Modest versus Ultra-Modest Dialetheism

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1. Introduction

Jc Beall is the world's leading defender of *modest dialetheism*—the view that true

falsities exist, albeit only in the form of pathologies like 'This sentence is not true' (henceforth,

"the Liar").[1] Still, the claim that there are true falsities continues to be shocking. But the modest

aspect gives Beall's (2009) position an appeal lacking in other dialetheist accounts, most notably

that of Graham Priest (1987/2006). For modest dialetheism insists that true falsities never occur

in the "base language," i.e., in the fragment of the language that is free of semantic terms like

'true'.[2] In tandem with this, it suggests that true falsities are mere linguistic "spandrels,"

unintended by-products of otherwise reasonable semantic terminology.[3] As a spandrel, one can

thus regard the Liar and its dialetheic status as simply an oddity of linguistic usage, rather than as

evidencing something about the central or typical uses of 'true'.

The absence of dialetheias from the base language and the spandrel status of the Liar are

two modesties exhibited by Beall's dialetheism. Yet Beall regards the view as modest also

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[1] 'This sentence is not true' is usually called the "strengthened Liar," since it is seen as more intractable than 'This sentence is false'. But since I discuss only the strengthened Liar here, I just refer to it as "the Liar."

[2] In fact, Beall (2019a, 2021) now includes dialetheias in the base language. Further, Beall (in conversation) says he prefers to call himself a "glut theorist" rather than a "dialetheist;" cf. Beall (2022). In order to keep our discussion manageable, however, I shall skip over these recent developments.

[3] "*Spandrels* of *x* are inevitable, and frequently unintended, by-products of introducing *x* into some environment. Originally, the term applied chiefly to architectural spandrels, those inevitable V-shaped areas that are by-products of arches…Spandrels, however, are not peculiar to architecture. Evolutionary spandrels…for example, include the male nipple, which was not itself selected by Mother Nature for a particular role but, rather, is the inevitable by-product of other selected items (viz., female nipples). If you introduce something to play a particular role in some environment, you also–perhaps inadvertently–introduce whatever spandrels thereby result." Beall (2009, p. 5). Notably, however, the spandrel idea was first expressed earlier in Armour-Garb & Beall (2001). Thanks to Reviewer #4 for bringing this to my attention.

because it partakes of a *deflationary* view of truth. This is alluded to immediately in his opening line: "Are some truths also false? Yes, but only in a fairly mundane, 'deflated' sense" (2009, p. 1). We find further indications of this in his preface:

> I present what is called a 'dialetheic' position on transparent truth and paradox, and so join Graham Priest [1987/2006] in the basic dialetheic claim: there are some true falsehoods. What I hope is clear, however, is that my position stems from a particular conception of truth [viz., deflationism], one not shared by Priest, and is very much a modest position on the whole. (Priest, in conversation, charges that the position is 'far too straight'. I take this as a compliment, reflecting the genuine modesty of my position…)

As far as I can tell, Beall never details why he thinks deflationism amounts to a kind of modesty (although one likely explanation is considered later). Regardless, after a general overview of deflationism (section 2), I shall argue that deflationism is precisely where Beall's view is unacceptably *im*modest (section 3).

Nevertheless, the evidence that the Liar is a dialetheia is formidable. But if even "modest" dialethiesm flounders, this looks bad for dialetheism per se. Yet having explained why Beall's deflationism is not modest, I shall then explain why it is not even necessary and should be jettisoned (section 4.1). Briefly, dialetheism requires only that 'true' is used disquotationally in *at least one* occurrence of 'This sentence is not true'. Since dialetheism is the immediate result, however, this more minimal assumption still requires argument, and I offer one based readily observable facts about linguistic usage (section 4.2).

The dialetheism that results is not deflationist, and because of this, I describe it as "ultra-modest." Its significance is that it better represents the minimum needed for dialetheism, and in so doing, gives dialetheism the best chances for wider acceptance in the discipline.

2. Approximating Deflationism

Again, the point of contention with Beall is deflationism about truth; however, it turns out that deflationism has many faces. Here, it is identified by a positive linguistic thesis (disquotationalism), and a negative metaphysical thesis (eliminativism):

(DQ) The term 'true' is an inferential device of disquotation.

(Elim) The term 'true' does not denote a substantive property.

Thus, unlike the deflationism of (e.g.) Horwich (1990/1998), deflationism here concerns only uses of 'true' that apply to sentences rather than propositions. Given that, (DQ) can be explicated as the claim that 'true' is an inferential device whereby a sentence ϕ and its truth ascription " 'ϕ' is true" are intersubstitutable in all non-opaque contexts.[4] (The intersubstitutability is also known as "transparency." Note that the relevant substitutions are labeled "disquotational inferences"— yet this covers not only inferences where quotes are removed, e.g., from ' 'Snow is white' is true' to 'Snow is white', but also the converse inferences where quotes are added.[5])

As for (Elim), there is a question of what counts as a "substantive property." Clearly, correspondence with the world, coherence with a theory, and general pragmatic utility would be the key examples. And in understanding (Elim), perhaps the rejection of those properties as the denotation of 'true' is what's most important. Yet since 'true' functions as a predicate, and

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[4] The present construal of (DQ) is slightly different than what one finds elsewhere in the literature. Often, it is seen as claiming that all instances of the Tarskian T-schema are correct (cf. Tarski 1933, p. 155). The correctness of these instances would typically be necessary and sufficient for the intersubstitutability of ϕ and " 'ϕ' is true." However, there are logics where such intersubstitutability is sound, and yet where instances of the above schema are not true in all models. Thus, with Beall (2019b), I regard the intersubstitutability as the core of what (DQ) is driving at.

[5] As Soames (1999) mentions, a sentence like 'My conjecture is true' does not allow 'is true' to "disappear" in an inference to 'My conjecture' (which is not even a sentence). But it is plausible that the semantics of 'My conjecture is true' is wholly derived from the semantics of " 'χ' is true", in which χ is equivalent to the conjecture in question. I think something similar could be said about attributions of truth to sentences of different languages. E.g., ' 'La niege est blanche' is true', but this does not allow the inference to 'La niege est blanche' (since it's not a sentence of English). But here too, one could see the semantics of ' 'La niege est blanche' is true' as inherited from ' 'Snow is white' is true', where 'Snow is white' is equivalent to 'La niege est blanche'. Even so, there are other uses of 'true' where it fails to disquote, and it is less obvious there that these uses can be seen as derivative of the disquotational use. See section 3.

predicates apparently ascribe properties to their subjects, deflationists often feel compelled to say more about the "non-substantive property" denoted by 'true'.

Beall (2019b) following other deflationists describes 'true' as denoting a "logical property." In particular, he insightfully describes 'true' as expressing the dual of classical negation (or more precisely, the property-correlate of such an operation[6]). Consider that in a sentence $\sim\phi$, the tilde expresses a function that takes the truth value of ϕ and outputs the opposite truth value.[7] Similarly, in a sentence $\dagger\phi$, the symbol $\dagger$ can be stipulated to indicate the performance of an operation that takes the truth value assigned to ϕ and outputs the same truth value. Predicating 'true' to ϕ is then just an alternate way of indicating this. (The grammatical difference is only superficial: Even though 'true' is concatenated with a term for ϕ rather than ϕ itself, the same operation on the truth value of ϕ occurs). So on this approach, 'true' denotes a logical property in that it indicates the occurrence of an identity operation on a truth value.

This exacerbates the question, however, of why a term like 'true' is even necessary. Indeed, the intersubstitivity of ϕ with " 'ϕ' is true" indicates that anything which can be said with 'true' can be said without it (at least in non-opaque contexts). However, 'true' combined with quantification over sentences enables us to say things that would otherwise be impossible for beings with our cognitive and temporal limits. Thus, an orthodox Christian could assert "Every sentence of the Bible is true," and thereby affirm every sentence in the Bible, even if s/he is unable to list them out by rote memory. Or, rather than uttering infinitely many sentences, one might say that for any sentence ϕ, either ϕ is true or ϕ is not true. The term 'true' thus affords us

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[6] Thanks to Reviewer #4 for suggesting this clarification.
[7] Here and elsewhere, I often gloss the use/mention distinction when there is no real danger of confusion. I assume in such cases that we may rely on context to disambiguate.

linguistic capacities that we would otherwise lack, even though it expresses nothing but an identity operation on truth values.

All parties should acknowledge how 'true' increases the expressive abilities of finite speakers. But these observations are especially germane to deflationism, for again, they explain why 'true' exists as part of the language even if it is nothing but a disquotational device, a term which expresses only a logical property. This brings us to another common feature of deflationary views, to wit, that if truth is not a substantive property, then it is not suited to play an explanatory role in the theory of meaning and elsewhere.[8] This bears particularly on a truth-conditional theory of meaning, where the meaning of a sentence purports to be explained by its truth condition. For instance, a truth-conditional theory might suggest:

(i) 'Snow is white' means that snow is white because 'Snow is white' is true iff snow is white.

Or, to make the explanatory aspect a little more apparent:

(ii) 'Snow is white' means that snow is white because that is the exact condition under which 'Snow is white' is true.

However, if truth is not a substantial property, then the condition under which a sentence is "true" is one where it has some insubstantial property. So the sentence having this property under that condition could not be explanatory of the sentences' meaning.

Addendum: Devitt (2002) observes that if a deflationist rejects explanations like (i) and (ii), this does not require her rejecting an explanation like (iii):

(iii) 'Snow is white' is true because snow is white.

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[8] Even though deflationism concerns the word 'true' in the first instance, I sometimes switch to talking about the property of deflationary *truth*, since we can now take it as given that deflationary truth exists as a property, albeit as merely a logical property as per the earlier description.

That is, the truth of 'Snow is white' can be explained, even if it is not an explainer. However, Price (1997) observes that an explanation like (iii) is plausible only if the string of symbols inside the quotation marks is antecedently identified as a sentence that means that snow is white. Otherwise, it would be mysterious why snow's being white bears on that jumble of symbols being true. (That is so, even if truth is nothing but a logical property.) Regardless, this need not force us back into truth-conditional semantics. Price suggests that a deflationist can instead explain meaning via some kind of inferential role semantics. But let us not pursue this issue. It is worth noting regardless that deflationists may be able to explain the truth and meaning of certain linguistic strings, even if they refuse explanations like (i) and (ii).[9]

3. Beall's Argument and Its Limits

Why might someone be inclined toward deflationism (besides the usual frustrations with correspondence theory, coherence theory, and pragmatism)? For his part, Beall (2004) offers the following argument (quoting p. 206):[10]

(1) Invoke Ockham: Given two hypotheses that equally well explain the data, go for the simpler one.

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[9] From our previous remarks, it seems deflationary truth *is* explanatory of why disquotational inferences are truth-preserving. After all, if truth is an identity operation on the truth value of a quoted sentence, then this explains why it is valid to infer φ from the premise that " 'φ' is true." However, even if this is correct, the "explanatory role" denied of deflationary truth is usually a causal or metaphysical explanatory role rather than just a logical one. So the point could be granted by the deflationist by still maintaining that truth is ill-suited for non-logical explanation.

[10] This argument is repeated in Beall (2009, p. 2). On that same page, Beall also endorses a second, slightly different argument from Field (1994) where deflationism is seen as a "sound methodological strategy." The idea is that we should "pursue [deflationism] as far as we can; for in so doing—and plausibly, only in so doing—we will see where it breaks down…or we will see its vindication" (pp. 2-3). (Beall 2004 also gives this argument.) However, as long as deflationism is "on the menu" of philosophical options, we should always consider honestly how well a deflationist can accommodate the data. Such methodology does not require a prior commitment to deflationism, yet it would yield results on how much the view is vindicated or how much it breaks down.

(2) Datum: The disquotational features of 'is true' appear to explain all relevant fragments of truth-talk; no apparent explanatory value is added by positing that truth has a "robust nature."

(3) Hence, pending good reason to go beyond a conception of truth according to which it is merely an expressive device, it is reasonable to set "nature" questions aside—questions that go beyond the expressive role of 'is true'.

Despite Beall's talk of merely "setting aside" certain questions, the import of Ockham is not just to remain neutral on whether truth has a substantial nature, but rather to *deny* that it has such a nature. This, moreover, is what leads us to (Elim)—a thesis which is here regarded as essential to the deflationist's position.

It should be clear that (Elim) is a controversial thesis; it is rejected by anyone who is not a deflationist (correspondence theorists, coherence theorists, etc.). So does the Ockhamist argument withstand scrutiny? Let us focus on Datum. The premise implicates (DQ), which is the other essential ingredient to deflationism.[11] Notice first that there is some unclarity in Datum, regarding which are the "relevant fragments" of truth talk. Certainly, the datum is not that *every* use of the term 'true' in English is a device of disquotational inference—one can use one can talk about a "true friend," or say that "My bicycle wheel was made true." But the relevant uses of 'true' is where it is predicated of sentences rather than of friends or bike wheels.

Notwithstanding, 'true' sometimes fails to disquote even when it is predicated of a sentence. Zardini (2015) provides several examples exploiting familiar intensional contexts

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[11] Actually, what Datum implicates is not (DQ) as formulated above, but rather:

(DQ*) The term 'true' is device of disquotational inference, in all relevant fragments of truth talk.

Yet I take this version to be what was really at issue all along. Though here too, it becomes important to clarify which fragments are relevant.

(sentences using empty names, propositional attitude verbs, modal operators, etc). Yet there are other examples as well. Beall (2009) himself appears especially concerned with the following:

> *Determinate truth*: There is a perfectly good sense in which 'This sentence is not determinately true' is not determinately true, and in which it does not follow that the sentence is also determinately true (cf. Field 2008).

Two further examples I might add are:

> *Nihilistic reference.* Van Inwagen's (1990) mereological nihilism implies that 'General Sherman is a tree' is true, but not that General Sherman is a tree, since it implies that 'General Sherman' merely denotes some simples arranged tree-wise. [12]
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> *Non-commissive quantification*. 'There is an even prime' is true, but it does not follow that there *is* an even prime.[13]

There is also the following case to consider:

> *Explanation of truth*: We saw there is a perfectly good sense in which (iii) is correct:
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>> (iii) 'Snow is white' is true because snow is white.
>
> But it does not follow:
>
>> (iv) 'Snow is white' is true because 'Snow is white' is true.

This seems unnoticed in the deflationist literature; however, if deflationists want to explain why 'Snow is white' is true in English, they should not regard (iii) as equivalent to (iv).

Could Beall explain away these examples? Perhaps. But I mention them not because they threaten the very possibility of a deflationary account. Rather, the point is that if Datum is to be

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[12] Writers like Sider (2009) suggest that van Inwagen's metalanguage is not ordinary English but rather a language known as "Ontologese". Granted, van Inwagen may not be using 'true' in the *ordinary* way, but it is still clear that the English term 'true' is being used. (And the uses of the English 'true' are what concern us.)

[13] Many philosophers still balk at the idea of non-commissive quantification, a kind of quantification which does *not* ontologically commit the speaker to entities in its range. However, there is much evidence (like the example above) suggesting that it is a real phenomenon of natural language. For details, see, e.g., Azzouni (2007) and Priest (2008).

acceptable as a premise in Beall's argument, he ought to provide some reassurance that such cases do not falsify Datum. Otherwise, the Ockhamist argument seems to leave us agnostic.

One could just bracket off these examples from consideration as well. We might read Beall as inclined in this direction, for he often hedges (DQ) as the claim that 'true' is disquotational *in all non-opaque contexts* (see his 2009, pp. 1, 12, 87, etc.). Thus, if Datum is hedged in a similar way—and the problem cases are conceded to be opaque uses of 'true'—then the Ockhamist argument appears solid.

But what exactly counts as an opaque context? As far as I can tell, it just seems to be a context where disquotation fails. Yet if that is correct, then the hedged (DQ) threatens to become trivial. It apparently amounts to the claim that 'true' is disquotational in English except when it is not. Who would disagree?

In earlier work, however, Beall adds something which may quell the triviality worry. Where 'dtrue' signifies 'true' in its disquotational use, Beall (2005) writes:[14]

> What distinguishes deflationists from non-deflationists is that the former take dtruth to be *fundamental*: if there are other truth predicates in the language, they are derivative, deriving from 'dtrue' and other connectives. In a slogan: all that need be explained about truth is explicable in terms of dtruth (and other logical tools). (p. 7, italics mine)

This seems to allow that the opaque uses of 'true' may be relevant fragments of truth-talk, and yet the disquotational 'true' would be primary. I take this to mean that the other uses would be definable by the disquotational 'true', perhaps with the help of various logical devices. That

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[14] Reviewer #4 stresses textual evidence indicating that Beall does not intend 'dtrue' to unequivocally signify 'true' on its disquotational use. Rather, it signifies 'true' according to Beall's understanding of the term. So just like 'true', 'dtrue' is to be regarded as disquotational in all non-opaque contexts. But if so, it would be puzzling for Beall to add that 'dtrue' is "fundamental." This too appears trivial if 'true' is regarded as identical to 'dtrue'. (Trivially, any use of 'true' is definable by 'true'.)

would be a non-trivial claim. Moreover, Datum could still be a good reason to endorse that claim. For when Datum says that the disquotational use "explains" all relevant fragments of truth talk, this could mean that all such fragments either showcase the disquotational use directly, or contain a use of 'true' which is wholly derivative from the disquotational use (give or take some logical finessing). From that premise, the fundamentalist disquotationalist view follows.

Yet if this is how we should understand Datum, the premise becomes dubious. It is allowed that there are non-disquoting uses of 'true', as seen in the above examples. However, it is not obvious how all such uses are explicable by the disquotational use. Why should we expect that? I worry that this version of the argument ultimately rests on a presumption rather than an observable "datum" about natural language.

« Parenthetical remark: Deflationists are not the only ones who hope to see 'true' as disquotational—many correspondence theorists accept the validity of the T-biconditionals. The problem cases are thus not unique to deflationism, which may allow Beall to remain steadfast in his views. But instead, this might create doubt about both Beall's deflationism as well as the inflationary competitors. Indeed, when it comes to natural language, I suspect that recognizing that 'true' has a variety of uses is the most reasonable. Insisting on a single, fundamental usage apparently neglects how the fluidity of language is an essential and adaptive feature; cf. section 5 below. *End parenthetical. »*[15]

Nevertheless, perhaps more can be said for Datum on the fundamentalist reading. Part of Beall's philosophical vision is an origin story about how a word like 'true' became part of the language. Beall (2004, 2009) speaks of language users needing to expand their assertive abilities, given their cognitive and temporal limitations. A word like 'true' was introduced precisely to

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[15] The stylistic *« Parenthetical remark: … End parenthetical. »* is borrowed from Beall (2009).

enable assertions like "Every sentence of the Bible is true," or "Every sentence is either true or not true." (The Liar is then a spandrel of this perfectly legitimate usage.) The moral seems to be that, if such expressive augmentation is the rationale for the *creation* of the term, then it is plausibly the rationale behind the *continued use* of the term. The problem, however, is that the apparently opaque uses of 'true' are exactly what call this into question. Even if 'true' was first introduced as a disquotational device, this use might not be fundamental to all uses.[16]

Regardless, we might simply focus on the "original" use of 'true', as distinct any other putative uses. This would mean that the relevant bits of truth talk mentioned by Datum are only those fragments where 'true' has its disquotational use (or a use that is uncontroversially derivative). The controversial problem cases would be left aside.

The resulting disquotationalism implied by Datum would then be noticeably weaker. It would say that 'true' is sometimes a device of disquotation, and perhaps has some derivative uses. But would be silent on all other uses. In particular, to avoid over-ambitiousness, Datum would be silent on cases like *Nihilistic reference, Non-commissive quantification*, and *Explanation of truth* (and possibly the cases from Zardini, op. cit., as well). While this may be more evidence-based, however, I imagine Beall would feel disappointment in thus restricting his deflationism. Indeed, a common complaint against Tarski's (1933, 1944) theory is that, at best, it describes only a fragment of natural language. The thrust of our present observations, however, is that we should also hesitate to extend (DQ) beyond a proper part of English.

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[16] Beall might still suggest that the origin of 'true' is *evidence* for the fundamental status of the disquotational use. However, we should not take too seriously that the disquotational use is the "original" use. The genesis of words is often arational, and we are not doing linguistic anthropology, after all.

4. An Ultra-Modest Proposal

In large measure, however, we need not feel disappointment. This is because our restricted disquotationalism is still sufficient for *the shocking thesis of dialetheism*. That is so, provided that *some* use of 'This sentence is not true' features the disquotational 'true'. Assuming that, there are several, compelling ways to argue that 'This sentence is not true' is both true and false. I leave it to the reader to decide which of these is best.[17] Regardless, it is crucial that dialethiests basically possess a *mathematical proof* of their thesis. (Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence, and to my mind, the dialetheist meets that standard.) What I am suggesting, moreover, is that these proofs need not depend on the *general* claim that 'true' supports disquotational inference. It is eminently more modest to assume instead that, in at least one occurrence of the Liar, 'true' is disquotational.

4.1 Neutrality on Eliminativism

Clearly, our highly restricted disquotationalism does not reinvigorate the Ockhamist argument. My suggestion, then, is to adopt neutrality on (Elim).[18] (The view I proffer is thus a highly restricted *pure disquotationalism* rather than a species of deflationism.) Plausibly, however, Beall wants to uphold (Elim) because he wishes to dispense with metaphysical controversies arising from the existence of dialethieas.[19] Following Zalta (2004, p. 432), a true falsity would suggest that some object instantiates both a property and the negation of the

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[17] See for example Tarski (1933, p. 158; 1944, pp. 347-358), Beall (2009, pp. 5-6), and Zardini (2015, p. 53).
[18] Such neutrality I also regard as a consequence of the "quietist" view I adopt regarding the metaphysics of language-world relations. See Parent (2015).
[19] My thanks to Jim Hutchinson for bringing this to my attention.

property at the same time. Such a consequence would be a metaphysical liability, to say the least. It would suggest that there are contradictions *in the world*.[20]

Yet if the Liar is "true" in no substantive sense, then Beall seems to dodge the dire metaphysical consequences. One might still be worried about the co-instantiation of an "insubstantial property" with its contrary. But in the case of the Liar, such co-instantiation would mean only that the Liar puts its truth value through the identity operation expressed by 'true', and also through the dual operation. These operations are "contrary," of course: If both operations are given the same truth value as input, they yield different truth values as output. And so, the Liar ends up both true and not true, as dialetheism predicts. This is odd, but if truth is just a "logical property," it need not create a rip in the fabric of spacetime.

The point is especially clear if we consider a version of Beall's *constructivism* about truth. Although he doesn't quite phrase it this way, we can understand constructivism as the view that the "truth value" of a sentence is like a fictional character. (See also the fictionalist views described in Kroon 2004 and in Woodbridge & Armour-Garb 2013.) The ontology of fictional characters generates its own puzzles, to be sure, but impossible objects create no metaphysical disaster if they are found only in fiction. Consider Louis Geoffroy's (1841) *Napoléon Apocryphe*, in which humans discover how to square the circle.[21] Since the author intends to be writing fiction, he is not suggesting that our world contains an impossibility. Likewise, if truth values are regarded as fictional objects, then concocting an impossible truth value (one that is both true and not true) is not to impute to the actual world an impossible state-of-affairs.[22]

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[20] Reviewer #3 directs me here to Priest (1987/2006, p. 299), who tries to soothe anxiety about contradictions in the world. Priest's idea is that if there is a dialetheia, then in one sense, it trivially follows that there are contradictions in the world, if "the world" is "whatever determines the truth or falsity of a sentence." This is one view that a dialetheist can take; however, it is not the only option (as I elaborate further below).

[21] I learned of this example from Nolan (2021).

[22] Likening a truth value to a fictional object also illuminates Beall's analysis of 'true' as the dual of classical negation. We are told that truth is an identity operation on a truth value. But if a truth value just is either truth or

As mentioned, this is likely is why Beall regards deflationism as supporting the modesty of his view. My counter-suggestion, however, is that modesty would have us refrain from (Elim), given the failure of the Ockhamist argument. Granted, this re-opens the question of whether dialetheism implies actual impossibilities. But an open question is not an objection. The dialetheist can emphasize, moreover, that eliminativist views of truth remain epistemically possible.[23] A contradictory truth value *might* be as innocuous as a contradictory fictional object—though again, modesty recommends avoiding a commitment on the matter.[24]

Reviewer #4 for this journal observes that under dialetheism, 'true' might still express a substantive property. In which case, dialetheism might end up having extreme metaphysical consequences. Similarly, Reviewer #6 worries that metaphysical havoc could be entailed by the view, even if the dialetheist can avoid self-consciously endorsing the entailment. Agreed: Dialetheism may still end up generating unacceptable consequences. But the ultra-modest view at least does not supply a metaphysics from which extreme consequences might be derived. Neither, however, does it plump for an eliminativist metaphysics on the basis of dubious evidence. In these respects, it occupies a safer dialectical position.

A different objection is that I have been harping on aspects of *epistemic* modesty (e.g., limiting ourselves to what the evidence supports). Beall, however, seems more concerned with *metaphysical* modesty, and in particular, explaining why dialetheia do not put impossibilities into

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falsity, this may seem to only delay the question of what truth is. However, the constructivism informs us that a truth value is a fictional object. So we can understand 'true' as expressing an identity operation on that sort of object.

[23] Instead of constructivism, one might opt for the "semantic dialetheism" in Mares (2004). However, Mares focuses only on (putative) dialetheias in the base language, and I am unclear how to apply the view to the Liar.

[24] This comports well with a view I am particularly fond of, namely, *mental fictionalism*—the view that *all* psychological (including semantic) phenomena are part of a fiction. This is not to say they are unreal; a story can refer to real things. It's just that the mental fictionalist is *not committed* to their reality, insofar as she regards them as elements of a story. For an article-length overview of mental fictionalism, see Demeter et al. (2022). (By the way, in Parent (ms.), mental fictionalism is seen as endorsing unrestricted disquotationalism as a *prescription* for using the truth-term. Yet this conflicts none with my present rejection of disquotationalism as a descriptive thesis.)

our world. Is the dispute over "modesty" merely verbal? Granted, there may be a difference in focus, but this does not make epistemic scruples irrelevant. The fact remains that metaphysical explanations are only as good as the evidence supporting them. So even if Beall's attention is on metaphysics, epistemic modesty remains important. Indeed, relative unconcern with evidence is what gives metaphysicians a bad name. I am not suggesting Beall is guilty of this; he offers us the Ockhamist argument after all. Instead, the point is that the "verbal dispute" objection has teeth only if one is prepared to regard epistemic modesty as not germane to the dispute.

4.2 Modulating 'True'

The ultra-modest position is that in at least one utterance of the Liar, 'true' is used disquotationally. The contrast is with Beall's approach, where 'true' is uniformly analyzed throughout the language by means of a disquotational predicate. Yet even though ultra-modesty is a severe restriction on disquotationalism, it still leads immediately to dialetheism. So critics may be eager to ask: Why think that the Liar *ever* uses 'true' disquotationally?

The key observation here is that language-users can *modulate* what an expression means, at least for the purposes at hand, even if the modulated meaning is different from what the term usually means. These days, philosophers commonly recognize that such modulation occurs with gradable adjectives like 'flat' or 'bald'—a soccer field might count as "flat" for the purposes of soccer, even if it is far from being absolutely flat. But as a rather different sort of modulation, one might utter 'Germany loves potatoes' in which 'Germany' denotes the German people (rather than the German landmass)—and ordinary speakers will immediately follow what is

going on.[25] Here too, several candidate meanings seem available for the term 'Germany', and yet contextual factors single out the relevant meaning for the communicative purposes.

In fact, the phenomenon of meaning modulation is more ubiquitous than these few examples suggest. Consider Ludlow (2014) who writes:

> Far from being the exception, I think this is typical of how things are with the words we use. Even for well-entrenched words their meanings are open-ended and can change on the fly as we engage different conversational partners. Consider a word like 'sport'. Does it include bowling? Mountain climbing? Darts? Chess? Or consider words like 'freedom', 'journalist', or (less loftily) 'sandwich' and 'doll'. All of these words have meanings that are underdetermined, and we adjust or modulate their meanings on a conversation-by-conversation basis. Their meanings are *dynamic.* (p. 2)

Perhaps it is a bit much to say that the meanings of words are *underdetermined*; however, the essential point is that meanings are contextually shifty.[26] (It still might be fully determinate what 'sport' means in a given context, even if its cross-contextual meaning is variable.)

The contextual shiftiness of numerous words is instantly recognizable to language users, so much so that it is odd why semanticists have historically neglected it. It is simply part of using language that a term's meaning can be altered, sometimes quite significantly, to suit the purposes of the speaker. In the limit case, a speaker can explicitly stipulate *ad libitum* a wholly divergent use of a term; semanticists have been attuned to that fact at least. Yet in a wide variety of uses, meaning modulation occurs without the aid of explicit stipulation.

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[25] The example is from Lycan (2018).

[26] By the way, to say that meanings are contextually shifty is stronger than suggesting that the reference of (say) indexical terms is contextually shifty. Following the standard analysis originating in Kaplan (1978), an indexical term allegedly has a constant meaning, despite the fact that its reference is variable. The claim of meaning modulation, however, is that even meaning shifts from context to context.

Such considerations provide support to the idea that a speaker can use 'true' disquotationally or not, as they wish, in the context of utterance, without needing to announce as much. For instance, one might ascribe 'true' to 'There is an even prime,' and the context of utterance can implicitly determine whether this licenses an inference to the existence of an even prime. In a conversation among Platonists, that may well be the case, but not in other contexts. If this is generally true about 'true', then context can also determine 'true' to be disquotational in at least one utterance of 'This very sentence is not true'. This would not suggest that 'true' is always disquotational, or even that it is ordinarily disquotational—yet it would acknowledge the kind of linguistic freedom that speakers enjoy. Granted, more details on the mechanics of the modulation would be desirable, but I do not have such ambitions here. It is enough to observe that the meaning of words can be adjusted on the fly (even without overt warning), and that this lends support to the idea that 'true' can be readily used disquotationally in the Liar, regardless of whether 'true' is typically or fundamentally disquotational.

One complication, however, is that we are not assuming that 'true' expresses a substantive property. Thus, unlike 'sport', a shift in the meaning of 'true' would not necessarily be a shift in *denotation* from things with one property to thing with a related property. So what exactly is shifting in the case of 'true'? We need not decide that either. Suffice it to say that speakers modulate the term in such a way as to allow disquotation or not.

However, like 'Germany' or 'sport', this may suggest that 'true' is *equivocal* in English. That may seem quite unorthodox, which sits uneasy with a pretension to "ultra-modesty." Yet this is an overreaction. We are simply respecting that 'true' in English sometimes allows disquotation and sometimes not, as seen in examples like *Nihilistic reference*, *Non-committal quantification*, and *Explanation of truth*. We are then adding that the context of use apparently

dictates the manner in which 'true' is used. The comparison with 'Germany' or 'sport' is then merely intended to illustrate that contextual precisifications are entirely run-of-the-mill.

Still, it should be admitted that ultra-modest dialetheism vindicates a "true contradiction" only according to one precisification of 'true'. When 'true' is non-disquotational, 'This sentence is not true' cannot be proven to be true and false. And in that case, the ultra-modest position passes no verdict. Here, however, an anti-dialetheist might suggest that the non-disquotational use of 'true' reflects the *primary* meaning of 'true', much like the primary meaning of 'sport' excludes chess. In which case, the sense in which there exists a "true contradiction" would be an aberrant sense, much like how chess is an aberrant sort of "sport."

However, the non-disquotational use of 'true' is unlikely to be primary. Though I reject Beall's hard-line disquotationalism, the disquotational use indeed seems to be the way the term earns its keep. (This is not a point about the term's origin, but rather about its continued proliferation.) Again, 'true' enables needed shortcuts such as "Every sentence of the form $p \vee \sim p$ is true," and it is the disquotational consequences which make these function effectively as shortcuts. It is also the disquotational use which gives rise to the Liar. Yet since the emergence of the Liar is not intended by typical speakers, nor is it much use to them, it is still fair to regard the Liar as a mere spandrel of otherwise reasonable linguistic usage.

On a related note, ultra-modesty is compatible with speakers regularly ignoring the Liar as though it were not a sentence of the language. In such contexts, Tarski may well have provided an adequate theory of how 'true' behaves. The present point, however, is that one can also deploy a use of 'true' where it is disquotational. With respect to such a usage, it can be shown that there is at least one true contradiction in natural language.

5. Closing Remarks

Ultra-modest dialetheism holds that the Liar is a true falsity, as demonstrated in a number of proofs. The proofs are especially powerful if they assume only that 'true' is disquotational in at least one occurrence of 'This sentence is not true'. Further, the minimal disquotationalist thesis has a serious argument in its favor. The disquotational use of 'true' is one of the term's conventionally established uses, and language-users generally enjoy the freedom to adopt such a use as they like.

One might think that the ultra-modest position is compatible with Beall's view, if it just says that the Liar can use 'true' disquotationally. Granted, that much is compatible with Beall, but that is not the whole of it. In addition, I have argued that:

(A) Fundamentalist disquotationalism is not supported by the linguistic evidence (unless the view is watered down into something trivial).

(B) In light of (A), eliminativism is unwarranted.

From this angle, ultra-modest dialetheism is somewhat priggish (for want of a better adjective); it alleges that Beall's dialetheism is *not* sufficiently modest, given the evidence—and given the subsequent failure of the Ockhamist argument. The alternative offered is a more evidence-based position that makes fewer assumptions, and this can only make dialetheism more attractive.[27] (I am under no illusion, however, that dialetheism will continue to elude mainstream acceptance for the time being. But my hope is that this paper nonetheless advances the cause.)

Reviewer #5 objects that the point here is too easy. The idea is that since (DQ) is "the real engine" of the Liar paradox, it is obvious that (Elim) is not needed for dialetheism. But a

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[27] Reviewer #6 objects that Beall's position can claim some advantages that the present view cannot; most notably, Beall can explain why the Liar uses 'true' disquotationally. (It is because 'true' is fundamentally disquotational.) I reply that an explanation that rests on an empirically inadequate hypothesis should not be seen as advantageous.

warning is apt that "modest" dialetheism does *not* represent the minimum needed to be a dialetheist. Let me reiterate also that ultra-modesty consists not just in suspending (Elim) but in rejecting (DQ). On a non-trivial reading, (DQ) is a general claim that is much stronger than what the dialetheist requires.

It might be said that there is an objectionable kind of pluralism implicit in the ultra-modest view. And yet, as noted in connection with Tarski, there is a strong push to have an account of 'true' which concerns all of natural language.[28] Granted, I may have let my pluralist colors slip. However, in its official formulation, ultra-modest dialetheism is not pluralist about 'true'; it is instead neutral on the issue. The linguistic evidence fails to warrant Beall's fundamentalist disquotationalism, but it also fails to rule it out.

Be that as it may, I might take this as an opportunity to highlight the potential for "bad faith" in formal semantics. The usual attitude is that formal semantics uncovers uniform rules that govern linguistic usage. One might even regard meaning modulation as governed by fixed principles and parameters ("metarules" about which semantic rules are in force in a context). However, in the biological order, we find much diversity and mutation—and as a biological phenomenon, language should be understood accordingly. A few years ago on Facebook, a friend posted the following:

<div align="center">ice cream = win</div>

This was easily understood by other users (as evidenced by the number of "likes"), even though the identity-sign is flanked by terms that are *not even in the same grammatical category*, much

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[28] Pluralism about 'true' is not the same as logical pluralism, as expounded by Beall & Restall (2000). Even if 'true' has multiple uses, it does not follow that there are multiple logics—after all, it may turn out that only one use of 'true' bears on logic. As an obvious case, 'true' as applied bike wheels does not have such bearing. (Reviewer #3 observes that there are still other views of truth which have the 'pluralism' label. E.g., Lynch (1998) regards truth is a functional kind that is realized in a plurality of ways. Such a view is not at issue above either.)

less extensionally the same. However, far from exposing a flaw of natural language, the example reveals an adaptive flexibility of language that maximizes opportunities for communication.[29]

It is fair enough, however, if formal semantics brackets such examples so to describe first the more typical uses. Also, we sometimes forego the purely descriptive aim, and instead opt for a prescriptive program of "regimentation," where we legislate certain usage rules in the hopes of minimizing philosophical perplexity. But even when describing the typical rules, one should remember that ordinary speakers can break the "rules" at any time (and not necessarily for good reasons). The idea that the rules "govern" a conversation should be tempered with the observation that the conversation can also govern the rules. To put it somewhat paradoxically, usurping, reinistating, and re-usurping the rules is simply part of the rules.

Formal semantics can always posit a change in context when the rules change. This allows that the rules *are* fixed, albeit relative to a context. But such context-tracking I suspect over-intellectualizes matters—English speakers instantly grasp the one-off use of '=' in 'ice cream = win' without first identifying some *general* rule governing '=' in the context. Human beings are likely not the serial processors described by GOFAI ("good old-fashioned A.I."), where understanding means running precise logical formulae in Mentalese. Insofar as linguistic rules are real, they are probably more "epiphenomenal," emerging from a more organic, stochastic basis.[30]

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[29] A related (hypothetical) example involving 'true': Speaker A: "Ice cream!" Speaker B: "True that!"

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