

## TRANSCENDENTALISM ABOUT CONTENT

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Transcendentalism about truth-conditional content is the view that eliminativism about such content is not simply false, as a matter of empirical fact, but that in some sense it must be false; it is "incoherent," "self-refuting," "pragmatically inconsistent," and so on. I aim to show that all arguments to this effect are bad by laying bare the question-begging strategy that is common to them. I shall consider a naive version of transcendentalism first and then move on to a sophisticated version proposed recently by Paul Boghossian in "The Status of Content."<sup>i</sup>

### **I. Eliminativism and Realism**

I start with a brief statement of my credo on the dispute between eliminativists and realists about truth-conditional content.<sup>ii</sup> This will form the backdrop to my critique of transcendentalism.

An eliminativist about truth-conditional content denies that anything has a content explained in terms of truth and reference. Assuming that something would not be a belief unless it had such content, the eliminativist is thus denying that there are any beliefs.

Similarly, she is denying desires, hopes, and other "intentional" states.

This eliminativist then owes us two things. First, she owes us an argument against folk psychology and semantics,<sup>iii</sup> for these folk theories are riddled with talk of intentional items. This argument needs to be very strong, because this talk is apparently central not only to folk theories but also to many scientific theories.

Indeed, it is hard to exaggerate how shocking it would be to discover that there was nothing to this talk. Second, she owes us an alternative way of talking, including an alternative to truth-conditional semantics, that will enable us to describe, explain, and predict mental and linguistic phenomena in other terms. In my view, no eliminativist has yet come close to discharging these debts.

So, at this point, eliminativism has not been made plausible.

Nevertheless, the realist about truth-conditional content has no cause for complacency. Even though much of the eliminativist critique of realism is exaggerated, some of it is disturbing. And the realist should be very worried about how difficult it is proving to be to naturalize truth and reference.

The dispute between eliminativist and realist is an empirical one. The evidence is far from being all in but at this stage, in my opinion, it favors the realist strongly, but not conclusively.

### **II Transcendentalism**

Many realists, including Boghossian, want to go much further: they offer transcendental arguments to show that eliminativism is not even a possible view. So, even if we do argue that the eliminativist has failed to discharge the above debts (out of politeness, perhaps), we don't really have to. We are entitled to dismiss her out of hand without considering what she says. In Kantian terms, it is "a condition on the possibility of theorizing at all"

that there be intentional items (ones having truth-conditional content). To deny this is, in Lynne Rudder Baker's vivid phrase, to commit "cognitive suicide."<sup>iv</sup>

A naive transcendental argument to this effect runs as follows:

1. The eliminativist sincerely utters, "There are no beliefs."
2. So, the eliminativist believes that there are no beliefs.
3. So, eliminativism about beliefs involves realism about beliefs.
4. So, eliminativism is incoherent.<sup>v</sup>

Why is this argument so footling? Because it starts by ignoring what the eliminativist actually says. Since she is an eliminativist, she rejects the established intentional way of talking. So she will not describe any mental state, including her own in stating eliminativism, as a belief. So step 2, which saddles her with precisely what she is denying, is blatantly question-begging.

To say this is not to go back on the remarks that opened section I. The eliminativist does owe us an alternative description to that in 2. The absence of such a description does count against eliminativism, perhaps heavily. But that is all the absence does.

It does not show that no other description could be given, hence that eliminativism could not be right. At most it shows that eliminativism probably is not right. The slide from charging that eliminativism is implausible to charging that it is incoherent is totally unwarranted.

A certain myopia afflicts transcendentalists: they do not see that the theory that the eliminativist must provide, transcendental argument or no transcendental argument, would supply alternative ways of talking that could be used quite generally, including to describe eliminativism and the eliminativist. The eliminativist's theory, or lack of it, is open to criticism, but there is no room for a transcendental "first strike" against her. Realism cannot be saved that easily.

This needs emphasizing for, in my experience, many who do not subscribe to transcendental arguments against content, still think that such arguments are "onto something" and so take them more seriously than they deserve. They are onto nothing beyond the fairly straightforward points in section I.

Some also seem to think that the eliminativist denies herself the right to talk. For, according to her, talking "does not really say anything; it is mere gibberish." This simple confusion is an indication of the entrenchment of folk theory. Talking is one thing, the folk theory of talking another. So you can talk without holding the theory. The eliminativist does not recommend silence. She recommends different talk about talk. The eliminativist is not committed to the view that all talk is "mere gibberish." A plausible eliminativist theory would surely distinguish, in nonintentional terms, between genuine utterances and gibberish.

Finally, it is futile to keep emphasizing how shocking eliminativism is and how difficult it would be to live with. Your average eliminativist is thoroughly aware of this; indeed, she enjoys

being an enfant terrible. And she is fond of pointing out how often in the history of science the truth has been shocking. This is a very good point. What eliminativism calls for in response is neither transcendentalism nor cries of horror, but arguments aimed at what the eliminativist actually says.<sup>vi</sup>

Transcendental arguments against eliminativism may take many forms and may involve any of the intentional notions.<sup>vii</sup> However, they all share the question-begging strategy with the naive argument.

The strategy is to start the argument by applying notions to the eliminativist that are laden with precisely the theory that she thinks should be abandoned; and to overlook that she would think that notions from a replacement theory were the appropriate ones to apply.

Boghossian's argument differs from the naive one in its complicated manipulation of notions of truth. These manipulations have an interest in their own right. They involve a serious, though easily made, error about deflationary truth. Boghossian's conclusion is a nice statement of the transcendentalism I oppose: "irrealism about content [which is a form of eliminativism] is not merely implausible, it is incoherent" (p. 158).

A word about the language of this paper. All parties to this dispute agree that beliefs are essentially intentional in that something would not be a belief if it had no truth conditions (section I).<sup>viii</sup> So 'belief' is not an expression that the eliminativist would apply in her theory. However, I have used expressions like 'talk,' 'semantics,' 'reject,' 'mental and linguistic phenomena,' and 'theory,' as if they were ones that an eliminativist could apply. In doing this I am assuming that, at least, it has not already been established that the entities in question are essentially intentional; it has not already been established, for example, that something would not be linguistic unless it involved truth and reference. A transcendentalist might object, claiming that intentionality infects all our talk about mind and language. I see no basis for this extreme essentialism and will continue with my assumption. If the assumption is wrong, each of these expressions would need to be replaced by a nonintentional analogue, thus anticipating part of the alternative way of "talking" that the eliminativist must produce.<sup>ix</sup> The only effect of this on the argument would be to make it longer and more difficult to read.

### III. "Irrealism"

Boghossian's paper begins: "An irrealist conception of a given region of discourse is the view that no real properties answer to the central predicates of the region in question" (p. 157). "Irrealism" in a region entails eliminativism at the metaphysical level: entities do not have properties appropriate to that region.

What then are we to say of the "discourse" - read, sentences - that seem to ascribe these properties? This is a question at the semantic level. Boghossian suggests two possible answers. The "error" thesis is that the sentences are mistaken: the extensions of the predicates that express these properties are empty. The "non-factualist" thesis is that the sentences are not mistaken because they are not factual: the predicates do not express properties. Boghossian uses

'irrealism' to cover these two semantic theses, made necessary by eliminativism.

Irrealism has been popular with talk about morals but it is quite general; it arises wherever we have an eliminativist metaphysics. So it arises for eliminativism about content; for the view that nothing has content. In this case, confusingly, the metaphysical level concerns semantics. The semantic level concerns the ascription of content. The eliminativist has to be an irrealist about these ascriptions. Boghossian's tactic is to saddle the eliminativist with a certain general characterization of irrealism in order to show that her position is incoherent. The characterization does for him what step 2 did for the naive transcendentalist. The intricacies of this characterization make the question-begging less blatant.

I shall consider Boghossian's discussion of error irrealism first and non-factualist irrealism second.

#### **IV. The Error Thesis and Austere Eliminativism**

Boghossian claims that "an error thesis about the sentence 'x is P' is simply the view that, because nothing has the property avowedly denoted by 'P',

(3) 'x is P' is always false." (p. 167)

On the basis of this general characterization, and the idea that having a truth condition is the core of having a content, Boghossian argues that the error thesis about content ascriptions leads to "a contradiction" (pp. 174-175). I shall examine the details of this argument later. First, we should consider its opening claim.

Boghossian rightly assumes that the eliminativist's rejection of truth-conditional content is likely to be accompanied by the adoption of some deflationary notion of truth. What the eliminativist denies is a robust notion of truth, particularly one playing an explanatory rôle in theories of mind and language. So Boghossian's target is an eliminativist who uses deflationary truth. However, deflationary truth is very tricky. It is also, I shall argue, irrelevant. So it will be instructive to set it aside for a moment.

How would Boghossian's argument fare against a more austere eliminativist: one who denied that anything was true or false, in any sense?\* Very badly. For the argument starts by committing the eliminativist to (3) which would be as blatantly question-begging as was step 2 of the naive argument. Of course the austere eliminativist who denies that anything is false will not say that something is false in describing her own position!

If the austere eliminativist subscribes to the error thesis we should, of course, demand from her alternatives to (3). But this demand is hardly additional to one we should make of any austere eliminativist whether she subscribes to the error thesis or not: supply a non-truth-conditional way of talking about language. She owes us this alternative semantics because she rejects truth and hence truth-conditional semantics. If the austere eliminativist had that alternative semantics, it would be easy for her to give an account of the error thesis.

The essence of the error thesis about some sentences is that those sentences are open to criticism for not meeting our evaluative

standards: they have a property that our "best" sentences don't; they are different from, say, the sentences of our most respected sciences. What defect we attribute to the sentences will depend on our semantics. If our semantics is truth-conditional, the defect in the sentences is obviously that they are false, as (3) says. If the semantics is the alternative one that the eliminativist must supply anyway, the defect will be something equally obvious; for example, if the semantics is verificationist, the defect will be that the sentences are falsified or disconfirmed.

Let us use 'B' (think of it as "bad") for the eliminativist's nonintentional analogue of 'false' (like 'disconfirmed'). Then, instead of (3), her account of the general error thesis would be:

(ET) All statements of the form 'x is P' are B.<sup>xi</sup>

In brief, finding an alternative account of the error thesis is the least of the austere eliminativist's problems. It is but a tiny sub-problem to the major problem of finding an alternative semantics.

If the austere eliminativist failed to offer a plausible alternative semantics, including an account of B, it would be appropriate to point out how badly this reflected on the plausibility of her position. That would be just to repeat, once again, my section I remarks about eliminativism. However, it would be quite inappropriate - indeed, it would be positively naive - to "prove" the eliminativist inconsistent by saddling her with (3) as an account of the error thesis. For that account presupposes precisely what the eliminativist is denying: that sentences have truth values.

Austere eliminativism is coherent and would be left totally untouched by Boghossian's argument. That argument is actually aimed not at austere eliminativism but at an eliminativism that allows deflationary truth. One moral of this section is that if Boghossian's argument were successful, the eliminativist should become austere.

Nothing hinges on deflationary truth for the eliminativist. However, the argument is not successful.

#### **V. The Irrelevancy of Deflationary Truth**

Deflationary truth plays a major role in Boghossian's discussion of both the non-factualist thesis and the error thesis. My argument in this section is focused on the error thesis but its conclusion applies to both: deflationary truth has no place in the eliminativist's account of either form of irrealism. So deflationary truth is doubly irrelevant: not only does the eliminativist not need it, as we have just seen, but even if she has it, it plays no role in her irrealism.

If I am right about this irrelevancy then Boghossian's argument against the error thesis fails. In the next section, I shall argue that even if I were wrong about the irrelevancy, the argument would fail.

Boghossian says that "an irrealism about content can only be a deflationism about truth." If we ignore the austere eliminativist, this is quite right. Irrealism about content is a thesis about content ascriptions (the semantic level) made necessary by eliminativism about truth-conditional content (the metaphysical level). The only sort of truth that could be compatible with this eliminativism is

deflationary. On the deflationary view sentences and thoughts do not have any explanatory property truth. The truth term is a linguistic device for "semantic ascent" that is important to the expressive powers of language.<sup>xii</sup> There is no reason why the eliminativist could not accept this deflationary notion. What she denies is that sentences are robustly true or false.

So we should go along with Boghossian in allowing the eliminativist to have deflationary truth. What we cannot go along with is what Boghossian does with deflationary truth.

Deflationary truth cannot be used, by the eliminativist or anyone else, to describe or explain the semantic properties of sentences.<sup>xiii</sup>

Part of what distinguishes deflationary truth from robust truth, is that it is not an explanatory notion in a theory of mind or language.<sup>xiv</sup> Any notion of truth used to describe or explain sentences must be a robust one in a truth-conditional semantics. It follows that Boghossian's argument that the eliminativist is caught in a contradiction starts with an assumption that the eliminativist would never accept: that (3) is a general account of the error thesis. If (3) is construed robustly, she obviously cannot accept it, because robust truth is precisely what she rejects. If (3) is construed deflationarily, it says nothing about the semantic properties of sentences and so, contrary to what Boghossian supposes, it cannot be the error thesis.

Of course, our present eliminativist, unlike the austere eliminativist, could accept (3) simpliciter (and so, as we shall see in the next section, Boghossian's argument can be resurrected); she takes its use of 'false' to mean deflationary false. But taken in this way, (3) is a statement of eliminativism and could not be an account of the error thesis.

Boghossian is seriously astray in his handling of deflationary truth. However, the subject is subtle and difficult, and his error is tempting. So I will say some more in support of my claims.

On the deflationary view, truth and falsity terms are linguistic devices for talking about reality by referring to sentences. On many occasions, they enable abbreviation: instead of repeating a person's statement, 'Chairman Mao is dead,' I can say, 'That is true.' Sometimes, the abbreviation is very convenient: rather than repeating the contents of a whole article adding 'not's, I can say, 'Everything that article claims is false.' Sometimes, the truth term is not just convenient but essential: a person who has forgotten Goldbach's Conjecture can nevertheless agree with it by saying, 'Goldbach's Conjecture is true'; a person who has lost track of all the utterances of the Great Helmsman can nevertheless express his commitment, 'Everything Chairman Mao said was true'. Without the truth term the latter two assertions would require infinite conjunctions. Setting aside some problems with indexicals, to refer to a sentence and say that it is true is just to assert the sentence, whilst acknowledging one's lack of originality.

Though the deflationary use of truth and falsity terms is called "semantic ascent," it is not in any interesting sense semantic:<sup>xv</sup> it is not part of a semantic theory or its application. The terms do

not apply to sentences partly in virtue of contingent properties of sentences determined by facts about language users and their relations to the environment. Though 's is false' is superficially like 's is loud,' it is semantically quite different.

In the light of this, the deflationary falsity term cannot give us any explanatorily significant information about a sentence. In particular, it cannot tell us what the error thesis must tell us: the nature of the defect a sentence suffers from. Saying, as (3) does, that 'x is P' is always false is saying that no x is P. So it is simply a restatement of the metaphysical level doctrine, eliminativism about Ps.

This point deserves emphasis. The error thesis is a form of irrealism, a semantic level doctrine made necessary by eliminativism at the metaphysical level (section III). The thesis is supposed to give us explanatorily significant information about sentences, not simply to restate eliminativism.

The error thesis is like Russell's theory of descriptions in being a substantive thesis about language prompted by the nonexistence of things in the world. That is just the sort of thesis that cannot, on the deflationary view, be expressed by applying 'false' to a sentence. Indeed, if the eliminativist could use 'false' for this explanatory purpose, what would her rejection of truth-conditional content amount to?

The problem with Boghossian's characterization of the error thesis can be brought out as follows. If the content eliminativist were to accept,

(A) (3) is the error thesis,  
she would immediately be caught in an inconsistency. For, she must accept, along with everyone else,

(B) The error thesis about 'x is P' is a substantive semantic thesis additional to the metaphysical thesis that nothing is P.  
And her eliminativism commits her to

(C) 'False' in (3) is to be read as deflationary false.  
Because of (C), (3) is not a substantive semantic thesis additional to the thesis that nothing is P. So, according to (B), it is not the error thesis, which contradicts (A).

Since the eliminativist must reject (3) as an account of the error thesis, she owes us an alternative. Her position is just like that of the austere eliminativist. Her main problem is that of finding a non-truth-conditional semantics. If she had that, it would be easy for her to use this semantics to give an account of the error thesis, along the lines already indicated: (ET). Of course, one might argue that no plausible version of (ET) is likely to be forthcoming. But that is simply to argue, once again, that eliminativism is implausible, which is beside the point of an argument that eliminativism is incoherent.

Boghossian barely contemplates the possibility that the eliminativist would offer a different account of the error thesis based on her own semantics. This exemplifies the question-begging strategy characteristic of the transcendentalist.<sup>xvi</sup>

The qualification, 'barely,' in the last paragraph is made

necessary by Boghossian's penultimate paragraph. He there finds the possibility of non-truth-conditional ways of characterizing irrealism "well-worth exploring" (p. 183). This is related to his occasional backing away from the transcendentalist conclusion that eliminativism about content is incoherent: he adds qualifications that move his conclusion a bit toward a weak one that the eliminativist owes us an alternative account of irrealism. But the possibility of a non-truth-conditional approach to language and mind is not something to be raised as an afterthought and taken account of in qualifications: such an approach is of the essence of eliminativism. Once this is grasped, the weak conclusion can be seen to be an uninteresting corollary of the fact that the eliminativist owes us an alternative semantics. The transcendentalist conclusion is undoubtedly interesting but, I am in the process of arguing, it is false.

In the last section, I argued that an eliminativism without truth is coherent. So if the adoption of deflationary truth were to lead to trouble the eliminativist should not adopt it. In this section, we have seen that when she does adopt it, it can play no role in her account of the error thesis. So, Boghossian's argument that starts from the assumption that deflationary truth (failing robust truth) must play such a role fails. In the next section, we shall see that even if deflationary truth did play a role in the eliminativist's error thesis, Boghossian's argument would fail.

#### **VI. Boghossian's Argument Against the Error Thesis**

A preliminary point. Given the nature of deflationary truth - that it is by definition an expressive device - it is prima facie very unlikely that ceasing to be austere and adopting it could get the eliminativist into any special trouble at all. Adding it to a semantic theory should cause no more trouble than adding it to, say, a biological theory. And so it turns out.

On the basis of his claim that (3) is the eliminativist's account of the error thesis in general, Boghossian claims that the error thesis about content ascriptions in particular is:

"(4) All statements of the form 'S has truth condition p' are false."  
(p. 174)

He combines this with the T-sentence,

'S has truth condition p' is true if and only if S has truth condition p,

to yield, in a straightforward way, the conclusion that the error thesis is caught in "a contradiction" (p. 175).

The argument fails because, as I have argued, (3) is not the eliminativist's account of the error thesis in general. So, (4) is not her account of the error thesis about content ascriptions in particular. The eliminativist would apply the earlier (ET), yielding the following account:

All statements of the form 'S has truth condition p' are B.

However, suppose that I were mistaken and that (3) were the eliminativist's account of the error thesis. Would Boghossian's argument then succeed? That is my first question.

In the last section, I pointed out that, even though the eliminativist rejected (3) as an account of the error thesis, she



should accept it (understood deflationarily) as a general way of stating eliminativism about Ps; it is a harmless example of "semantic ascent." Would Boghossian's argument from (3) succeed if it were resurrected without the claim that (3) was the error thesis? That is my second question.

The answer to both questions is, "No."

An eliminativist who accepted (3), whether as an account of the error thesis or not, would not accept (4) unless it were understood in an odd way. Boghossian's argument that eliminativism is contradictory depends on there being no equivocation in (4); so 'truth' in (4) means a notion of truth that stands opposed to the notion of falsity meant by 'false'; either both are robust or both deflationary.

But, understood in this way, (4) is completely unacceptable to the eliminativist. She rejects the view that sentences have robust truth conditions but she is prepared to allow that they may be deflationary true or false and hence would be prepared to express her rejection,

(4)\* All statements of the form 'S has robust truth-conditions p' are deflationary false.<sup>xvii</sup>

If (3) were the general error thesis, (4)\* would be the error thesis for content ascriptions. It is only if (4) were understood as (4)\* that the eliminativist would accept it any circumstances. Combining a T-sentence with (4)\* will not yield a contradiction. Indeed, combining it with the most appropriate T-sentence,

'S has robust truth conditions p' is deflationary true if and only if S has robust truth conditions p, will simply yield a statement of eliminativism: for no S and for no p does S have robust truth conditions p.

In sum, Boghossian needs (4) to establish his contradiction. The eliminativist would not offer (4) as the error thesis about content ascriptions even if she were mistakenly to accept (3) as the general error thesis. She has no need to assent to (4) at all. She would assent to (4)\* but that yields no contradiction.

Boghossian's own discussion shows that two notions of truth are of interest to the eliminativist: the robust one that she denies and the deflationary one that she is prepared to accept. Yet his argument depends on overlooking this.

In sum, Boghossian's discussion of the error thesis is open to four criticisms. First, no talk of truth is essential to the content eliminativist and so no attempt to convict her of incoherence by saddling her with such talk can succeed. Second, if she does accept deflationary truth, she would not use it in (3) as an account of the error thesis. Third, what she would do is use her own semantics for that account, just as she would if she eschewed truth altogether. Fourth, whatever her attitude to (3), she rejects (4), and so is not caught in a contradiction.

### **VII. Boghossian's Argument Against the Non-Factualist Thesis**

The error thesis is one semantic alternative open to the eliminativist. The other is non-factualism. Boghossian gives Ayer's classical statement of ethical emotivism as an example of non-factualism.

The presence of an ethical symbol in a proposition adds nothing to

its factual content. Thus if I say to someone, "You acted wrongly in stealing that money," I am not stating anything more than if I had simply said, "You stole that money." In adding that this action is wrong I am not making any further statement about it. I am simply evincing my moral disapproval of it. It is as if I had said, "You stole that money," in a peculiar tone of horror, or written it with the addition of some special exclamation marks.<sup>xviii</sup>

Boghossian goes straight on to identify non-factualism about a declarative sentence of the form 'x is P' with the following:

"(1) The claim that the predicate 'P' does not denote a property

and (hence)

(2) The claim that the overall (atomic) declarative sentence in which it appears does not express a truth condition." (p. 161)

Boghossian argues that this account presupposes a robust notion of truth. On the strength of this, he is quickly able, not surprisingly, to convict the non-factualist about content ascriptions of "contradiction" (p. 175). I spare the reader the details because it is the account that does the damage.

Boghossian gives this account without any argument, or even a reference. He calls it "standard" (p. 174). Whose standard? The account is unsuitable for anyone who rejects truth-conditional semantics, as we shall see. So it is unsuitable for Ayer who is a verificationist. More to the point, it is unsuitable for an eliminativist about content. Boghossian is saddling the eliminativist with precisely what she denies.

Non-factualism about certain sentences is the view that those sentences have a different sort of meaning from the standard meaning of "factual" sentences, particularly the sentences of science. That is what is constitutive of non-factualism. Now, it is clear that a person whose standard semantics is truth-conditional will go on to identify non-factualism about sentences with the rejection of truth-conditional semantics for those sentences; he can go along with (1) and (2). But, it should be equally clear that a person who rejects truth-conditional semantics altogether, and has a different standard semantics, will not accept (1) and (2) as an account of non-factualism.

She will offer analogues of them using notions in her standard semantics.<sup>xix</sup> Thus, suppose that we use 'G' (think of it as "good") as her non-truth-conditional analogue of 'true.' Then, her account of non-factualism would be:

(NF) All sentences of the form 'x is P' are not G-conditional.

Consider, for example, Ayer's view of 'You acted wrongly in stealing the money.' He thinks that the meaning of this is part factual and part emotive. The factual part is the meaning of 'You stole the money,' which is to be explained by the standard verificationist semantics that applies to empirical science. The emotive part is the meaning of 'You acted wrongly,' which is rather like the meaning of 'Boo!' and which lacks verification conditions. It must be explained by some other semantics. (1) and (2) have nothing to do

with his non-factualism.<sup>xx</sup>

As I have noted (section V), Boghossian barely contemplates the possibility that an eliminativist would offer a different account of irrealism based on her own semantics. The failure to take this possibility more seriously is particularly striking here, first, because the verificationist setting of Ayer's emotivism suggests the alternative account of non-factualism that I have just sketched; and, second, because Boghossian's own discussion of (1) and (2) almost demands some such alternative.

Boghossian discusses the notions of truth and reference in (1) and (2) at great length (pp. 161-167). He finds (1) and (2) hard to understand if their notions are merely deflationary. Hence, he argues that there is a tension between the deflationary notions and non-factualism (he returns to this theme later; pp. 178-179).<sup>xxi</sup> He concludes that the notions must be robust, and so a contradiction looms for the eliminativist. But, of course, they must be robust if they are to characterize non-factualism. Deflationary truth cannot explain anything about sentences, only robust truth can do that. Deflationary truth is as irrelevant to the account of non-factualism as it was to the account of the error thesis (section V). Attention to deflationary truth obscures the obvious: the eliminativist would never contemplate (1) and (2) as an account of non-factualism.<sup>xxii</sup>

It is thoroughly appropriate that the realist about content should insist that the non-factualist honor her semantic debts. And these debts are considerable. Like any eliminativist, she owes us a non-truth-conditional standard semantics for the sentences of science. But she also owes us another semantics for the allegedly non-factual content ascriptions. Furthermore, she owes us a principled reason for thinking that these two sorts of sentences differ in this way in their semantics. Until these debts are honored, Boghossian is entitled to think that her position is implausible. However, he is not entitled to castigate her as "incoherent" on the basis of a characterization of her position which she obviously would not accept.

The normal eliminativist is, like Ayer, prepared to use deflationary truth. However, nothing hinges on that. If her use misleads people into thinking that she would find (1) and (2) an acceptable account of non-factualism, she should, for the sake of argument, drop the use. Deflationary truth is a red herring.

#### **VIII. Conclusion**

In conclusion, both Boghossian's transcendental arguments for content suffer from three failings. First, they presume that something significant could be established against the eliminativist by committing her to claims involving truth. Truth is not essential to eliminativism. Second, when the arguments bring truth into account, they misuse it. Deflationary truth, the only notion of truth that the eliminativist could allow, is not even a candidate for explaining irrealism. Third, they overlook that the theory that the eliminativist must provide anyway would supply alternative ways of talking about linguistic and mental phenomena. These can then be

used to state irrealism. Finally, the argument against the error thesis has an additional failing to these three it shares with the argument against non-factualism (section VI).<sup>xxiii</sup>

These failings exemplify, in a complicated way, the usual question-begging strategy of transcendental arguments for content: start the argument by applying notions to the eliminativist that are laden with precisely the theory that she thinks should be abandoned; overlook that she would think that notions from a replacement theory were the appropriate ones to apply. Naive forms of this argument saddle her with claims from folk semantics and psychology. Boghossian's forms saddle her with philosophical theses which are, apparently, standard in some circles.

A characterization of irrealism is something we should expect from the eliminativist (cf the uninteresting "weak conclusion" in section V). But it is the least of her problems. She needs a nonintentional theory to describe, predict, and explain what we are all doing and saying every day. If she had that, irrealism would be no problem.

I have defended eliminativism from transcendentalism. I have not defended it otherwise. I do think that it is open to the criticism that it has not offered a plausible alternative way of talking about language and mind. But pointing that out takes only a paragraph. And the most that we should conclude is that eliminativism is implausible not that it is incoherent.<sup>xxiv</sup>

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i.Philosophical Review, 99 (1990): 157-184. All references to Boghossian are to this paper.

ii. Some arguments for some of this credo are to be found in "A Narrow Representational Theory of the Mind," in Rerepresentation: Readings in the Philosophy of Mental Representation, ed. by Stuart Silvers (Dordrecht, Holland: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989), pp. 369-402.

Reprinted in Mind and Cognition: A Reader, ed. by William G. Lycan (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990).

iii. I agree with Boghossian (pp. 170-173) that an eliminativist about mental content must also be an eliminativist about linguistic content.

iv. Saving Belief: A Critique of Physicalism (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 148.

v. Such arguments are common in philosophical conversation. Here is a published argument that comes close:

we cannot accept eliminativism because it claims that no beliefs have content, and that is something that it would be self-refuting to accept. We cannot give up the idea that we have beliefs about certain things, because to reject that idea would also be to have a belief about something. (Philip Gaspar, review of Realism)

and Truth by Michael Devitt, Philosophical Review, 95 (1986), pp. 446-451, p. 447)

Baker's discussion (op. cit., pp. 113-148), insofar as it is offering transcendental arguments, often comes close too. However, much of her discussion can be construed not transcendentially but as arguments for the implausibility of eliminativism. Her discussion exemplifies the unwarranted slide from charging implausibility to charging incoherence; see below.

vi. For some excellent examples of what is called for, see Patricia Kitcher, "In Defense of Intentional Psychology," Journal of Philosophy, 81 (1984), pp. 89-106; "Narrow Taxonomy and Wide Functionalism," Philosophy of Science 52 (1985) pp. 78-97; Tyler Burge, "Individualism and Psychology," Philosophical Review, 95 (1986), pp. 3-45.

vii. As Baker illustrates; op. cit., pp. 113-148.

viii. One way to resist an eliminativist claim is to reject its essentialist presupposition, as John Bigelow has emphasized to me. Thus a realist could resist the claim that there were no beliefs because nothing had truth conditions by denying that having truth conditions was essential to beliefs. This denial cannot be dismissed out of hand if one thinks that the nature of beliefs is a totally empirical question.

ix. Stich's "B-state," which is his analogue of "belief," is an example of what would be called for; From Folk Psychology to Cognitive Science: The Case Against Belief (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1983).

x. Karl Popper practiced something close to this austerity before he became aware of Tarski's work; see Logic of Scientific Discovery (New York: Basic Books, 1968), p. 274. A motivation for austerity would be the suspicion that no scientifically respectable account of truth can be given. Note that the austere eliminativist can still assert any sentence. What she does not do is assert of any sentence that it is true or false.

xi. Suppose someone objected that (3) is the error thesis, by definition. The eliminativist should respond that the error thesis would not then be a version of irrealism that she could use. (ET) would be, however. Since (ET) would not then fall under either of Boghossian's two versions of irrealism, we would need to name another version; "the defect thesis" perhaps. The key point for the eliminativist is that (ET), whether it is called "the error thesis" or not, is an answer to the semantic question that Boghossian rightly thinks eliminativism gives rise to (section III).

xii. For excellent discussions of deflationary truth see Dorothy L. Grover, Joseph L. Camp, and Nuel D. Belnap, "The Prosentential Theory of Truth," Philosophical Studies, 27 (1975), pp. 73-125; Grover, "On Two Deflationary Truth Theories," in Truth and Consequences, eds Michael Dunn and Anil Gupta (Dordrecht, Holland: Kluwer Academic Publishers, in press); Stephen Leeds, "Theories of Truth and Reference," Erkenntnis, 13 (1978), pp. 111-129; Hartry Field, "The Deflationary Conception of Truth," in Fact, Science and Morality: Essays on A. J. Ayer's Language, Truth, and Logic, ed. by Graham MacDonald and Crispin Wright (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), pp. 55-117; Robert Brandom, "Pragmatism, Phenomenalism, and Truth Talk," in Midwest Studies in Philosophy of Language, Volume XII: Realism and Antirealism, eds Peter A. French, Theodore E. Uehling, Jr., and Howard K. Wettstein (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), pp. 75-93; Paul Horwich, Truth (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990). I discuss deflationary truth further in Realism and Truth (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, second edition, in press), sec. 3.4.

Boghossian also mentions (pp. 161-162) the deflationary idea, emphasized by the pragmatists, that to call a sentence true is to praise it. Brandom (ibid) shows how the prosentential theory can explain this.

xiii. I ignore here, and elsewhere, the uninteresting exceptions arising from the fact that deflationary truth can be applied to sentences that are themselves semantically descriptive or explanatory.

xiv. On this see, for example, Brandom, ibid., pp. 91-2.

xv. This ties in with Putnam's nice remark that Tarski's famous article should have been called "The Nonsemantic Conception of Truth"; "A Comparison of Something with Something Else," New Literary History, 17 (1985), pp. 61-79, p. 63.

xvi. The strategy is very persistent. At one point Boghossian notes that one eliminativist, Paul Churchland, calls for "the creation of a new theory of meaning for natural language" (p. 170). Churchland makes this call in the process of pointing out the question-begging nature of a transcendental argument like my naive one; in particular, he points out that assuming a theory of meaning that presupposes intentionality begs the question; "Eliminative Materialism and Propositional Attitudes," Journal of Philosophy, 78 (1981), pp. 67-90, p. 89. Boghossian does not see that this opens up the possibility of different characterizations of irrealism based on the new theory of meaning. Instead he misses Churchland's point entirely, taking the call as an example of an irrealist about mental content rejecting irrealism about linguistic content. Why does he miss the point? Does he, perhaps, take a theory of meaning to be necessarily

truth-conditional (so that to call for one is to be a realist about linguistic content)? If a theory of meaning were such, then Churchland would simply need some name other than 'theory of meaning' for the non-truth-conditional theory of linguistic phenomena that he is calling for; cf. section II on essentialism.

xvii. In a note (p. 165n) Boghossian insists that truth cannot be both robust and deflationary and that the theorist of truth must decide which it is. Presumably, his concern here is with the "ordinary," pre-philosophical, use of 'true.' On the strength of this insistence, he might want to outlaw (4)\* on the ground that it uses 'true' for both notions. This would be a pointless piece of verbal legislation.

Suppose, on the one hand, that the ordinary use of 'true' is deflationary. The realist about content is clearly entitled to introduce a term for the robust notion he is using in his semantics.

There can surely be no interesting objection to his using 'true' for that purpose - even though that will introduce an ambiguity - provided that the robust notion conforms to the "equivalence thesis": all appropriate instances of 's is true if and only if p' hold. And the eliminativist is then also entitled to use 'true' in this robust sense: in rejecting robust truth, she does not reject the realist's word; she denies that anything is robustly true (cf. 'God' and the atheist). Suppose, on the other hand, that the ordinary use of 'true' is robust. The eliminativist is entitled to introduce a term for the notion characterized by the deflationists. And once again there can surely be no interesting objection to using 'true' for this purpose since the notion conforms to the equivalence thesis. So whatever the facts are about the ordinary use of 'true,' (4)\* is in order. Even if these usages were objectionable, new terms could be introduced - say 'r-true' and 'd-true' - and the eliminativist could state her position using those. These verbal matters are beside the substantive question and the eliminativist can remain neutral on them.

xviii. Language, Truth and Logic (New York: Dover Publications, 1952) p. 107.

xix. (1) might be acceptable as a mere manner of speaking: to say that 'P' does not denote a property is simply to say that the standard semantics does not apply to it. Boghossian likes to capture irrealism by talking of properties; see the opening paragraph of section III above for examples. Such talk is often convenient. (I have used it myself in characterizing deflationary truth.) However, it is important to see that serious talk about properties is not essential to eliminativism about content. The eliminativist can remain neutral on the ontological status of properties in general and of any property in particular. What is essential to eliminativism about Fs is the claim that there are no Fs. Thus eliminativism about witches is the view that there are no witches and eliminativism about robust truth is the view that nothing is robustly true. Whether, nevertheless,

there are properties, witchhood and robust truth, is a separate issue that the eliminativist can leave to others. Thanks to Anne Bezuidenhout for discussions that led to this note.

xx. Ayer muddies the water somewhat by denying that ethical statements are true or false (Ibid, pp. 103, 107). Given his view that truth is merely deflationary (Ibid, pp. 87-90), this denial must be a mistake unless he believes that ethical statements should not be asserted. For, on his view, saying that a statement is true is simply asserting it. So saying that it is true does not tell us that it is factual, nor anything else about it.

xxi. He claims that many have noted this tension (p. 163n).

xxii. Boghossian does consider the possibility that the eliminativist might drop (the applications of) either (1) or (2) (pp. 177-178). But this is no time for revisionist tinkering; the eliminativist is calling for a revolution. Both (1) and (2) must go.

xxiii. Boghossian also offers some analogous arguments involving reference instead of truth. They have analogous failings. So too does his attempt to show that deflationary truth itself is incoherent (pp. 180-182).

xxiv. Earlier versions of this paper were delivered at a colloquium, "Language and Thought," at the University of Cincinnati in March 1990; at the annual conference of the Australasian Association of Philosophers in Sydney and at the University of Dunedin in July 1990; at the Victoria University of Wellington in August 1990; at Johns Hopkins University in October 1990; and at Cambridge University in November 1990. The initial stimulus for the paper was in a seminar at the University of Maryland in Spring 1988. I gave a one-sentence dismissal of transcendental arguments for content. Georges Rey, though no great fan of these arguments, felt that they deserved much more. He did his best then, and on several subsequent occasions, to persuade me. The next stimulus was provided by Paul Boghossian's paper, which Rey presented to me for comment. My comments led to further very helpful discussions with Rey. As a result of all this, I decided to give transcendental arguments much more. Rey bears most of the responsibility for this decision. Thanks also to the editors of the Philosophical Review for comments on an earlier version (before rejecting a later one); and to, Alex Byrne, Dorothy Grover, Brian Loar, Michael Slote, and Corliss Swain. The paper was partly written on a Semester Research Award from the Graduate Research Board at the University of Maryland.