qualifier “usually”, on the other hand, is required once the restriction to relevant content is in place. In fact, once it is admitted that the content of a revealing truth ascription is not exhausted by the proposition that truth is ascribed to, it cannot be ruled out that competent speakers sometimes utter revealing truth ascriptions precisely because the content they want to express could *not* be expressed without employing propositionally revealing truth talk. In other words, it cannot be excluded that sometimes the extra content of revealing truth ascriptions is (part of) the relevant content.⁴

Deflationists maintain that in order to see *why* truth talk is (usually) dispensable in revealing contexts and *how* the truth predicate performs its generalising role in unrevealing environments it is sufficient to appeal to the (non-paradoxical) instances of the equivalence schema

(ES) $\langle p \rangle$ is true $\leftrightarrow p$.

I will come back to this point in the next section.

How do these deflationary theses concerning the role of truth talk relate to the no-explanatory-role claim (NER), which concerns the *concept* of truth? (NER) states that the notion of truth is explanatorily inert. Deflationists who subscribe to (NER) provide this sweeping claim with a tangible interpretation. One aspect of this interpretation—the one that will be particularly relevant to the following discussion—is this claim: any explanatory work that can be done by some revealing truth ascription, *R*, can equally well be done by the proposition(s) that truth is ascribed to in *R* (see Horwich 1998, p. 49).

As mentioned above, deflationists do not maintain that utilising the word “true” in philosophical explanations is a somehow defective practice. In subscribing to (NER) they do not intend to prohibit the use of truth talk in such explanations.⁵ Rather, they distinguish between truth-talk’s involvement or occurrence in formulations of explanations on the one

hand, and truth-talk's contributing explanatory content to what is expressed by those formulations on the other—in order to then insist that whenever “is true” occurs in the formulation of explanations its use is either dispensable in the sense of (a) or can be entirely accounted for in terms of its role as a device for expressing a certain kind of generalisation in the sense of (b). The deflationary account of the role of truth talk relates to (NER) via a line of reasoning that deflationists who advocate (NER) often leave implicit but clearly rely upon. In large outlines, the reasoning goes as follows:

(DeflationNER)

1. For any explanation, *E*, involving truth talk, if the truth talk in *E* can be adequately accounted for along the lines of either (a) or (b), then it does not contribute explanatory content to *E*.
2. For any explanation, *E*, involving truth talk, the truth talk in *E* can be adequately accounted for along the lines of either (a) or (b).
3. Therefore, for any explanation, *E*, involving truth talk, the truth talk in *E* does not contribute explanatory content to *E*.

I accept the first premise of (DeflationNER) for the sake of argument, and I take issue with the second. More precisely, I take the argument overall to suggest a promising strategy for identifying *candidate* counterexamples to (NER). The strategy suggested by (DeflationNER) is to try to find counterexamples to its second premise. One way to pursue this strategy is to try to identify an occurrence of the predicate “is true” in the explanans-clause of a true explanatory “because”-statement, where the occurrence of “is true” is such that its function (or role) cannot be accounted for by either (a) or (b). Of course, not all explanations can be couched in terms of “because”-statements since, for instance, some explanations answer to “what is”-questions rather than to “why”-questions (cf. Jenkins 2008). In order for the following to go through, however, it is sufficient to make the uncontroversial assumption that one paradigmatic way of asking for an explanation is by means of “why”-questions and that one paradigmatic way of giving explanations is by means of “because”-statements.

Before stating what I take to be a counterexample to the second premise of (DeflationNER)—and arguing that it is also a counterexample to (NER)—it will be useful to rehearse the deflationary treatment of a norm of assertion whose normative content *prima facie* involves the notion of truth.

3. A norm of assertion and its deflationary treatment

Assertions are open to normative assessment along many different lines. They can be objectionable or praiseworthy for moral reasons, they can be epistemically justified or unjustified, boring or interesting, relevant or irrelevant to their conversational context *etc.* Speech acts of assertion can exemplify all of these qualities and defects (and many more) quite independently of whether their propositional contents are true or not. However, consider the following *semantic* constraint on the correctness of assertoric speech acts:

(SCA) It is correct to assert a proposition only if it is true.

It would seem that the truth predicate makes an important contribution to the normative content of this constraint. Not so, says the deflationist. Granting the use which is here being made of “is true” as entirely proper and unobjectionable, she insists that, in (SCA), “is true” is only being used to achieve the right kind of generality: it makes an important contribution to the *formulation* or *expression* of the general constraint, but it does not contribute anything to (SCA)’s normative content proper.

In fact, what deflationists have to say about the role of the truth predicate in formulations of norms for assertion echoes what they have to say about the role of that predicate in explanations. They do not intend to prohibit the use of “is true” for the purpose of formulating norms of assertion. Rather, they appeal to the distinction between the mere occurrence of truth talk within formulations of such norms and truth-talk’s contributing genuinely *normative* content to what is expressed by those formulations—in order to then insist that whenever “true” is being used in the formulation of norms of assertion its use is either dispensable in the sense of (a) or can be entirely accounted for in terms of its role as a device for the expression of generalisations in the sense of (b). The deflationist’s argument for the claim that truth talk does not contribute genuinely normative content to norms of assertion like (SCA) is simply (DeflationNER) with “norm” in place of “explanation” and “normative” in place of “explanatory”.⁶

In order to establish the more specific claim that the truth predicate makes no contribution to the normative content expressed by (SCA) deflationists offer the following line of argument. With the variable x taking propositions as values and singular terms denoting propositions as substituents, (SCA) can be stated more formally in this way:

(SCA) $\forall x$ (It is correct to assert $x \rightarrow x$ is true).

If we express the semantic constraint by means of a first-order universal quantification, the last occurrence of the bound referential variable x requires a predicate—and the predicate best suited for the job is, of course, “is true”. However, it would be hasty to take the fact that truth talk facilitates the expression of the normative content of (SCA) as evidence for the thesis that the concept of truth is involved in the normative content expressed by (SCA). This becomes clear, says the deflationist, when we consider an arbitrarily chosen instance of (SCA), say:

(T⁺) It is correct to assert <some dogs are vicious> → <some dogs are vicious> is true.

There is an obvious way of expressing the normative content of (T⁺) without using the truth predicate. Since (T⁺) is a context of truth talk that is both propositionally revealing and transparent, we can immediately apply the left-to-right direction of the relevant instance of (ES), i.e. of

<Some dogs are vicious> is true ↔ some dogs are vicious,

to the consequent of (T⁺) and write (T⁻) instead of (T⁺):

(T⁻) It is correct to assert <some dogs are vicious> → some dogs are vicious.

At this point a deflationist will point out that the *normative* contents of (T⁻) and (T⁺) are identical even though, contrary to (T⁺), (T⁻) does not involve truth talk at all. The claim that (T⁺) and (T⁻) have identical normative contents can be spelled out along the following lines: every assertion of <DOGS> that satisfies the necessary condition of assertoric correctness specified by (T⁺) also satisfies the necessary condition specified by (T⁻), and *vice versa*. Assuming (T⁺) and (T⁻) to be declarative equivalents of the imperatives “[assert <DOGS>] only if <DOGS> is true!” and “[assert <DOGS>] only if some dogs are vicious!”, respectively, another way to make the same point is this: there is nothing a person could rationally do in order to comply with (T⁺) that she could not also rationally do in order to comply with (T⁻), and *vice versa*. Notice, in passing, that to say that the normative contents expressed by (T⁺) and (T⁻) are identical is not to say that (T⁺) and (T⁻) express identical contents *tout court*.

So the normative point of (T⁺) can be expressed without employing the concept of truth and, importantly, in doing so, there is no need to replace use of that concept with use of any other.⁷ All that needs to be appealed to

is the relevant instance of (ES). The treatment just applied to (T^+) works for every instance of (SCA); and this, according to the deflationist, should be taken to show that the *only* reason why the predicate “is true” appears in (SCA) is that it—together with the apparatus of referential quantification—conveniently enables the formulation of a universal generalisation which entails every instance of

$(T^+_{\text{schematic}})$ It is correct to assert $\langle p \rangle \rightarrow \langle p \rangle$ is true

and, together with the relevant instances of (ES), every instance of

$(T^-_{\text{schematic}})$ It is correct to assert $\langle p \rangle \rightarrow p$.

For what follows it is important to emphasise that I do not take issue with the deflationary treatment of (SCA). Again for the sake of argument, I accept the claim that for each instance, I^+ , of $(T^+_{\text{schematic}})$, there is at least one instance, I , of $(T^-_{\text{schematic}})$, such that the normative contents of I^+ and I are identical (and vice versa for each instance, I , of $(T^-_{\text{schematic}})$).

Deflationists treat this point as a satisfactory end to the debate on the role of the truth predicate in (SCA). As far as the normative content of (SCA) is concerned, they may very well be right in doing so. However, there is a sequel to that debate. The sequel concerns the question of how we are to understand the instances of $(T^-_{\text{schematic}})$ and, or so I will argue in the remainder, it is bound to involve truth talk in a way that cannot be accounted for along the standard deflationary lines, (a) and (b), introduced in the last section.

4. A counterexample to the no-explanatory-role claim

The instances of $(T^-_{\text{schematic}})$ stand in need of explanation. With regard to every single one it is legitimate to ask: why does it hold? In what follows I use (T^-) as an arbitrarily chosen example-instance of $(T^-_{\text{schematic}})$. Consider the following question, then:

(Q) Why is an assertion of $\langle \text{some dogs are vicious} \rangle$ correct only if some dogs are vicious?

Alternatively:

(Q) Why does (T^-) hold?

Here it might be objected that (T⁻) does *not* hold and that, consequently, (Q) should be dismissed. I will come back to this worry in the next section. For the time being I assume that (Q) cannot be dismissed so easily. So, given that (Q) is a good question, a good answer to (Q) would provide us with an explanation of why (T⁻) holds—to put it in fewer words, with an explanation of (T⁻). What, then, should one expect from an explanation of (T⁻)? At the very least it should help us understand why the existence (or non-existence) of vicious dogs is relevant to the correctness (or incorrectness) of assertions of <DOGS>. It should break an explanatory path from the existence or non-existence of vicious dogs to the normative status (correctness or incorrectness) of assertoric speech acts which have <DOGS> as their propositional content. In asserting <DOGS> we do not assert dogs or any of their dispositions. Therefore the detour via *the proposition* that some dogs are vicious, i.e. via the propositional content that is shared by all assertions of <DOGS>, seems inevitable in answering (Q). It is hard to see how the relevance of whether or not there are vicious dogs to the normative status of assertions of <DOGS> could be thought of as *not* mediated by some property (substantial or not) that <DOGS> can (fail to) exemplify—by something that appertains to <DOGS> only if some dogs are vicious. This suggests that what we have to do in order to explain (T⁻) is identify a predicate *G* of propositions that satisfies (at least) the following two conditions:

- (i) *G* applies to <DOGS> only if some dogs are vicious, and
- (ii) <DOGS>'s being *G* or not being *G* partly determines the normative status of assertions of <DOGS>, such that an assertion of <DOGS> is correct only if <DOGS> is *G*.

Unsurprisingly, I think that the predicate that best meets conditions (i) and (ii) is the predicate “is true”. So my claim is that the following “because”-statement is (part of) the best available explanation of (T⁻), i.e. (part of) the best available answer to (Q):

(A⁺) [It is correct to assert <DOGS> only if some dogs are vicious] because
[<DOGS> is true only if some dogs are vicious].

In (A⁺) “is true” occurs in the explanans-clause of a “because”-statement whose explanandum-clause is (T⁻). It is used in a (partial) explanation of the relevance of the existence or non-existence of vicious dogs for the normative status of assertions of <DOGS>. Given the deflationist's advice not to confuse the mere occurrence of the truth predicate in the explanans of some explanation, *E*, with evidence for the

claim that the notion of truth contributes genuinely explanatory content to *E*, it is fair to ask: if its role in (A^+) is not explanatory, then what role does the truth predicate play in (A^+)? Can the deflationist account for the role of the truth talk involved in (A^+)? More precisely, can she account for it in one of the standard deflationary ways, (a) and (b), introduced above?

It is obvious that in (A^+) “is true” is not being used to formulate a generalisation of the kind that is dear to deflationists (and non-deflationists as well). There is only one proposition at play here and, importantly, we know exactly which one it is. The explanans-clause of (A^+) is a propositionally revealing context of truth talk. So the truth talk involved in it cannot be accounted for along the lines of (b).

But it is not accessible to deflationary treatment in terms of (a) either. Since the deflationist claims that any explanatory work that can be done by a revealing truth ascription, *R*, can equally well be done by the proposition that truth is ascribed to in *R*, one might expect her to hold that the truth talk in (A^+) is dispensable in precisely this sense: the explanatory work that can be done with it can equally well be done without it—by using a sentence that expresses <DOGS> instead of one that expresses <<DOGS> is true> in the antecedent of (A^+)’s explanans-clause. However, the deflationist would be ill-advised to put forward this claim. Unlike “<DOGS> is true only if some dogs are vicious”, the tautology “some dogs are vicious only if some dogs are vicious” on its own cannot be used to state even a *partial* explanation of (*T*). The proposition it expresses has no explanatory value at all with regard to the question of why the normative status of assertions of <DOGS> (partly) depends on whether there are vicious dogs. The following “because”-sentence expresses a false proposition, despite the truth of the propositions expressed by the two clauses that it connects by “because”:

(A^-) [It is correct to assert <DOGS> only if some dogs are vicious] because
[some dogs are vicious only if some dogs are vicious].

This point reinforces the claim that in explaining (*T*) we cannot contend ourselves with talk about dogs and their properties. The detour via some property that <DOGS> can (fail) to exemplify is indispensable in answering (*Q*). Not any old property that <DOGS> can reasonably be claimed (not) to exemplify will do. The only one that has *explanatory* import with respect to (*T*) is the property of truth. Therefore, given her commitment to (NER), the deflationist would seem to be in a rather difficult dialectical position when it comes to the question of why the existence or non-existence of vicious dogs is relevant to the normative status of assertions of <DOGS>.

At this stage, if not before, the deflationist might complain that the line of argument just presented is wrong-headed. After all, the explanans-clause in (A^+) is just the left-to-right direction of an instance of (ES), and all (non-paradoxical) instances of (ES), together with the propositions expressed by them, are available to the deflationist by default, as it were. The proposition expressed by the explanans-clause of (A^+) is, for example, entailed by an *axiom* of Horwich's Minimalist Theory of truth (see Horwich 1998, pp. 17-20). So, the thought would have to go, the deflationist can dismiss the demand for an account, in terms of (a) or (b), of the truth-predicate's role in (A^+) since there is nothing in her deflationism which prevents her from simply *accepting* (A^+) as a (partial) explanation of (T).

These points are important. But they do not lend support to the complaint that the line of argument presented above is on the wrong track. Rather, they speak in favour of the claim that deflationists should be more cautious in answering the question of whether their respective version of deflationism commits them to (NER). Accepting (A^+) as a partial explanation of (T) amounts to accepting that the left-to-right direction of the relevant instance of (ES) is capable of doing explanatory work. Since the left-to-right direction of that instance, when employed in the context of explaining (T), contains truth talk which is not accessible to deflationary treatment in terms of (a) or (b), a deflationist who accepts (A^+) would seem to be forced to grant that the explanans-clause of (A^+) is capable of doing its work precisely *in virtue* of the conceptual contribution that the truth predicate makes to the explanatory content which is expressed by it. If this is correct, then there is a rather blatant tension between (NER) and the claim that instances of (ES) can be used explanatorily. If the latter claim holds good, then (NER) is false, and if (NER) is true, then instances of (ES) cannot be used explanatorily.

The deflationist will have to make a choice here. She can either maintain the thesis that the concept of truth is explanatorily inert, i.e. she can stick to (NER), or she can hold that instances of the equivalence schema can have explanatory import. But she cannot consistently hold both.

The tension just described is quite evident in Horwich, for example. On the one hand, he holds that "all of the facts whose expression involves the truth predicate may be explained [...] by assuming no more about truth than instances of the equivalence schema" (Horwich 1998, p. 23). On the other hand he claims that "whenever we deploy the concept of truth non-trivially – whether in logic, ordinary language, science or philosophy – it is playing this role: a device of generalization" (Horwich 2002, p. 138). Of

course, the description of the (normative) fact registered by (T⁻) does not (have to) involve the truth predicate. But still, that fact is one whose explanation should at least not be rendered impossible by one's account of truth—and deflationism would seem to have precisely this undesirable effect.

I do not want to put too much weight on these points, however. For the sake of argument, let us assume that they do not establish that accepting (A⁺) precludes one from accepting (NER), and vice versa.

I have already alluded to the fact that the explanation of (T⁻) in terms of (A⁺) is incomplete or partial. By itself this observation does not disqualify (A⁺) as an answer to (Q). A “because”-statement can be true—and thus have explanatory value—even if what it expresses is only a partial or incomplete explanation of what is described by its explanandum-clause (Schnieder 2006, p. 32). No doubt, there are many different possible approaches to rendering (A⁺) more complete as an explanation of (T⁻). However, there is one explanatory lacuna in (A⁺) which any such approach will have to fill in order to be acceptable. What is *clearly* missing in (A⁺) is an explicit statement of the explanatory link between the truth or untruth of <DOGS> and the correctness or incorrectness of assertions of <DOGS>. As far as the possible approaches to filling this explanatory gap in (A⁺) are concerned there is not much of a choice. Eventually appeal will have to be made to (T⁺). In fact, the most immediate way to render (A⁺) more complete consists in adding (T⁺) to its explanans-clause. This gives us:

(B) [It is correct to assert <DOGS> only if some dogs are vicious] because [*<DOGS> is true only if some dogs are vicious, and it is correct to assert <DOGS> only if <DOGS> is true*].

While the first conjunct of the explanans-clause in (B) *might*—for the reasons discussed above—be available to the deflationist, its second conjunct, i.e. (T⁺), is *not* available to her in the context of explaining (T⁻). She has already used (T⁻) in her account of (T⁺) (see section 2, above), and having done so precludes her from now using (T⁺) in explaining (T⁻). Moreover, and more importantly, the role of the truth predicate in the second conjunct cannot be accounted for along the lines of either (a) or (b). While the deflationist might be able to accommodate this point with respect to the first conjunct, it is hard to see how she could do so with regard to the second. The truth talk involved in the second conjunct of (B)'s explanans-clause does not serve the expression of a generalisation. That excludes (b). But neither is it dispensable in the sense that the explanatory work that is done by (T⁺) in the explanans of (B) can equally

well be done by (T). (T) is our *explanandum*, and it cannot be used to explain itself. That excludes (a).

Due to her commitment to (NER), which is based on the argument (DeflationNER), it would seem that the deflationist is left with no choice but to *reject* (B) as an explanation of (T). And given that (Q) is a legitimate request for explanation, the rejection of (B) commits her to offering an explanation of (T) which, while being at least as good as (B), either does not involve truth talk at all or uses it exclusively as a device for expressing generalisations. But such an explanation does not seem to be forthcoming. I will come back to this shortly.

(B) is a counterexample to the second premise of the argument (DeflationNER)—a counterexample, that is, to the claim that for any explanation, *E*, involving truth talk, the truth talk in *E* can be adequately accounted for along the lines of either (a) or (b). In order to see that (B) is also a counterexample to (NER) it is sufficient to appreciate that, in (B), it is the truth predicate which forges the explanatory link between the existence or non-existence of vicious dogs and the normative status of assertions of <some dogs are vicious>. Contrary to what many deflationists maintain, there is a genuinely explanatory role for the concept of truth in philosophical theorizing. It can be found in what is expressed by the explanans-clause of (B)—and, arguably, already in what is expressed by the explanans-clause of (A⁺). Moreover, since the assertion of <DOGS> is an arbitrarily chosen example there would seem to be a plethora of genuinely explanatory roles for the concept of truth.

5. Discussion of objections

It might be objected (1) that (T) does not hold (and therefore doesn't need explaining), (2) that (T) can, after all, be explained without making use of the concept of truth, (3) that (T) registers a basic or brute constraint on the correctness of assertoric speech acts which have <DOGS> as their content, (4) that the failure of the standard deflationary ways in accounting for the role of truth talk in the explanans-clause of (B) is simply due to the fact that “because” creates non-extensional contexts, (5) that the explanations (A⁺) and (B) of (T) do not pose a problem for the deflationist advocate of (NER) because (NER), as she intends it, concerns the role of the concept of truth in *causal* explanations only. I discuss these rejoinders in turn.

(1) In asking “why”-questions speakers presuppose that what they respectively request an explanation *for* is indeed the case. If (T) does not hold, then (Q)—“why does (T) hold?”—should be dismissed as ill-posed.

Consequently, one strategy to block the line of argument presented above would be to reject (T). Is this a viable strategy to pursue for the deflationist?

I do not think so. If there are no vicious dogs then any speaker who asserts <DOGS> commits a mistake. Taking the expression “correct” in (T) to mean “not mistaken” in the sense just hinted at, it seems rather difficult to find fault with the claim that (T) expresses a valid constraint on the correctness of assertions of <DOGS>. The denial of (T) would amount to the claim that the existence or non-existence of vicious dogs is irrelevant to the normative status of (some) assertions of <DOGS>. That seems plainly wrong, however, and it flies in the face of what, arguably by default, is the central *point* of asserting <DOGS>. Moreover, it seems to be something that no deflationist would want to be committed to—at least not in virtue of her deflationism alone. This objection, then, can be set to one side.

(2) I have argued for the claims that (B) is the best available explanation of (T) and that the deflationist’s rejection of (B) commits her to explaining (T) in a way—at least on a par with (B) as regards explanatory force—that either steers completely clear of the concept of truth or employs it exclusively in its generalising function. Moreover, I have claimed that such an explanation does not seem to be forthcoming. Is this last claim warranted?

As mentioned in section 3, deflationists offer an explanation of the general semantic constraint (SCA)—it is correct to assert a proposition only if it is true—which they, rather convincingly, take to establish that the truth talk involved in (SCA) can be exhaustively accounted for in terms of its role as a device for formulating a useful kind of generalisation, i.e. in terms of (b). However, as far as explaining (T), or rather, as far as explaining particular instances of the schema “it is correct to assert <*p*>, only if *p*” is concerned, the deflationary literature has little to offer. To date both deflationists and their opponents have tended to ignore that particular norms like (T) will appear to be unproblematic only as long as a prior understanding of the speech act of assertion is simply presupposed. Both sides, that is, have tended to ignore that, once the concept of assertion is put on the agenda, questions like (Q) will become legitimate requests for explanation. This tendency can probably be construed as a result of the prevalent focus of current debates concerning the explanatory role and the normative import of the concept of truth. Understandably, the focus of these debates has been squarely on statements of general epistemic norms and on general theses that purport to explain, for instance, meaning in terms of truth conditions or practical success in terms of desire and true

belief. Deflationists have made a remarkably strong case for the claim that the truth talk involved in such theses figures “merely [as] a device of generalisation” (Horwich 2002, p. 140). However, that claim rests on treating the observation that particular instances of the norms and theses in question can be reformulated *sans* truth talk and without loss of (relevant) content as the natural end of the debate. What about the “true”-free reformulations of the particular instances themselves? Sticking to my example, what about (T)?

The closest that one gets to reading an attempt at offering a “true”-free explanation of particular norms like (T) in the works of advocates of deflationism is Horwich’s account of the “normative significance of truth” (Horwich 1998, p. 139) for *belief*. Horwich generally translates issues concerning normativity into issues concerning desirability. In the present context, this general approach leads him to turn the question of why truth has normative significance for belief into the question of why the following principle (see Horwich 2002, p. 135), let’s call it (DT), holds good:

(DT) It is desirable to believe only what is true.⁸

Horwich, of course, accepts both the claim that truth is normatively significant for belief and the claim that (DT) holds good. His answer to the question of why (DT) holds, i.e. why it is desirable to believe only what is true, begins with a “true”-free reformulation of a particular instance of (DT)—an instance which concerns what Horwich calls “a directly action-guiding proposition”:

[It] is easily seen why I should want it to be the case, for example, that I *believe* that if I run I will escape, only if I *will* escape if I run. I want this because, given a desire to escape, that belief would lead to a certain action (running), and that action would satisfy my desire if indeed it implies escape. This is why I would like it to be that I believe that I will escape if I run, only if I will indeed escape if I run (Horwich 1998, p. 139).

In the context of the passage just quoted, Horwich’s aim is to explain why the *general principle* (DT) holds good and, moreover, to do this in a way that establishes that the truth talk involved in (DT) serves merely as a device for expressing the required generalisation over propositions. To this end, he argues that an explanation analogous to the one given in response to the question of why it is desirable for me to believe <if I run I will escape>, only if I *will* escape if I run, can be given for all my beliefs that have directly action-guiding contents. However, “directly action-guiding

beliefs are derived from other beliefs” and “any of our beliefs might be a premise in some such inference” (p. 140). Therefore, says Horwich, (DT) holds good. Note that this explanation does indeed steer clear of using the concept of truth explanatorily. The predicate “is true” is used only in the final generalising step that takes us from particular instances of the schema “if it is desirable to believe $\langle p \rangle$, then p ” to the explicit generalisation (DT). Arguably, at that point all explanatory work has already been done.

For present concerns, the most relevant part of Horwich’s explanation of (DT) is the long quote above. Let us grant that it contains the ingredients of a good explanation of why it is desirable for me to believe \langle if I run I will escape \rangle , only if I *will* escape if I run, and more generally for why we want our beliefs to be true. Can the explanatory strategy exemplified in the quote from Horwich be adapted so as to provide a good explanation of, say, (T)—which states that it is *correct to assert* \langle DOGS \rangle only if some dogs are vicious? The answer, I think, has to be that it cannot be so adapted, for the following simple reason: while (T) holds without exception and, therefore, independently of the various practical goals we might have, the claim that it is desirable to assert \langle DOGS \rangle , only if there are vicious dogs, does *not* hold without exception or independently of our practical goals. What we desire the propositional contents of our assertions to be like is one thing, what the propositional contents of our assertions have to be like in order for our assertions to be correct is quite another. To interpret “why does (T) hold?” as “why is it desirable to assert \langle DOGS \rangle , only if some dogs are vicious?” amounts to changing the subject. Questions about assertoric correctness just don’t translate quite as smoothly as Horwich would have us believe into questions about what we *want* the propositional contents of our assertions to be like.

Of course, these considerations cast doubt only on the prospects of explaining (T) *along the lines of Horwich’s account of (DT)*. They do next to nothing to establish that “true”-free explanations of (T) are impossible. It merits emphasis, however, that even if an acceptable “true”-free explanation of (T) were to be given, the line of argument presented in section 4 would be weakened only *in part*. What would remain standing is the point that the explanatory use of the truth predicate in (B) is both perfectly legitimate and not accessible to standard deflationary treatment. What, then, *can* the deflationist say about the role of truth talk in (B)?

(3) Another rejoinder to the argument given above might be to concede that (T) holds but then to go on and say that (T) registers a basic constraint on the correctness of assertions of \langle DOGS \rangle —a constraint that neither requires nor allows of explanation. In order to make good on this rejoinder the deflationist would have to make a case for the claim that (Q),

despite being a *prima facie* legitimate request for explanation, can ultimately be dismissed as unanswerable. No one can answer it, and therefore the fact that the deflationist cannot answer it should not be held against her deflationism—or so the thought would have to go.

But this kind of manoeuvre should really be the last resort. At any rate, to reply to (Q) by declaring (T) to register a brute or basic normative fact would seem to be an inappropriate over-reaction. After all, (Q) would certainly not *seem* to be unanswerable. In fact, above I have offered an answer to it. If deflationism should make it impossible for its advocates to offer one as well, then this must be taken to cast doubt, not on the possibility of giving an answer to (Q), but on deflationism.

In order to appreciate that (T) does indeed stand in need of explanation it suffices to notice that norms analogous to (T) do not hold with respect to all speech acts. The following, for example, does not express a valid norm for asking the question of whether some dogs are vicious:

[It is correct to ask whether some dogs are vicious] only if some dogs are vicious.

Why, then, is it correct to assert <DOGS> only if there are vicious dogs, whereas the existence or non-existence of vicious dogs is irrelevant to the normative correctness of *asking whether* there are such dogs? If (Q) were unanswerable, then so would be this question. Claiming the latter, however, would seem to be *outré*, to say the least.

A somewhat more subtle variant of the objection just dismissed would start from the concession that (Q) is answerable, but then go on to insist that all one can reasonably expect by way of an answer to (Q) is this: because (T) captures an important aspect of what we mean by “correct assertion of <DOGS>”. This rejoinder might go hand in hand with the consideration that (T) can be construed as part of an *implicit definition* of the concept of correct assertion, i.e. as part of a definition that would comprise, among many others, all sentences of the form “it is correct to assert <p> only if p”. Appeal to the concept of truth would thus be avoided, and this can be expected to make the rejoinder under discussion attractive to deflationists.

As far as they go, these points are fair. But in order to constitute an objection against my line of argument, they would have to be supplemented by a convincing case for the claim that something is wrong with the explanation (B) of (T) that has been given above. Recall that the target of my argument is not deflationism per se, but (NER), i.e. a claim that many deflationists assume themselves, rightly or wrongly, to be committed to in virtue of their deflationary accounts of truth. Deflationists

rest their commitment to (NER) on the claim that all occurrences of truth talk in explanations can be adequately accounted for in terms of the standard deflationary moves (a) and (b). I take the considerations in section 4 above to establish that this claim is false. As long as no further arguments are forthcoming—arguments, that is, to the conclusion that, despite all appearances to the contrary, the concept of truth does *not* play an explanatory role in (B)—(B)’s status as a counterexample to (NER) remains untouched.

(4) In (A⁺) and in (B), the predicate “is true” is involved in sentences which are multiply embedded. In (B), for instance, its first occurrence is in the antecedent of a conditional, its second in the consequent of another conditional. To complicate matters, the two conditionals in which the truth predicate occurs are the conjuncts of a conjunction which, in turn, is embedded in a non-extensional compound: the conjunction is the explanans-clause of a “because”-sentence.

The line of argument presented above repeatedly relies on the claim that the role of the truth talk involved in (A⁺) and (B) is not accessible to standard deflationary treatment in terms of (a)—the fact that it is not accessible to (b) can be ignored in the present context. Now, a deflationist might concede this claim but complain that it cannot be used in the way suggested above, since the failure of (a) in accounting for the role of the truth talk involved in (B) is simply due to the fact that the sentential connective “because” generates contexts which are not transparent. Indeed, many deflationists restrict the intersubstitutivity of a given revealing truth ascription, *R*, and the sentences expressing the propositions that truth is ascribed to in *R*, to extensional contexts (see, for instance, Field 2008, p. 210; Armour-Garb and Woodbridge 2010, p. 66). Therefore, or so the rejoinder would have to go, (B) cannot be used to show that there is anything wrong with the deflationist’s interpretation of and commitment to (NER).

But this objection can be resisted for several reasons. In the first place, recall that (NER) *is* a thesis about the role of the concept of truth in explanations and that one paradigmatic way of expressing explanations is by means of “because”-statements. So it seems legitimate to expect (NER) to cover the claim that the conceptual contribution which the truth predicate can make to the contents expressed by explanatory “because”-statements is itself never explanatory. If that expectation is warranted, then a restriction of (a) to extensional contexts has the effect of rendering useless the deflationist’s main argument for (NER), i.e. (DeflationNER). Notice, moreover, that there is nothing wrong with logically complex explanantia *per se*. We use them all the time.

More importantly, we can evacuate the sentences whose conjunction constitutes the explanans-clause of (B) from their opaque context and write them down as premises in a little argument that has (T⁻) as its conclusion: 1. <DOGS> is true only if some dogs are vicious, 2. (T⁺), therefore: 3. (T⁻). Next, we can say of this argument that it is (part of) the best available explanation of (T⁻) and run the reasoning from section 4 with respect to what is expressed by the sentences 1. and 2.—which, of course, are no longer embedded in a non-extensional context. The upshot of this line of reasoning is the same as that of section 4 above. The deflationist cannot offer the argument as an explanation of (T⁻) because, while maybe being entitled to the first premise, she is not entitled to the second, i.e. to (T⁺). More importantly, the role of the truth predicate in premise 2. cannot be accounted for along the lines of (a)—restricted to extensional contexts or not.

(5) The last rejoinder that I want to anticipate would try to make good on the claim that deflationists should remain unmoved by all that has been said here concerning the explanation of (T⁻) in terms of truth—because what they are committed to is not (NER), but rather:

(NER_{causal}) The concept of truth has no explanatory role to play in *causal* explanations.⁹

Now, the explanations (A⁺) and (B) of (T⁻) are certainly not causal explanations. Maybe they can best be described as offering *conceptual* explanations of (T⁻) (see Schnieder 2006, pp. 31-35; 2011). Commitment to (NER_{causal}) is, of course, compatible with granting the notion of truth any *non-causal* explanatory role whatsoever. But if a deflationist were to insist that all she wanted to deny is that the notion of truth has *causal*-explanatory import, it would be difficult to help the impression that she betrays her cause. After all, deflationists take the thesis that the notion of truth is explanatorily inert to be something that *distinguishes* their accounts from traditional, non-deflationary approaches to truth. (NER_{causal}), however, expresses a claim that many advocates of traditional correspondence or coherence theories, say, will find utterly unobjectionable. This suggests that deflationists, even when they explicitly endorse only (NER_{causal}), have a broader thesis in mind, one that covers but is not exhausted by the claim that the notion of truth has no explanatory role to play in causal explanations.

6. Concluding remarks

I have claimed that (B) can be used to show that the argument (DeflationNER), the driving force behind the deflationist's commitment to (NER), is unsound. (B) can be used to show this because it is a counterexample to (DeflationNER)'s second premise. Furthermore, I have claimed that (B) should be accepted as a counterexample to (NER). It is hard to see how the conceptual contribution that the truth predicate makes to the explanatory content expressed by (B)'s explanans-clause could be understood as anything *other* than itself explanatory. In fact, the truth predicate is precisely what *makes* the content expressed by (B) an explanation of (T). Assume, for the sake of argument, that these claims are correct. Should we then also take (B) to amount to a general refutation of the deflationist outlook on truth, along the lines suggested by Williams (2002, p. 157)? Is (NER) really *that* central to deflationism?

The question cannot be dealt with at any useful length here. Notice, however, that while (NER) *is* central to many deflationary accounts there is another, equally central, deflationary thesis which would seem to be perfectly compatible with accepting (B) as a counterexample to both (DeflationNER)'s second premise and (NER): the claim that, as Bar-On and Simmons couch it, "there is no substantive property of truth shared by all and only [those] things we (properly) call true" (Bar-On and Simmons 2007, p. 83). Nothing in the line of argument given above suggests that, for the *concept* of truth to be able to do its explanatory work in the explanation of (T), truth has to be a substantial property in the sense hinted at (and rejected) by Bar-On and Simmons. The only metaphysical assumption—the only one concerning the question of what truth *is*, the nature of truth—that is at work in the preceding line of argument is that truth is *a* property. This assumption is consistent with what most contemporary deflationists (apart from some prosententialists) have to say, by way of metaphysics, about the nature of truth.

What my argument casts doubt on is not the deflationist's metaphysics of truth but her proposed account of the concept of truth. Accepting an indispensable explanatory role for that concept in the context of *understanding* and *explaining* (T) is consistent with conceding everything the deflationist has to say about the dispensability of truth talk in *stating* or *expressing* the normative content of (T⁺) (for a similar point see Bar-On and Simmons 2007). In expressing the normative point of (T⁺) all reference to the truth or untruth of <DOGS> can be skipped. We can express that content by means of (T). But in explaining why (T) holds we cannot skip reference to the truth or untruth of <DOGS>. Contrary to what

many deflationists suggest, a good case can be made for the claim that appeal to <DOGS>'s capacity to (fail to) exemplify the property of truth is indispensable in explaining why the relevance of the existence or non-existence of vicious dogs is relevant to the normative status of assertions of <DOGS>. To be sure, the explanation of (T) in terms of (B) involves the concept of truth in a rather local explanatory project. But it is an explanatory project none the less. So *if* (B) is a counterexample to (NER), then many deflationists should reshuffle their commitments.

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Notes

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² “<Some dogs are vicious>” is short for “the proposition that some dogs are vicious” (see Horwich 1998, p. 10). Since I will make heavy use of the proposition that some dogs are vicious (even though it will nowhere be asserted in what follows), I will most of the times abbreviate further and write “<DOGS>” as short for “the proposition that some dogs are vicious”.

³ I take explanatory “because”-statements to have the form “EXPLANANDUM because EXPLANANS”, where the two words in small capitals are placeholders for declarative sentences. For some differences between genuinely explanatory and other “because”-statements see Schnieder (2011, p. 447).

⁴ To my knowledge, the last point—which might reasonably be taken as signalling a problem in deflationary accounts of the role and function of propositionally revealing truth talk—has so far not been addressed in the debate on deflationism. Note also that *if* the extra content of revealing truth ascriptions may sometimes be part of the relevant content, then an analogous point should be expected to hold for

unrevealing contexts of truth talk as well. This may spell trouble for the “exhaustively” in (b). For what follows, however, these observations can be set aside.

⁵ See, for instance, Field (2001, p. 153): “[T]here is nothing in deflationism that prevents the use of ‘true’ in explanations as long as its only role there is as a device for generalisation”. See also Williams (2002, 2007).

⁶ Arguments along these lines can, for instance, be found in Horwich (2001, 2002), Dodd (2013), Williams (2002) and Blackburn (2013).

⁷ Here is a representative statement by Horwich (2001, p. 160): “Clearly our commitments to norms like this one [to norms like (T), B.R.] have nothing to do with the concept of truth; for that concept is completely absent from their articulation.”

⁸ A variant of the same move, along disquotationalist lines, can be found in Field (2001, pp. 120-121).

⁹ A no-explanatory-role claim along the lines of (NER_{causal}) is made in Field (2001, p. 29, p. 152, p. 173).