NOTHING IS TRUE*

T his paper motivates and defends *alethic nihilism*, the theory that nothing is true. I first argue that alethic paradoxes like the Liar and Curry motivate alethic nihilism; I then defend the view from objections. The critical discussion has two primary out-comes. First, a *proof of concept*. At first blush, alethic nihilism probably strikes you as silly or obviously false, perhaps even incoherent. I argue that it is in fact well-motivated and internally coherent. Second, I ar-gue that deflationists about truth ought to be nihilists. This is because a convincing objection to nihilism will need to identify an important function served by truth-talk that it could not serve if nothing is true; however, truth can play its expressive role, as a device for expressing agreement and disagreement, even if nothing is true. So, if this func-tion exhausts the utility of truth-talk, as deflationists contend, then we do not stand to lose anything by accepting nihilism. Since we also stand to gain an elegant solution to the alethic paradoxes, on balance deflationists ought to be nihilists. While not a deflationist myself, I do not intend this as an objection to the view. On the contrary, I argue that deflationism's compatibility with nihilism is a strength.

I. AN ARGUMENT FOR NIHILISM

Consider the following argument, the conclusion of which we will call *alethic nihilism*:

(1)	For any property F, $F =$ truth only if F validates all instances of (T-In) and (T-Out).	*Premise.*
(2)	There is no property that validates all instances of (T-In) and (T-Out).	*Premise.*
(3)	There is no property F such that $F =$ truth.	*(1), (2).*
(4)	If there is no property F such that $F =$ truth, then nothing is true.	*Premise.*
(5)	Nothing is true.	*(3), (4).*

Let us unpack this. (T-In) and (T-Out) are the inference *schemata*:[1]

[1] We could use the T-schema instead: '*p*' is true iff *p*'—I will not be precious about the differences here.

(T-In) p.
            _____
            'p' is true.

(T-Out)   'p' is true.
            _____
            p.

Here, 'p' is a schematic marker to be replaced by a declarative sentence and single quotes are a device for transforming a sentence into a singular term denoting that sentence (or whatever your preferred "primary truth-bearer" is, for example, the proposition the sentence expresses). Let us suppose that properties are the entities ascribed by predicates (and denoted by nominalizations thereof).[2] We say a property *F* *validates* an instance of (T-In) or (T-Out) iff, if 'true' ascribes *F*, then that instance of the *schema* is valid.

(1) says that a property is the property of truth only if it validates every instance of (T-In) and (T-Out). To deny (1) is to maintain that the property of truth does not validate all instances of (T-In) and (T-Out). That is, for some relevant 'p': it may be the case that p and yet not be the case that 'p' is true; or it may be the case that 'p' is true and yet not be the case that p. But it would be very strange for someone to assert a sentence while denying that sentence is true, or to assert that a sentence is true while denying that that sentence itself.[3] Such an interlocutor defies easy interpretation—if we were satisfied that they understood the other expressions involved, we would wonder if they meant the same thing by 'true' as we do. Some have gone so far as to argue that 'p' and ''p' is true' are cognitively equivalent,[4] intersubstitutable in all (non-opaque) contexts,[5] or even synonymous.[6] So, premise (1) is intuitively plausible.

But the assumption that there is a property that validates all instances of (T-In) and (T-Out) is notoriously problematic. Consider the "Liar" sentence, which says of itself that it is not true (that is, Liar = 'Liar is not true'), or the "Curry" sentence, which says of itself that, if it is true, then some absurdity is the case (for example, Curry = 'If Curry is true, then $0 = 1$'):

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[2] For those skeptical that 'x instantiates the property of *F*ness' can (in the relevant cases) be inferred from 'x is F', it should be possible to reframe the discussion in terms of predicates, rather than properties. But doing so is cumbersome, and merely serves to relocate the issues.

[3] Kevin Scharp, *Replacing Truth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 16.

[4] Hartry Field, "Deflationist Views of Meaning and Content," *Mind*, CIII, 411 (July 1994): 249–85, at pp. 250–51.

[5] Jc Beall, *Spandrels of Truth* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2009), p. 1.

[6] A. J. Ayer, "The Criterion of Truth," *Analysis*, III, 1/2 (October 1935): 28–32.

(6)	Liar is true.	*Assumption for reductio.*
(7)	'Liar is not true' is true.	*(6), Leibniz's Law.*
(8)	Liar is not true.	*(7), (T-Out).*
(9)	*Contradiction.*	*(6), (8), conjunction introduction.*
(10)	Liar is not true.	*Reductio from (6)–(9).*
(11)	'Liar is not true' is true.	*(10), (T-In).*
(12)	Liar is true.	*(11), Leibniz's Law.*
(13)	*Contradiction.*	*(10), (12), conjunction introduction.*
(14)	Curry is true.	*Assumption for conditional proof.*
(15)	'If Curry is true, then $0 = 1$' is true.	*(14), Leibniz's Law.*
(16)	If Curry is true, then $0 = 1$.	*(15), (T-Out).*
(17)	$0 = 1$.	*(14), (16), modus ponens.*
(18)	If Curry is true, then $0 = 1$.	*Conditional proof from (14)–(17).*
(19)	'If Curry is true, then $0 = 1$' is true.	*(18), (T-In).*
(20)	Curry is true.	*(19), Leibniz's Law.*
(21)	$0 = 1$.	*(18), (20), modus ponens.*

The assumption that there is a property that validates all instances of (T-In) and (T-Out) thus seems to lead quickly and inexorably to absurd conclusions. By *reductio,* then, we can infer that there is no such property—which is premise (2).

Together these entail (3): that there is no such property as truth. (On the plausible assumption that, if truth is anything, then it is a property, it follows that there is no such thing as truth.) The rationale for premise (4) is that, if there is no such property as truth, then nothing instantiates that property; and if nothing instantiates the property of truth, then nothing is true. But with (3), this entails (5): nothing is true. We thus have a valid argument from plausible premises to alethic nihilism. Either we need to deny one of the premises, or we must accept the conclusion.

Now, the literature on the alethic paradoxes is suffused with views that would reject one of our premises. As such, the potential pitfalls of each option are well known. On the one hand, there are those who would deny (1), recommending a conception of truth that does not validate all instances of (T-In) and (T-Out). As discussed, this is counterintuitive. Moreover, it is not enough to avoid contradiction to deny (1)—we need to maintain that truth fails to validate specifically those instances of (T-In) and (T-Out) that lead to contradiction (for example, when we substitute Liar or Curry for '*p*'). Unless we can find some principled reason for thinking that truth fails to validate *those* instances of (T-In) and (T-Out) in particular, this response threatens

to be *ad hoc*.[7] And (T-In) and (T-Out) are far from the only intuitive principles concerning truth that lead to contradiction.[8] Since any inconsistent set of such principles can be used to formulate an analogue of (1) in an argument for nihilism, any classically consistent conception of truth will need to deny several such principles. At best, this makes the resulting conception of truth "highly unnatural";[9] at worst, we might question whether it deserves to be called a conception of *truth* at all.[10] Most problematic, however, is that it has been argued that '*p*' and ''*p*' is true' must be intersubstitutable in all (non-opaque) contexts if the truth predicate is to play its expressive role, as a device for expressing agreement and disagreement. By denying (1), and thus denying such universal intersubstitutability, we risk frustrating the expressive role of the truth predicate.[11]

On the other hand, there are those who would deny (2), arguing that we can avoid (or in some cases live with) the absurd conclusions of Liar- and Curry-like reasoning. Suffice it to say, however, that it is extremely difficult to pinpoint where such apparently impeccable reasoning goes awry, and that the non-classical logics invoked to this end are typically considerably weaker than we would otherwise like.[12]

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[7] This is often argued to be particularly pressing for deflationists—see, for example, Vann McGee, "Maximal Consistent Sets of Instances of Tarski's Schema (T)," *Journal of Philosophical Logic*, XXI, 3 (August 1992): 235–41; Graham Priest, *Doubt Truth to Be a Liar* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), p. 45; Keith Simmons, "Deflationary Truth and the Liar," *Journal of Philosophical Logic*, XXVIII, 5 (October 1999): 455–88; and Alan Weir, "Ultramaximalist Minimalism!," *Analysis*, LVI, 1 (January 1996): 10–22.

[8] Harvey Friedman and Michael Sheard, "An Axiomatic Approach to Self-Referential Truth," *Annals of Pure and Applied Logic*, XXXIII, 1 (1987): 1–21; Vann McGee, "How Truthlike Can a Predicate Be? A Negative Result," *Journal of Philosophical Logic*, XIV, 4 (November 1985): 399–410; and Kevin Scharp, "Conceptual Engineering for Truth: Aletheic Properties and New Aletheic Concepts," *Synthese*, CXCVIII, 198 (2021): 647–88.

[9] Hartry Field, "Variations on a Theme by Yablo," in Jc Beall and Bradley Armour-Garb, eds., *Deflationism and Paradox* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), pp. 53–74, at p. 54.

[10] Scharp, "Conceptual Engineering for Truth," *op. cit.*, pp. 671–72.

[11] Jc Beall and Bradley Armour-Garb, "Should Deflationists Be Dialetheists?," *Noûs*, XXXVII, 2 (June 2003): 303–24, at p. 314; Hartry Field, *Saving Truth from Paradox* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 138–41, 148–49, and 205–10; and Graham Priest, *In Contradiction: A Study of the Transconsistent*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), pp. 55–56. I discuss this expressive role in more detail below. I argue that we can use the truth predicate to play this role even if nothing is true, but this still requires *acting as if* all instances of (T-In) and (T-Out) are valid. So this response does not help those who deny (1). There are further arguments in favor of the unrestricted T-schema too—see, for example, Priest, *In Contradiction, op. cit.*, pp. 56–57.

[12] Timothy Williamson, "Semantic Paradoxes and Abductive Methodology," in Bradley Armour-Garb, ed., *Reflections on the Liar* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 325–46.

The claim is not, of course, that all such proposals are hopeless—only that they are highly contentious. Despite the ingenuity and technical sophistication of many such approaches, none has won anything like consensus. Certainly the options out there remain sufficiently controversial that we are warranted in looking elsewhere.

The driving motivation behind the current paper is the observation that all this work has been to the neglect of a further option, which is to *accept* both premises, and follow the argument where it leads.[13] If there is no such thing as truth, then we can never infer '''p' is true' from 'p'—that is, the nihilist rejects all instances of (T-In). But then we cannot move from (10) to (11), or (18) to (19). The nihilist thus has a *principled* response to the Liar and Curry paradoxes. For instance, if nothing is true, then *a fortiori* the Liar sentence is not true; but we cannot move from 'Liar is not true' to '''Liar is not true' is true', because there is no such thing as truth. (On the contrary, we know that 'Liar is not true' is *not* true, because nothing is.)[14] My goal here is to explore the viability of this neglected option.

Of course, nihilism is extremely counterintuitive. But it would be rash to dismiss it on these grounds alone. The conclusions of philosophical arguments can be surprising. And nihilism's competitors here include similarly counterintuitive views, like dialetheism (the view that a sentence can be both true and false). Indeed, the reason that the Liar and Curry sentences are thought to engender *paradoxes* is precisely because it looks like *any* response will be counterintuitive. And as we will see below, nihilism is far less controversial by its own lights than it appears to its opponents—to dismiss the view out of hand represents a failure to engage with it on its own terms.

Another reason we should take the argument seriously is that we take analogous arguments seriously. For instance, arguments for moral nihilism often start from a claim (typically made on conceptual grounds) that a property's being a *moral* property—like rightness or

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[13] The key exception is David Liggins, "In Defence of Radical Restrictionism," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, XCVIII, 1 (January 2019): 3–25, whose paper I encountered after an earlier draft of this paper was complete. Our discussions occasionally overlap (I will note where) but are largely independent and complementary. Liggins's case for nihilism is less direct: he argues that it is preferable to other forms of restrictionism. We respond to different objections (of those below, Liggins only explicitly addresses 1b and 6). Liggins does not recommend that the nihilist engage in truth-talk as a useful pretense (see footnote 36). And, while he expresses sympathy with the idea, Liggins does not argue that deflationists ought to be nihilists.

[14] See also Liggins, "In Defence of Radical Restrictionism," *op. cit.*, pp. 11–13, who applies nihilism not only to the Liar and Curry, but also to further paradoxes and problems, including Yablo's paradox and the truth-teller.

wrongness—requires that it has some characteristic *F*. It is then argued that nothing is *F*, and thus that there are no moral properties, from which it follows that nothing is right or wrong.[15]

We can get a closer, more instructive analogy by adapting a thought experiment due to Jc Beall.[16] Suppose a cult appears that worships a god of wisdom the members call Aiehtela (pronounced eye-ah-*tel*-ah). According to the cult, Aiehtela is omniscient and infallible, in precisely the sense that all grammatical instances of the following inference *schemata* are valid:[17]

(OMN) $\dfrac{p.}{\text{Aiehtela accepts '}p\text{'.}}$

(INF) $\dfrac{\text{Aiehtela accepts '}p\text{'.}}{p.}$

Indeed, the cult insists that any being that failed to validate any instance of (OMN) or (INF) would *on those grounds alone* be disqualified from being Aiehtela—Aiehtela is *by definition* omniscient and infallible. (*x validates* an instance of (OMN) or (INF) iff, if 'Aiehtela' denotes *x*, then that instance is valid.) That supports:

(1A)   For any entity *x*, *x* = Aiehtela only if *x* validates all   *Premise.*
       instances of (OMN) and (INF).

Suppose you hear about the cult and start out open-minded—an Aiehtela agnostic. However, you reason as follows. Suppose that there

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[15] J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (Hammondsworth: Penguin Books, 1975); and Richard Joyce, *The Myth of Morality* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

[16] Jc Beall, "True and False—As If," in Graham Priest, Jc Beall, and Bradley Armour-Garb, eds., *The Law of Non-Contradiction: New Philosophical Essays* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), pp. 197–216. Beall (*ibid.*, p. 210) also seems to think the deflationist should draw a nihilist, or at least fictionalist, lesson from the analogy: "We talk *as if* there is a property of truth, but there is no reason to think that truth has anything beyond this 'as if' status—anything beyond the status of Aiehtela [who does not exist]." However, Beall (*ibid.*, p. 197) *also* thinks the analogy makes the existence of dialetheia seem "perfectly natural." But if truth, like Aiehtela, does not exist, then strictly speaking nothing is true—so no true sentence has a true negation. Liggins makes a similar point: see David Liggins, "Constructive Methodological Deflationism, Dialetheism, and the Liar," *Analysis*, LXXIV, 74 (October 2014): 566–74, at pp. 570–71.

[17] If you prefer propositions to sentences, you are welcome to replace (OMN) and (INF) with *schemata* that use 'Aiehtela believes that *p*'. This makes the use of Leibniz's Law in the heretical reasoning more controversial, given Frege's Puzzle and the like. But this comes out in the wash: Aiehtela's presumed omniscience and infallibility would, in effect, render the relevant opaque contexts transparent.

is such a being. Now consider two 'Heretic's Hypotheses': HH1 is a sentence that says, of itself, that Aiehtela does not accept it (that is, HH1 = 'Aiehtela does not accept HH1'), and HH2 is a sentence that says, of itself, that if Aiehtela accepts it, then some absurdity is the case (for example, HH2 = 'If Aiehtela accepts HH2, then $0 = 1$'). You then reason:

(6A)	Aiehtela accepts HH1.	*Assumption for reductio.*
(7A)	Aiehtela accepts 'Aiehtela does not accept HH1'.	*(6A), Leibniz's Law.*
(8A)	Aiehtela does not accept HH1.	*(7A), (INF).*
(9A)	*Contradiction.*	*(6A), (8A), conjunction introduction.*
(10A)	Aiehtela does not accept HH1.	*Reductio from (6)–(9).*
(11A)	Aiehtela accepts 'Aiehtela does not accept HH1'.	*(10A), (OMN).*
(12A)	Aiehtela accepts HH1.	*(11A), Leibniz's Law.*
(13A)	*Contradiction.*	*(10A), (12A), conjunction introduction.*
(14A)	Aiehtela accepts HH2.	*Assumption for conditional proof.*
(15A)	Aiehtela accepts 'If Aiehtela accepts HH2, then $0 = 1$'.	*(14A), Leibniz's Law.*
(16A)	If Aiehtela accepts HH2, then $0 = 1$.	*(15A), (INF).*
(17A)	$0 = 1$.	*(14A), (16A), modus ponens.*
(18A)	If Aiehtela accepts HH2, then $0 = 1$.	*Conditional proof from (14A)–(17A).*
(19A)	Aiehtela accepts 'If Aiehtela accepts HH2, then $0 = 1$'.	*(18A), (OMN).*
(20A)	Aiehtela accepts HH2.	*(19A), Leibniz's Law.*
(21A)	$0 = 1$.	*(18A), (20A), modus ponens.*

The assumption that there is a being that validates all instances of (OMN) and (INF) thus seems to lead quickly and inexorably to absurdity. By *reductio*, then, you infer:

(2A)	There is no entity that validates all instances of (OMN) and (INF).	*Premise.*

Finally, if Aiehtela does not exist, then she does not accept any sentences:

(4A)	If there is no entity x such that $x =$ Aiehtela, then nothing is accepted by Aiehtela.	*Premise.*

It follows that there is no such thing as Aiehtela, and so nothing that Aiehtela accepts. Call this *Aiehtela nihilism.*

The "heretical" reasoning above clearly motivates Aiehtela nihilism. The Heretic's Hypotheses are only problematic for the believer—the Aiehtela nihilist rejects all instances of (OMN), and thus has principled grounds for rejecting the inference from (10A) to (11A), and from (18A) to (19A). For instance, if there is no such thing as Aiehtela, then *a fortiori* Aiehtela does not accept HH1; but we cannot move from 'Aiehtela does not accept HH1' to 'Aiehtela accepts 'Aiehtela does not accept HH1'' because Aiehtela does not exist. (On the contrary, we know that Aiehtela does *not* accept 'Aiehtela does not accept HH1'.) We thus have good reason to endorse Aiehtela nihilism.

Now, that is *not* to say that Aiehtela nihilism is the best option all things considered. Perhaps there are benefits to postulating such an entity, or costs associated with doing without such an entity, that warrant finding an alternative solution to the "heretic's paradoxes" (that is, denying (1A) or (2A)). However, *absent such motivation*, we stand to lose nothing by being Aiehtela nihilists. Since we also stand to gain something—namely, an elegant solution to the heretic's paradoxes—overall this suffices to make Aiehtela nihilism an attractive proposition.

As with Aiehtela, so with truth. Given the independent plausibility of premise (1), the Liar and Curry paradoxes give us good reason to think that there is no such property as truth. That is not, by itself, to say that alethic nihilism is the best option all things considered: there may be benefits to postulating such a property, or costs associated with doing without such a property, that warrant finding an alternative solution (that is, denying (1) or (2)). But *absent such motivation*, we stand to lose nothing by being alethic nihilists. Since we also stand to gain something—namely, an elegant solution to the alethic paradoxes—overall this would suffice to make alethic nihilism an attractive proposition.

Alethic nihilism therefore poses a challenge: to say why, on balance, we *need* to postulate the property of truth, what *benefits* accrue to doing so or *costs* accrue to doing without it.[18] If we can meet this

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[18] Put it this way: you are probably much less worried about the heretic's paradoxes articulated above than you are about the Liar and Curry paradoxes. Why? The obvious justification is that you see no antecedent reason to believe in Aiehtela. But that only helps because it means there is (by your lights) no cost associated with embracing Aiehtela nihilism. For there to be a disanalogy here therefore requires that there *is* a cost associated with alethic nihilism—otherwise you should be similarly untroubled by the Liar and Curry paradoxes. The nihilist challenges us to say what that cost is.

challenge, then we vindicate the more traditional responses to the alethic paradoxes. If we cannot meet this challenge, then we would be entitled to simply excise truth from our worldview and put our feet up—undermining the more traditional responses. Either way, we learn something.

The rest of this paper investigates what it would take to answer this challenge by formulating a series of objections to nihilism, to which I will try to respond on the nihilist's behalf. As mentioned at the outset, this critical discussion has two primary outcomes. First, a *proof of concept*. Alethic nihilism is liable to strike people as silly or obviously false, perhaps self-defeating or incoherent, or even morally or politically suspect. I argue that this impression is misleading, and that arguments to the contrary either beg the question or else rely on premises that the nihilist can reasonably deny (see especially Objections 1–4). As well as being well-motivated, nihilism is internally coherent. A *convincing* objection to nihilism thus needs to identify an important function served by truth-talk that it could not serve if nothing is true. Second, I argue that, while substantivists about truth have good reason to reject nihilism—hereby providing a vindication of the more traditional responses to the alethic paradoxes conditional on substantivism—deflationists about truth do not. That is because we can use the truth predicate to play its expressive role, as a device for expressing agreement and disagreement, even if nothing is true; and according to deflationists the utility of truth-talk is *exhausted* by this expressive role. So, by the deflationist's lights, we do not stand to lose anything by accepting nihilism. Since, as argued, we stand to gain an elegant solution to the alethic paradoxes, on balance deflationists ought to be nihilists (see especially Objections 6–9).

II. OBJECTIONS AND REPLIES

Objection 1a: Nihilism is open to obvious counterexamples: for example, 'snow is white' is true.

Objection 1b: Nihilism is self-defeating: if nothing is true, then 'nothing is true' is true; so, something is true; so, it is not the case that nothing is true.

Objection 1c: Nihilism is self-defeating: if *nothing* is true, then 'nothing is true' is not true; so, it is not the case that nothing is true.

Objection 1d: Nihilism entails contradictions of its own. If 'snow is white' is not true, then snow is not white. And if 'snow is *not* white' is not true, then it is not the case that snow is not white. So if nothing is true, then it both is and is not the case that snow is not white.

Objection 1e: If nothing is true, then there is in some objectionable sense no objective reality. For instance, if 'Trump lost the 2020 elec-

tion' is not true, then Trump did not lose the 2020 election. General-
izing, if nothing is true, then there are no facts of the matter, one way
or the other, about what the world is like.

Response: The nihilist maintains that, if there *were* such a property
as truth, then (T-In) would be a valid inference rule. But the nihilist
denies that there is any such property. The nihilist therefore denies
that the inference from '*p*' to ''*p*' is true' is valid. So, by the nihilist's
lights, denying that '*p*' is true does *not* commit her to denying that *p*.
For example, the nihilist can accept that snow is white, or that grass
is green, or that Trump lost the 2020 election, if that is what the evi-
dence suggests. What she denies is a *further* claim: that 'snow is white'
is true, that 'grass is green' is true, and that 'Trump lost the 2020 elec-
tion' is true. In general, the nihilist *qua* nihilist simply does not take a
stand on any non-alethic matters.

Nihilism would be open to obvious counterexamples if it were in-
consistent with the claim that snow is white. But by the nihilist's own
lights, it is not. It is inconsistent with the claim that 'snow is white'
is true. But *this* claim implies that there is a property, truth, that the
sentence instantiates. And the nihilist has grounds for denying that
there is such a property. To *assume* that there is such a property is
thus to beg the question. For the same reason, the nihilist can coher-
ently accept that nothing is true while denying that 'nothing is true'
is true.[19]

Similarly, Objections 1c–1e tacitly assume that ''*p*' is not true' im-
plies 'not-*p*'. But this assumes that the inference from '*p*' to ''*p*' is true'
is valid (see Objection 3). That is to assume precisely what the nihilist
denies.

The moral is that nihilism is much less radical by its own lights than
it is apt to sound to its opponents. If you are assuming that (T-In) is
valid, then of course the claim that nothing is true is going to sound
absurd. But that assumption is obviously inappropriate in the present
dialectical context.

Objection 2: The intuitive justification for premise (1) is that (T-In)
and (T-Out) seem central to the concept of truth (or the meaning
of 'true'): someone who accepts that *p* while denying that '*p*' is true
defies easy interpretation—they seem confused. But the nihilist re-
jects the inference from '*p*' to ''*p*' is true'! At best, this renders the
argument for nihilism "self-effacing":[20] accepting the conclusion un-
dermines one's justification for accepting one of the premises, and so

[19] Liggins, "In Defence of Radical Restrictionism," *op. cit.*, p. 14.
[20] Jack Woods, "The Self-Effacement Gambit," *Res Philosophica*, xcvi, 2 (April 2019): 113–39.

undermines one's justification for accepting the conclusion. At worst, the nihilist is conceptually confused, and by her own lights. This can be seen as a way of shoring up Objections 1a–1e: rejecting the relevant instances of (T-In) undermines the justification for (1) and/or demonstrates conceptual confusion.

Response: The objection turns on the precise sense in which (T-In) and (T-Out) are said to be "central" to the concept of truth. For instance, if we say that '*p*' and ''*p*' is true' are synonymous, then it is true that one cannot deny that '*p*' is true without *ipso facto* denying that *p*. Of course, this particular claim is too strong to be plausible (for example, that there is something that is true is a logical consequence of ''snow is white' is true', but not of 'snow is white').[21] But the question is whether the nihilist can maintain that (T-In) and (T-Out) are central to the concept of truth in a sense that supports premise (1), while simultaneously rejecting all instances of (T-In) herself.[22]

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[21] See, for example, Marian David, "Some T-Biconditionals," in Bradley Armour-Garb and Jc Beall, eds., *Deflationary Truth* (Chicago: Open Court, 2005), pp. 382–419, at p. 387 onwards.

[22] This is reminiscent of a theme in the literature on *inconsistency theories* of truth. Inconsistency theorists maintain that the concept of truth (or predicate 'true') is inconsistent, usually on the grounds that the concept is in some sense "governed" by (T-In) and (T-Out), and paradoxes like the Liar show that any concept governed by such rules is inconsistent. For example: Alexis G. Burgess and John P. Burgess, *Truth* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011); Charles Chihara, "The Semantic Paradoxes: A Diagnostic Investigation," *The Philosophical Review*, LXXXVIII, 4 (October 1979): 590–618; Matti Eklund, "Inconsistent Languages," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, LXIV, 2 (March 2002): 251–75; Douglas Patterson, "Understanding the Liar," in Jc Beall, ed., *Revenge of the Liar: New Essays on the Paradox* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 197–224; Scharp, *Replacing Truth*, *op. cit.*; and Alfred Tarski, "The Semantic Conception of Truth and the Foundations of Semantics," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, IV, 3 (March 1944): 341–76. A difficulty concerns how to understand "governance" here: we need a notion that allows one to possess the concept of truth without being committed to the validity of all instances of the rules, lest the inconsistency of the concept is to commit you (*qua* possessor of the concept) to contradictions. See, for example, Matti Eklund, "Meaning-Constitutivity," *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy*, L, 6 (December 2007): 559–74; Douglas Patterson, "Inconsistency Theories: The Significance of Semantic Ascent," *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy*, L, 6 (December 2007): 575–89; Douglas Patterson, "Inconsistency Theories of Semantic Paradox," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, LXXIX, 2 (September 2009): 387–422; Scharp, *Replacing Truth*, *op. cit.*, pp. 35–56; Matti Eklund, "Inconsistency and Replacement," *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy*, LXII, 4 (2019): 387–402; and Kevin Scharp, "Replies to Bacon, Eklund, and Greenough on *Replacing Truth*," *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy*, LXII, 4 (2019): 422–75. This parallels the nihilist's predicament regarding premise (1)—but note that (TC) is *not* offered as a solution to this problem. Inconsistency theorists and nihilists may seem like natural allies: if the concept of truth is inconsistent, but reality is consistent, then a natural thought is that there must be nothing in the world—that is, no property—to which the concept corresponds (Scharp, "Conceptual Engineering for Truth," *op. cit.*). In fact, however, the relationship between the views is not straightforward. Inconsistency theorists often

To see what the alethic nihilist should say here, it is helpful to consider the analogous objection from one of Aiehtela's acolytes. The acolyte of Aiehtela may reason that, since Aiehtela is by definition an entity that validates all instances of (OMN) and (INF), anyone who rejects the inference from '*p*' to 'Aiehtela accepts '*p*'' is simply conceptually confused. The right response is to say that, while it may be true by definition that Aiehtela *if she exists* is omniscient and infallible, it does not follow that there is an entity that matches that description. (After all, we cannot simply define entities into existence on pain of absurdity—some definitions are inconsistent.) That is, the Aiehtela nihilist can accept all instances of the following *conditional* schema:

(AC) If there is such an entity as Aiehtela, then Aiehtela accepts '*p*' iff *p*.

So long as one denies the antecedent, there is no incoherence in accepting (AC), accepting '*p*', and denying that Aiehtela accepts '*p*'. In this way, the Aiehtela nihilist can accept the centrality of (OMN) and (INF) to the concept of Aiehtela in a sense that supports (1A), while nonetheless rejecting all instances of (OMN).

Likewise, the alethic nihilist can accept all instances of the conditional schema (TC):[23]

(TC) If there is such a property as truth, then '*p*' is true iff *p*.

Since she denies the antecedent of the conditional, the nihilist can accept (TC) and accept '*p*', while denying that '*p*' is true. In this way, the alethic nihilist can accept that (T-In) and (T-Out) are central to the concept of truth in a sense that supports (1) (indeed, (TC) is pretty much (1) in schematic form), while rejecting all instances of (T-In).[24]

Objection 3a: If no declarative sentences are true, then they must all be false. That is absurd.

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reject (1). Eklund, "Inconsistent Languages," *op. cit.*, for instance, argues that an inconsistent concept may nonetheless denote an "imperfect deserver"—for example, a "truth-like" property that validates some but not all instances of (T-In) and (T-Out). (See Objection 10.) And my argument for nihilism does not claim that the concept of truth is inconsistent: premise (1) makes a claim *about truth*, not the concept of truth.

[23] Those who dislike property-talk can replace the antecedent with 'If anything is true. . . ' or 'If there are any truths. . . '.

[24] Despite our papers' titles being contradictories, I only encountered Jamin Asay, "Something Is True," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, cv, 3 (November 2022): 687–705, after this paper was already under review at this JOURNAL. I note, however, that I believe this discussion speaks to Asay's central "changing the subject" objection.

Response: *Au contraire!* A sentence is false only if its negation is true. So if nothing is true, *nothing* is false.[25]

Objection 3b: But 'not-*p*' is true iff '*p*' is not true!

Response: This principle, like Objections 1a–1e, is rooted in (T-In). If '*p*' implies ''*p*' is true', and so 'not-*p*' implies ''not-*p*' is true', it follows that '*p*' is not true iff 'not-*p*' is true. But if the inference from '*p*' to ''*p*' is true' is not valid, this justification disappears. So to assume this principle without further argument is to beg the question.

Objection 4: If the nihilist accepts some sentences and denies others, or in some sense accepts that there are objective facts, then isn't she committed to the existence of truth and falsity after all?

Response: How so?

Attempt 1: Let 'is *T*' be true of a sentence iff I accept that sentence. So, I should accept ''*p*' is *T*' iff I accept '*p*'. Given that I know this, it looks like 'is *T*' will function a lot like a truth predicate for me. I cannot self-consciously accept '*p*' while denying ''*p*' is *T*', nor vice versa. Moreover, I could (arguably) use 'is *T*' as a device for expressing agreement and disagreement, for example, saying 'Everything on the blackboard is *T*' to express my agreement with every sentence on the blackboard.[26] Similar reasoning suggests that 'is *F*' will function like a falsity predicate for me if we stipulate that 'is *F*' is true of a sentence iff I deny that sentence.

Response: The fact that I cannot self-consciously accept one of '*p*' or ''*p*' is *T*' while denying the other does not commit me to thinking that the property ascribed by that predicate validates *any* instances of (T-In) or (T-Out).[27] The property of *being T* is co-extensive with (if not identical to) the property of *being accepted by me*. But I am fallible. Sometimes I accept '*p*' when it is not the case that *p*, or do not accept '*p*' when it is the case that *p*. (That is possible, even if not actual—for those worried that my humility is misplaced.) So from the fact that '*p*' is *T* it need not follow that *p*, nor from the fact that *p* need it follow that '*p*' is *T*. I can accept all this without incoherence, the constraints on which pairs of sentences I can rationally accept notwithstanding. So the property of *being T* is a terrible candidate for truth, even by my own lights.

[25] Liggins agrees—see Liggins, "In Defence of Radical Restrictionism," *op. cit.*, p. 11. Note, then, that nihilists do *not* think that atomic truth-ascriptions are *false*, and so are not error theorists in Scharp's sense—see Scharp, "Conceptual Engineering for Truth," *op. cit.*, p. 672.

[26] It is not clear that this is to *express* my agreement rather than to *assert* it. But set this aside.

[27] More precisely, it only validates those very rare instances where the fact that *p* guarantees that I accept '*p*'.

Attempt 2: Since she accepts some sentences and denies others, in some minimal sense the nihilist accepts that there are facts (or at least "a way the world is" in some sense or other). For instance, I accept 'grass is green'. So, I think that (it is a fact that) grass is green. I may be mistaken, of course. But either way I am committed to there being a fact of the matter.[28] And unlike me, the facts are not fallible. And they seem to determine a privileged set of sentences, A: 'grass is green' is in A iff grass is green; 'grass is not green' is in A iff grass is not green; and so on. In general, 'p' is in A iff p. So it seems I am committed to thinking that the property of *being in A* validates all instances of (T-In) and (T-Out).

Response: The nihilist will deny that this set is well-defined. Given a sentence L that says, of itself, that it is not in A, we can derive a contradiction.[29] There is no set matching that description, and so no such property as being a member of that set. That is, the nihilist will say of the property of *being in A* exactly what she says about truth.

That said, what the nihilist can concede is that there are *truth-like* properties—for instance, properties that validate some (perhaps very, very many), but not all, instances of (T-In) and (T-Out).[30] For instance, if we restrict our attention to an expressively limited object language L_0 which lacks any truth predicate, Tarski showed us how to define a truth predicate 'T_0' *for that language* in a metalanguage L_1. This method can in turn be used to define a truth predicate 'T_1' for L_1 in a metametalanguage L_2. And so on up the hierarchy. The property of *being T_0* thus validates (T-In) and (T-Out) for sentences in L_0; *being T_1* does so for sentences in L_1; and so on. Alternatively, McGee has argued that there are infinitely many maximal consistent but mutually incompatible sets of instances of the T-schema, each of which might be used to identify a truth-like property.[31] Perhaps most pertinently, following Kripke we might identify a property that validates (T-In) and (T-Out) for the "grounded" sentences (for example, the property of *being valued 'true' in the minimal fixed point*).[32]

The nihilist need not deny the existence of any of these truth-like properties. But she will maintain that no such property validates all instances of (T-In) and (T-Out), on pain of absurdity (premise (2)).

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[28] At least, setting aside cases of indeterminacy due to vagueness and the like.

[29] Note that talk of *sets* of sentences in particular is inessential to the key point being made here.

[30] Compare Scharp's notion of an aletheic property in Scharp, "Conceptual Engineering for Truth," *op. cit.*

[31] McGee, "Maximal Consistent Sets of Instances of Tarski's Schema (T)," *op. cit.*

[32] Saul Kripke, "Outline of a Theory of Truth," this JOURNAL, LXXII, 19 (November 1975): 690–716.

So, given premise (1), none of these properties is to be identified with truth.

Objection 5: But now it is difficult to see what is at issue between the nihilist and the restrictionist, who seeks to articulate a conception of truth that validates some but not all instances of (T-In) and (T-Out).[33] If all sides agree that there are truth-like properties and only disagree about whether any such property should be called 'truth', isn't this a merely verbal dispute?

Response: The disagreement concerns whether the restrictionist's project is of any theoretical interest. Recall that the challenge posed by the nihilist is to articulate why, on balance, we *need* to postulate the property of truth—what *benefits* attach to doing so or *costs* attach to doing without it. If we can answer this challenge, then it is important that we render our postulation of such a property consistent with our wider worldview, and restrictionism is one way of going about doing that. But if we cannot answer this challenge, then it is mysterious what theoretical interest the restrictionist's truth-like properties are supposed to have. Unless we can answer the nihilist's challenge, the restrictionist's project will look like little more than a diverting intellectual exercise.[34]

Objection 6: Alright, challenge accepted. We cannot do without truth because truth-talk is expressively indispensable: it "enables us to express agreement and disagreement when that would otherwise be difficult or impossible (as well as conversationally inappropriate)."[35] For instance, if I agree with everything on the blackboard, rather than tiresomely repeating everything that is written there, I can express my agreement by saying 'Everything on the blackboard is true'. If I remember agreeing with what was written on the blackboard yesterday, but cannot remember what it was, I can nonetheless express my agreement by saying 'Whatever was written on the blackboard yesterday was true'. I agree with every sentence of the form '*p* or not-*p*', but there are infinitely many of them. I can nonetheless express my agreement by saying 'Every sentence of the form '*p* or not-*p*' is true'. Expressing

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[33] Depending on whether she rejects or accepts (1), the restrictionist can see herself as providing an account of or replacement for truth. The response given below applies to either conception of the project.

[34] Compare Leon Horsten, *The Tarskian Turn: Deflationism and Axiomatic Truth* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2011), p. 150, who argues that there seem to be "no arguments for which principles of type-free truth are required," and thus admits that "developing strong systems of self-referential truth is a rather 'pure' enterprise that is of limited interest of [*sic*] the toiling philosophical masses." The nihilist need not object to someone engaging in this pure enterprise if they like. The challenge is to say what theoretical interest the resulting notion of truth has.

[35] Field, *Saving Truth from Paradox*, *op. cit.*, p. 138; see citations therein.

agreement in such cases by uttering all the sentences I agree with is conversationally inappropriate, difficult, or impossible. Truth-talk enables us to overcome these limitations. But if nothing is true, then I cannot use truth-ascriptions to express agreement.

Response: The objection assumes (in its final line) that we can use truth-talk to serve this expressive purpose only if some things are true. But (i) truth-talk can serve this expressive purpose even if, as a matter of fact, nothing is true. And (ii) we can use truth-talk to serve this expressive purpose even if *we believe that* nothing is true by treating the existence of truth as a useful fiction.[36]

Why believe (i) and (ii)? Because what matters for the success of the practice of using truth-talk to express agreement and disagreement is that people *act as if* (T-In) and (T-Out) are valid. But for people to act as if (T-In) and (T-Out) are valid it is not necessary that they *are* valid—so the existence of a property that validates any instances of (T-In) and (T-Out) is immaterial to the success of the practice. Since truth is (minimally) a property that validates some instances of these *schemata*, it follows that the existence of truth is immaterial to success of the practice. And we can act as if we accept (T-In) and (T-Out) even if we reject (T-In) and (T-Out) by *pretending* that we accept (T-In) and (T-Out)—so nihilists can use truth-talk to express agreement and disagreement by pretending, in the relevant contexts, that there is such a property as truth.

To put this another way: for the truth predicate to function as a device for expressing agreement, it would be enough for there to be a convention to utter ''p' is true' only if you accept 'p'. The existence of such a convention does not require that there is a property that validates any particular instances of (T-In); and participation in such a convention does not require that you accept ''p' is true' only if you accept 'p', as long as you act as if you do in the appropriate contexts.

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[36] For a complementary defense of (i), see Liggins, "In Defence of Radical Restrictionism," *op. cit.*, pp. 7–9. While Liggins argues that nihilists can explain the expressive utility of truth, he does not say whether or not he thinks nihilists themselves can use the truth predicate for this purpose. Indeed, Liggins's explanation goes via our being disposed to believe all instances of the T-schema, when his nihilist explicitly rejects—and so is not disposed to believe, indeed *disbelieves*—many instances of the T-schema (half, to be precise). Moreover, Liggins argues that the nihilist should accept ''p' is true iff p' iff she denies 'p', and should deny the biconditional iff she accepts 'p'. This suggests that, by Liggins's lights, the nihilist herself cannot use the truth predicate to serve its expressive purpose, even if she can explain why others can. But if nihilists cannot use the truth predicate for this purpose, that is a serious cost. (To be fair, Liggins might be interpreted as saying the nihilist should *replace* truth-talk with sentential quantification—*ibid.*, pp. 16–19. This is surely unrealistic for day-to-day purposes, however.) The appeal to fictionalism in (ii) is designed to assuage this worry.

An analogy might be helpful. Imagine that we exist in a society where everyone believes in the omniscient, infallible Aiehtela. For obvious reasons, everyone uses talk of "what Aiehtela accepts" and "what Aiehtela does not accept" to express agreement and disagreement. Now suppose that, for whatever reason, you grow skeptical that there is such a deity. You become an Aiehtela nihilist—as far as you are concerned, Aiehtela does not exist and so does not accept any sentences. So, from your point of view, when your fellows say things like 'Aiehtela accepts Fermat's Last Theorem', they are sadly mistaken (regardless of the status of Fermat's Last Theorem). Still, there is nothing mysterious about the fact that *they* can use talk of "what Aiehtela accepts" to express agreement. The actual existence of Aiehtela is immaterial to this practice. What matters is that *they believe that* Aiehtela accepts '*p*' iff *p*.

Now let us suppose you decide to keep your heresy to yourself. Since you accept the conditional *schema* (AC), you know that, if Aiehtela were to exist, then she would accept '*p*' iff *p*. So, to act as if you believe that she exists while in public, you act as if you believe that Aiehtela accepts '*p*' iff *p*. As such, when pretending that Aiehtela exists, you can use 'Aiehtela accepts. . . ' to express agreement. Your utterances are, of course, insincere (in the sense that you do not accept the sentences you utter)—it is a pretense! But there is no reason to think that should stop you from engaging in the practice. So using "Aiehtela accepts. . . " to express agreement does not even require that you believe that Aiehtela accepts '*p*' iff *p*, only that you *act as if* you do in the relevant contexts. (By and by it may turn out that you are not the only one to have lost faith. It may even be that *everyone* in this society is a secret Aiehtela nihilist. As far as I can see, there is no reason to think that our merely pretending to believe in Aiehtela would somehow frustrate the expressive utility of Aiehtela-talk, as long as we carry on acting as if we believe in her in the relevant contexts.)

As with Aiehtela, so with truth. In order for us to use the truth predicate as a device for expressing agreement, it is enough that we act as if '*p*' is true iff *p* in the relevant contexts. The upshot is that the nihilist does not need to be an eliminativist about truth-talk: she can carry on using truth-talk to serve an expressive purpose, by treating the existence of truth as a useful fiction.[37] So the fact that the truth predicate is expressively indispensable need not trouble the alethic nihilist.

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[37] In a series of fascinating papers and a book, Armour-Garb and Woodbridge have developed and defended a sophisticated fictionalist theory of truth and argued that deflationists should be fictionalists. See James Woodbridge, "Truth as a Pretense," in Mark Eli Kalderon, ed., *Fictionalism in Metaphysics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), pp. 88–115; Bradley Armour-Garb and James Woodbridge, "Why Deflationists Should

Objection 7: But truth is also *explanatorily* important. For example, truth plays a role in the explanation of the practical success of actions performed by rational agents.[38] Suppose Bran wants a beer. Believing there to be a beer in the fridge, he goes to the fridge. There, he finds a beer. So, his action was successful: it resulted in the satisfaction of the desire (to have a beer) that it was intended to satisfy. This is not a coincidence! The success of Bran's action is explained, in part, by the fact that his beliefs about how to go about satisfying his desire were true. If they had not been true, then other things equal his action would not have been successful. But according to the nihilist, nothing is true. So, Bran's beliefs are not true. So, we cannot cite the fact that his beliefs are true to explain why his action was successful. In general, we cannot explain why some actions are successful and others are unsuccessful by saying that the former are based on true beliefs while the latter are based on false beliefs—by the nihilist's lights, no beliefs are true or false. This contrast becomes inexplicable.[39]

Response: If truth is explanatorily important, then nihilism is costly. (Of course, it is an open question whether the purported explanatory costs of nihilism would *outweigh* its potential benefits. For argument's sake suppose they would.) But it is controversial whether truth is explanatorily important. Let us call the thesis that truth is explanatorily important *substantivism*, and the thesis that the utility of truth is ex-

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Be Pretense Theorists (and Perhaps Already Are)," in Cory D. Wright and Nikolaj J. L. L. Pedersen, eds., *New Waves in Truth* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 59–77; Bradley Armour-Garb and James Woodbridge, "Semantic Defectiveness and the Liar," *Philosophical Studies*, CLXIV, 3 (2013): 845–63; Bradley Armour-Garb and James Woodbridge, "From Mathematical Fictionalism to Truth-Theoretic Fictionalism," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, LXXXVIII, 1 (January 2014): 93–118; and Bradley Armour-Garb and James Woodbridge, *Pretense and Pathology: Philosophical Fictionalism and Its Applications* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015). Their approach is quite different to that suggested here, however. My suggestion is that *the nihilist* should treat truth-talk as a useful pretense (a kind of localized "revolutionary" fictionalism). For Armour-Garb and Woodbridge, truth-talk is *already* a kind of pretense—the pretense is built into the semantics of truth-talk (a kind of "hermeneutic" fictionalism)—such that, if we say ''snow is white' is not true', the pretense kicks in and we hereby say that snow is not white. So, while similar in outlook, their view is not a good fit with nihilism. As such, they are forced to develop a different response to the Liar, which dismisses it as "semantically pathological."

[38] See, for example, Philip Kitcher, "On the Explanatory Role of Correspondence Truth," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, LXIV, 2 (March 2002): 346–64; and Will Gamester, "Truth: Explanation, Success, and Coincidence," *Philosophical Studies*, CLXXV, 5 (May 2018): 1243–65.

[39] For a related argument in a different setting, see Burgess's "metaphysical" argument for revising the concept of truth if it is inconsistent: Alexis Burgess, "Keeping 'True': A Case Study in Conceptual Ethics," *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy*, LVII, 5–6 (2014): 580–606, at pp. 585–86.

hausted by its expressive role *deflationism.* According to deflationists, truth is explanatorily idle.[40]

For instance, deflationists maintain that the role of truth in explanations of practical success is merely expressive. Horwich argues as follows.[41] What *explains* Bran's success is that Bran believed that there was a beer in the fridge, and there was a beer in the fridge. This explanation makes no mention of truth. For *any* instance of practical success, there is such a truth-free explanation. The point of using the truth predicate is just to *generalize over* or make indirect reference to these truth-free explanations. Truth itself makes no explanatory contribution.

It is controversial whether this response is successful. But if it is, then the role of truth with respect to practical success is merely expressive. And I argued above that the nihilist can use truth-talk for expressive purposes, by treating the existence of truth as a useful fiction. So, if this response is successful, then it is available to the nihilist too. On this front, then, deflationism and nihilism stand or fall together.

I suggest that this generalizes. According to deflationism, the utility of truth is exhausted by its expressive role. The nihilist, I have argued, can employ truth-talk to play this expressive role by treating the existence of truth as a useful fiction. This drastically reduces the scope for finding an objection to nihilism that is not *ipso facto* an objection to deflationism. For any purported role for truth that is supposed to render nihilism unattractive, either truth is merely being used as an expressive device, or it is not. If it is, then the nihilist can use truth-talk for this purpose too. If it is not, then this is already a problem for deflationism.[42]

Take, for instance, the claim that truth is a necessary condition for knowledge. Literally speaking, this is something the nihilist must reject, on pain of saying that knowledge is impossible. But what the nihilist *can* accept is that it is a necessary condition for knowing that

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[40] Deflationism is also associated with other theses, for example, (i) that truth has no nature, and (ii) that '*p*' and ''*p*' is true' are in some strong sense equivalent. Nihilism is obviously compatible with (i). I discuss (ii) below (Objection 8).

[41] Paul Horwich, *Truth*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), pp. 22–23, 44–46.

[42] There is a contrast here with the moral case. Blackburn seeks to *undermine* Mackie's arguments for error theory via his expressivist account of moral discourse: since moral discourse plays a merely expressive role, it does not carry implausible ontological commitments. See Simon Blackburn, "Errors and the Phenomenology of Value," in Ted Honderich, ed., *Morality and Objectivity: A Tribute to J. L. Mackie* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), pp. 1–22. That move is of no help here: truth's expressive role requires that we treat all instances of (T-In) and (T-Out) as valid (Field, *Saving Truth from Paradox*, *op. cit.*, pp. 205–10), which is enough to get the argument for nihilism going.

snow is white, that snow is white; and a necessary condition for know-
ing that grass is green, that grass is green; and so on. She can accept all
instances of the schema: it is a necessary condition for knowing that
p, that *p*.[43] Now, the deflationist will maintain that the role of truth
here is *solely* to generalize over these individualized, truth-free condi-
tions. If so, then the nihilist can employ truth-talk for this purpose: by
pretending that there is such a property as truth, she can express her
agreement with all instances of the aforementioned schema by saying
'Truth is a necessary condition for knowledge'. The sentence she ut-
ters is one that, literally speaking, she rejects. But that is all part and
parcel of engaging in a pretense.

A similar dialectic will play out with respect to: any purported nor-
mative roles for truth (for example, with respect to assertion or be-
lief); the role of truth in truth-conditional semantics; the role of truth
in explicating (in)consistency and entailment; and so on. There are
many purposes to which we put the notion of truth, any of which may
be used as the basis for an objection to nihilism. We cannot survey
them all here. But in each case, we can ask: is truth playing a merely
expressive role or a more substantive one? If the former, then the ni-
hilist can embrace this use of the truth predicate as a useful bit of
make-believe. If the latter, then we may well have a good objection
to nihilism, but we would also have a good objection to deflationism;
so, there is no *additional* cost to nihilism by the deflationist's lights.
So, while substantivists have good reason to find nihilism unattrac-
tive, we are yet to see any reason why deflationists should find nihilism
unattractive.

Objection 8a: But don't deflationists accept a stronger equivalence
between '*p*' and ''*p*' is true' than the nihilist can accept (for example,
synonymy or analytic equivalence)?

Response: Some do, some do not. Early (proto-)deflationists did
tend to suggest that '*p*' and ''*p*' is true' are literally synonymous.[44] As
already noted, this claim is too strong to be plausible. Later deflation-
ists are usually more careful. Field, for instance, claims that the sen-
tences are "cognitively equivalent" (*modulo* the existence of the sen-
tence '*p*'), where two sentences are cognitively equivalent for some-
one if their "inferential procedures license a fairly direct inference"
between them, and these inferences are empirically indefeasible and

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[43] Liggins, "In Defence of Radical Restrictionism," *op. cit.*, p. 16.
[44] F. P. Ramsey, "Facts and Propositions," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supple-
mentary Volumes*, VII, 1 (1927): 153–70, at p. 157; Ayer, "The Criterion of Truth," *op. cit.*;
and W. V. Quine, *Philosophy of Logic*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press,
1986), p. 12.

"close to indefeasible on conceptual grounds."[45] Field only takes the inferences to be "close to" indefeasible on conceptual grounds because he acknowledges that someone may revise their standards on encountering paradoxes like the Liar and Curry. So the nihilist can happily accept that, for most people, '*p*' and ''*p*' is true' are cognitively equivalent in this sense. She just has a distinctive take on how someone should revise their standards on encountering the paradoxes: they should reject all instances of (T-In).

But in any case, unless we have some other reason to think that deflationism is incompatible with nihilism, we should *tollens* the *ponens*: since deflationists stand to benefit from nihilism, unless we can find some other reason for deflationists to reject nihilism, deflationists should not accept a stronger equivalence between '*p*' and ''*p*' is true' than the nihilist can accept.

Objection 8b: But don't deflationists *by definition* accept a stronger equivalence?

Response: Not if Field is a deflationist—see above; but in any case this is now a verbal dispute. The important point is that those who think that truth is merely of expressive import stand to benefit from being nihilists. If they also have some further commitment that is incompatible with nihilism, that is another matter.

Objection 8c: But doesn't the claim that truth is *merely* of expressive import *presuppose* a stronger equivalence? For instance, if '*p*' and ''*p*' is true' are not intersubstitutable in modal and causal contexts, then truth might yet play an important theoretical role.[46]

Response: If truth does not exist, then it does not play any important theoretical roles. So if the deflationist accepts nihilism, she does not have to accept such a strong equivalence.

Objection 9a: Mathematical fictionalists characteristically maintain that mathematics is *conservative* over nominalistic theory:[47] roughly speaking, there is no nominalistic conclusion that follows from a nominalistic theory supplemented with mathematics that does not follow from the nominalistic theory alone. This is supposed to render mathematics, while literally false, a permissible resource for the nominalist to draw on in coming to nominalistic conclusions. But the motivation

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[45] Field, "Deflationist Views of Meaning and Content," *op. cit.*, pp. 250–51.

[46] Field, "Deflationist Views of Meaning and Content," *op. cit.*, pp. 265–67; and Richard Kimberly Heck, "Disquotationalism and the Compositional Principles," in Carlo Nicolai and Johannes Stern, eds., *Modes of Truth: The Unified Approach to Truth, Modality, and Paradox* (London: Routledge, 2021), pp. 105–50, at pp. 118–19.

[47] Hartry Field, *Science without Numbers: A Defense of Nominalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980); and Hartry Field, *Realism, Mathematics and Modality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989).

for alethic nihilism is precisely that the existence of truth is supposed to lead to absurd conclusions (for example, contradictions). So, by the nihilist's own lights, pretending that there is such a property is dangerous—it might lead us to embrace absurd conclusions, or at least to conclusions that we would not otherwise be warranted in accepting.

Response: For day-to-day purposes, this worry is not very pressing. Even theorists who think that the very concept of truth is inconsistent do not recommend public awareness campaigns to stop people using it.[48] But the worry does seem more pressing in certain theoretical contexts—such as philosophical, mathematical, or scientific argumentation.[49] Of course, as long as we are not making use of truth—or that use is readily dispensable—then the worry does not arise. However, if we do make use of truth, and that use is not readily dispensable, then there is some pressure to sort the "safe" from the "unsafe" uses.

The obvious solution is to only use conservative (and hence consistent) *fragments* of our alethic "theory" in such theoretical contexts—such as restricted instances of (T-In) and (T-Out). Note that the nihilist can use minimal fragments, and different fragments in different contexts depending on the purposes at hand. There is no need to identify some all-purpose fragment for use in all contexts. So, there is no danger of this response collapsing into a more orthodox restrictionist theory.

Objection 9b: But it has been argued that we need a *non*-conservative notion of truth.[50] For instance, if we add only a conservative theory of truth to a consistent theory—say, Peano Arithmetic—then there are various important claims about the theory, like its Gödel sentence or its consistency, that we cannot prove.

Response: First, it is not clear that we *do* need a non-conservative notion of truth for such purposes. Tennant, for example, has argued that we can prove the Gödel sentence and consistency of a theory by means of additional *non*-alethic principles (namely, reflection princi-

[48] Patterson, "Understanding the Liar," *op. cit.*, pp. 213–15; Burgess and Burgess, *Truth*, *op. cit.*, p. 128; Scharp, *Replacing Truth*, *op. cit.*, p. 2; and Burgess, "Keeping 'True'," *op. cit.*, p. 583.

[49] Though see Burgess and Burgess, *Truth*, *op. cit.*, pp. 131–32, for a fascinating defense of being "nonchalant" even in such contexts. See also Matti Eklund, "Replacing Truth?," in Alexis Burgess and Brett Sherman, eds., *Metasemantics: New Essays on the Foundations of Meaning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 293–310.

[50] Stewart Shapiro, "Proof and Truth: Through Thick and Thin," this JOURNAL, XCV, 10 (October 1998): 493–521; and Jeffrey Ketland, "Deflationism and Tarski's Paradise," *Mind*, CVIII, 429 (January 1999): 69–94.

ples).[51] While it falls beyond the scope of this paper to settle this issue, it is not clear that there is any serious cost to nihilism here.[52]

Second, it is sometimes argued that *deflationists* can only embrace a conservative conception of truth—indeed, it is as a problem for deflationism that the legitimacy of the "conservativeness requirement" is discussed. If so, then this is just another place where nihilism and deflationism stand or fall together.[53]

Objection 10: Accepting the existence of "truth-like" properties undermines premise (1). Plausible metasemantic theories predict that, in the absence of a perfect deserver, our concepts or terms will pick out the best imperfect deserver (or will be indeterminate in reference between several such imperfect deservers). So, even granting that there is no property that validates all instances of (T-In) and (T-Out), 'true' will instead ascribe the most deserving truth-like property, or will be indeterminate in reference among several such properties.[54] Since truth is the property ascribed by 'true', if 'true' ascribes some property, then there is such a property as truth. Moreover, presumably any such imperfect deserver will validate (T-In) for, say, 'snow is white'. Since snow is white, it follows that 'snow is white' is true. So it is not the case that nothing is true.

Response: Imperfect deservers can only be so imperfect. There are many highly intuitive principles concerning truth that turn out to be jointly inconsistent—it is thus very difficult to find a property that satisfies even a minimal subset of them.[55] So, it is not at all clear that

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[51] Neil Tennant, "Deflationism and the Gödel Phenomena," *Mind*, cxi, 443 (July 2002): 551–82. Note, then, that nihilism only threatens to undermine those consequences of "alethic theory" that are not conservative over *total* non-alethic theory. Most discussion of the conservativeness requirement is focused on arithmetical theory in particular. For concerns about using arithmetic as a "generic" case for thinking about conservativeness and deflationism, see Kentaro Fujimoto, "Deflationism beyond Arithmetic," *Synthese*, cxcvi, 3 (March 2019): 1045–69.

[52] Some further highlights of the debate: Hartry Field, "Deflating the Conservativeness Requirement," this JOURNAL, xcvi, 10 (October 1999): 533–40; Jeffrey Ketland, "Deflationism and the Gödel Phenomena: Reply to Tennant," *Mind*, cxiv, 453 (January 2005): 75–88; Neil Tennant, "Deflationism and the Gödel Phenomena: Reply to Ketland," *Mind*, cxiv, 453 (January 2005): 89–96; and Horsten, *The Tarskian Turn*, *op. cit.*, pp. 79–101.

[53] Indeed, nihilism may even *help* the deflationist here: Julien Murzi and Lorenzo Rossi, "Conservative Deflationism?," *Philosophical Studies*, clxxvii, 2 (February 2020): 535–49, argue that the conservative deflationist cannot give a non-self-undermining reason for preferring a conservative theory of truth to a non-conservative one. Whether or not this is true of conservative deflationists in general, the nihilist clearly has a reason to reject non-conservative notions of truth (that is the *basis* of Objection 9b!).

[54] Eklund, "Inconsistent Languages," *op. cit.*

[55] Friedman and Sheard, "An Axiomatic Approach to Self-Referential Truth," *op. cit.*; McGee, "How Truthlike Can a Predicate Be?," *op. cit.*; and Scharp, "Conceptual Engineering for Truth," *op. cit.*

there is any property that is *close enough* to what we mean to be talking about when we talk about truth to warrant the name.

In any case, if this is really our *only* reason to reject nihilism, then it is a Pyrrhic victory. For then which property is in fact ascribed by 'true' is of no theoretical interest: by hypothesis, we would be no worse off if there were no such property. So, rather than worrying our heads about what property happens to be ascribed by our truth predicate, it would be no loss to view truth-talk as merely a useful pretense instead.

Objection 11: The argument for nihilism is driven by the alethic paradoxes. Given the paradoxes of, say, denotation and validity, we could formulate arguments for denotation nihilism and validity nihilism too. So, the argument style overgeneralizes.

Response: This seems like exactly the wrong lesson to draw. If alethic nihilism is viable, then nihilism about denotation and validity may well be viable too—this is simply an open question. So, unless we have some *other* reason to think the argument for alethic nihilism fails, the lesson is that we need to engage with other nihilistic theses, and the arguments for them, on their own terms. To assume that the alethic nihilist will be committed to further nihilistic theses, and that these further nihilistic these are untenable, is to prejudge these substantive issues without argument.[56]

III. CONCLUSION

On the one hand, we seem to be committed to thinking that the property of truth validates all instances of (T-In) and (T-Out). On the other, paradoxes like the Liar and Curry seem to show that the existence of such a property would have absurd consequences. To date, the literature has predominantly been fixated on avoiding (or sometimes living with) these absurd consequences by revising either our understanding of truth or our understanding of logic. The alethic nihilist presents a third option: our understanding of *what truth is* (or, more precisely, *would be*) is just fine. Our mistake was in thinking that there is any such thing.

I have argued here that nihilism is well-motivated and internally coherent. However, given substantivism about truth, it is explanatorily costly. Substantivists are thus advised to deny nihilism, which pro-

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[56] Indeed, related nihilistic theses *already* have their defenders—for example, logical nihilism (Gillian Russell, "Logical Nihilism: Could There Be No Logic?," *Philosophical Issues*, XXVIII, 1 (September 2018): 308–24) and semantic nihilism (David Braun and Theodore Sider, "Vague, So Untrue," *Noûs*, XLI, 2 (June 2007): 133–56), the latter as a response to the paradoxes of vagueness. I hope to return to the relationship between these nihilistic theses in future work.

vides a conditional vindication of the more traditional responses to the alethic paradoxes. But we can still use the truth predicate to serve its expressive purpose, as a device for expressing agreement and disagreement, even if nothing is true, by treating truth-talk as a useful pretense. So, if this purpose *exhausts* the utility of truth-talk, as deflationists about truth contend, then we do not stand to lose anything by accepting nihilism. Since we also stand to gain an elegant solution to the alethic paradoxes, deflationists ought to be nihilists.

To be clear, I do not intend this as an objection to deflationism. On the contrary, deflationism's compatibility with nihilism is a strength. It is substantivists who must find some other response to the paradoxes. The history of such attempted solutions makes this a formidable prospect. I am not myself a deflationist about truth. But sometimes I wish I were.

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