

Minimalism and Truth-Value Gaps*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Writing in 1927, Russell said:

There is a tendency to use “truth” with a big T in the grand sense, as something noble and splendid and worthy of adoration. This gets people into a frame of mind in which they become unable to think.¹

Times have changed. Many people nowadays embrace a minimalist view of truth: they think, roughly, that there is no substantial property of truth (certainly nothing noble and splendid), and that the truth predicate is to be explained as a device for disquotation.

If we were to embrace such a minimalist view, what should we make of another claim: the claim that some declarative sentences fail of both truth and falsity? Famously, A. J. Ayer wanted both. He held that the sentence *Stealing money is wrong* ‘expresses no proposition which can be either true or false’; and at the same time he held to a minimalist view of truth.² Recently the tenability of his position has become a matter of some debate.³ On one side are what I shall call the compatibilists: those who hold that one can quite consistently embrace a minimalist theory of truth, whilst isolating a set of meaningful declarative sentences which do not have truth-values. Amongst the compatibilists stand Michael Smith, Frank Jackson, Graham Oppy and myself in an earlier paper.⁴ Opposed to them are the incompatibilists. The incompatibilists hold that the position Ayer embraced is incoherent: that once one accepts a minimalist account of truth, one is forced to say that all the meaningful declarative sentences (meaningful to the degree that there are constraints on when they should and should not be used) possess truth-values. Amongst the incompatibilists stand Paul Boghossian, Paul Horwich, Crispin Wright, Alex Miller and John Divers.⁵

*Although it shares the opening quotation, and has a few common parts, this is a very different paper from (Holton 1993), both in subject matter and conclusions. I thank the many people who have heard it, and others who have read it, for their very helpful comments. Particular thanks to Lloyd Humberstone, Frank Jackson, Rae Langton, Michael Smith, Scott Soames and the referee for *Philosophical Studies*.

¹(Russell 1927) p. 265.

²(Ayer 1936) pp. 107 and 87 ff. respectively.

³The debate is, in fact, not a new one: Stevenson was well aware of exactly this tension, and reacted by abandoning the claim that moral sentences are neither true nor false (Stevenson 1963) pp. 214-20. See also his earlier and more qualified criticism of Ayer (which he later saw as too qualified) in (Stevenson 1944) p. 267. I discuss Stevenson’s position in §8.

⁴(Holton 1993; Jackson, Oppy et al. 1994; Smith 1994).

⁵(Boghossian 1990) pp. 163 ff.; (Horwich 1990) pp. 80-1; (Wright 1992) pp. 27-8; (Divers and Miller 1994). Daniel Stoljar takes a different course: he holds that Ayer’s position was consistent since he only denied truth-values to ethical sentences in the way that he denied them to all sentences, i.e. he denied that they possessed any substantial property of truth (Stoljar 1993) p. 87. This strikes me as implausible. It seems clear that Ayer thought that there was something special about the truth status of ethical sentences that distinguished them from, for instance, sentences of natural science. His claim that they were neither true nor false was not just a way of giving voice to a general minimalism about truth.

My aim here is to find a middle path, a compromise that sees the best in both positions. Or, to put it belligerently, to disagree with everybody. With the incompatibilists I argue that the minimalist cannot consistently hold that there are meaningful declarative sentences that are neither true nor false; but against them I argue that this is not the end of the matter. With the compatibilists I argue that the minimalist can define a notion of truth-aptness such that there can be meaningful declarative sentences that are not truth-apt; but against them I argue that on any half plausible theory (emotivism included) the moral sentences will not be amongst them.

2. MINIMALISM ABOUT TRUTH

As I see it, minimalism about truth has two parts, one negative and one positive. It is tempting to start with an attempt to characterize the negative. Imagine we are dividing the true sentences from the false: putting the true on one side, the false on the other. (Imagine ourselves as gods if you like, so we make no mistakes.) Then a way of trying to capture the negative claim is to say that there is nothing (i.e. no substantial property) which the truths have in common which distinguishes them from the falsehoods. That is: there is no substantial property of truth. However, quite what *substantial* means in this context is, of course, a substantial problem. If we think of properties as classes, then there *will* be a property of truth: the class of true sentences. Even if we don't know which sentences are members of that set, we can define it conditionally: it will contain 'grass is green' if and only if grass is green, and so on. But of course it isn't the existence of such a class that we mean to deny when we say that the true sentences have nothing in common, since in this sense everything has something in common with everything else. We mean rather that we can give no useful, or explanatory, or metaphysically interesting account of what the true sentences have in common that the false ones lack. Moreover, our inability to give such an account isn't because truth is a primitive, indefinable, but interesting property, as Frege held. It's because it isn't an interesting property at all.

All such talk about metaphysically interesting properties is vague, and any attempt to make it precise will have to endorse the details of a particular account of metaphysical significance, details which are bound to be contentious. But we can approach the point from another direction, from the positive instead of the negative. Rather than saying what truth is not, we can say what it is; and if this positive account is minimal enough, then the negative part of the minimalist's claim can be that nothing more is needed to understand the nature of truth.

The positive minimalist account comes in many versions, and there are important differences between them. However, I want what I say here to have as broad an application as possible. So rather than committing myself to one version, I will give an open-ended characterization which can be made precise in different ways. The basic idea is this: an English speaker who is familiar with the truth predicate will understand that whenever they are prepared to say that possums are nocturnal, they should be prepared to say that 'Possums are nocturnal' is true, and vice versa. Similarly, whenever they are prepared to say that it is not the case that possums are nocturnal, they should be prepared to say that 'Possums are nocturnal' is false, and vice versa. We can capture this idea more precisely and more generally by means of the following two metalinguistic

schemas, in which *S* is to be replaced by any declarative sentence of English (I use italics as a device for mentioning sentences):

S is equivalent to '*S* is true.'
Not-S is equivalent to '*S* is false'

Following Dummett, let's call the thesis that all instances of these schemas are true *the equivalence thesis*.⁶ This provides the minimalist's positive thesis: the claim about what can be said about truth. The negative thesis now becomes the claim that there is nothing more to understanding the notion of truth than having the competence described by the equivalence thesis. And since this competence is decidedly minimal, this gives content to the idea that truth is not a substantial property.

I have intentionally left the equivalence thesis imprecise. Firstly, I have not specified how we should understand the inverted commas that occur in the schemas. The traditional way would be to understand them as serving to form the name of the sentence which they enclose; these sentences might in turn be understood either as uninterpreted strings of letters, or as abstract objects that have their meanings essentially fixed.⁷ Alternatively, rather than understanding the quotation marks as serving to name sentences, we could treat them as devices that name the proposition that is expressed by the sentence⁸; or as 'inheritors', creating, together with the truth predicate, an anaphoric term that inherits the sense of the previously mentioned sentence.⁹ I shan't rule any of these readings out.

Secondly, I have not specified how we should construe the equivalence that the schemas speak of. We might hold that the equivalence in question is synonymy, sameness of meaning; that would give us the claim endorsed by Frege and Ramsey. Or we might hold that the equivalence is something weaker: material equivalence, or more plausibly, material equivalence that obtains of necessity. This latter gives us the position endorsed by Paul Horwich.¹⁰ Note, however, that there is an important difference between our formulation of the equivalence thesis and the account of truth given by Horwich. Horwich takes competence with the notion of truth to consist in acceptance of instances of the biconditional schema

(E) <p> is true iff p

where the angle brackets serve to name the proposition expressed by the sentence they surround. In such instances the truth predicate on the left hand side, and

⁶(Dummett 1978) p. xx. Haven't I made the account circular by saying that the instances of the schemas must be *true*? I think not. To be competent with the truth predicate is to have a practical ability. It might be that to describe the ability using finite resources we need to employ the truth predicate itself; but that does not entail that our description is uninformative.

⁷For a recent example of the former approach, see (Jackson, Oppy et al. 1994); for the latter (Soames 1984).

⁸This gives us an account close to that given by Paul Horwich in (Horwich 1990). He uses angle brackets as his quotation devices to indicate that they have this special role.

⁹This gives us approximately the prosentential theory proposed in (Grover, Camp et al. 1975).

¹⁰(Horwich 1990). Horwich formulates his theory using non-necessitated biconditionals; but he thinks that they must hold of necessity if they are to have the entailments that he wants; see p. 22, n. 6. The argument given in that footnote doesn't seem to work, but the general idea is familiar enough: we think that *S* and '*S* is true' are intersubstitutable even when they occur within modal operators. I'm grateful to Paul Horwich for comments here.

the sentence on the right, are *used*. In contrast, instances of our schemas give us metalinguistic claims: instantiations of the schemas merely *mention* the sentences that they contain. This has important consequences. Suppose we instantiate (E) with a paradoxical sentence. Then the biconditional will itself be paradoxical, and hence not something that we want to accept.¹¹ This leads Horwich to formulate restrictions on the instantiations of (E) that we should accept, restrictions designed to exclude paradox. But such restrictions are not easy to formulate; and it is not obvious that simply excluding paradoxical instances will be enough. Mightn't we be reluctant to accept instantiations with sentences that contain non-referring terms, or have other presuppositions that are not met?

I suggest that these difficulties can be avoided by taking our metalinguistic approach instead of using biconditionals.¹² I think that this is clearly so when we understand the equivalence to be equivalence of meaning: then we can say that, for instance, *This sentence is false* means the same as '*This sentence is false*' is true, since both have the same paradoxical meaning; and that, *Atlantis is forty miles across* means the same as '*Atlantis is forty miles across*' is true, since both fail of reference in the same way. But the same point can surely be made even when we claim that each of these pairs contain sentences that are materially equivalent, provided that we do not think that such a claim amounts to endorsing the relevant material biconditional. We must rather understand the claim of material equivalence as consisting in something like the view that either we can accept both sentences, or else we can reject both, or else both are ill-formed in the same way.¹³

Let me conclude this section with a general point. Minimalism as I have presented it is a view about truth. It is not a view about reference, or semantics in general, or the metaphysics of properties; nor is it a view about the right philosophical methodology. It might have consequences for these subjects, but if so these consequences must be demonstrated. I say this because a number of recent thinkers have moved very rapidly from claims about the minimalist view of truth to claims about a 'minimalist' view on some of these other topics. At best this is the result of the over hasty view that minimalism about truth must be driven by a more general motivation—that minimalists are driven by a desire to remain metaphysically uncommitted, for instance, or by a desire to agree on as

¹¹We might wonder if we could accept such instances if the biconditional connective that features in (E) had a truth-table that gave the value 'true' when both sides fail to receive a truth-value. We will develop such a biconditional later in this paper. However, it does not seem that it will be enough to save us from paradox for all instances of (E). See below, n. 31.

¹²A similar approach is taken in (Weir 1996). However, Weir uses introduction and elimination rules in place of the equivalence thesis. Whether or not this amounts to the same thing depends both on the way we understand the notion of equivalence involved; and on the contexts in which the introductions and eliminations are permitted (under negation? under modal operators? under propositional attitude operators?).

¹³I will say two more things about the equivalence thesis. First, note that it only gives an account of the truth predicate when it is predicated directly of sentences or propositions. The use of the truth predicate and cognate constructions in other contexts (such as 'I doubt that much he told me was true'; 'Science aims at the truth') will have to be explained as somehow following from the equivalence thesis. I make no attempt to give such explanations here; for a recent example of what can be done, see (Horwich 1990). Second, the thesis as stated only defines the truth predicate for sentences of English. But we may suppose that it extends to other languages in a straightforward way: for any non-English sentence *S*, and for any English sentence *S** which is a translation of *S*, the English sentence '*S*' is true will be equivalent to *S**.

many received platitudes as possible. At worst it is the result of simple equivocation.¹⁴ We shall return to this matter in §8.

3. GAPPINESS

So far we have spoken only of truth. But what of the claim that there are some sentences that lack truth-values? How should we make that claim precise, and what reasons do we have for believing it? The first difficulty is that it is not sentences on their own, but sentences together with contexts of utterance and circumstances of evaluation, that are either true or false. To keep things manageable, I'll ignore sentences containing indexicals, and I'll assume that the world of utterance is always the actual world. Then we can characterize the relevant thesis as follows:

Gappiness (first version): There are some meaningful declarative English sentences which are neither true nor false.

What reason might we have for embracing this thesis? I introduced the idea by talking of Ayer's emotivist view of moral sentences, and much of the recent debate between compatibilists and incompatibilists has focussed there. But there are other reasons for holding Gappiness; and these avoid a number of complications that beset the discussion of emotivism. So I want to start by discussing these simpler cases, returning to discuss emotivism at the end.¹⁵

I. Reference failure

It is a view dating back at least to Frege that utterances of sentences containing non-referring singular terms lack truth-values. So on this view the sentence

- (1) Atlantis was at least forty miles across

is neither true nor false. The same can be said about sentences containing natural kind terms that lack reference, and perhaps about predicates that fail to denote properties: these, too, arguably fail to get truth-values.

I shan't do anything to defend this view; my interest here is just in whether it is compatible with minimalism.¹⁶ However, it is important to address one worry. A number of thinkers have held that declarative sentences containing non-referring singular terms fail to say anything. This can be relevant to our concerns in two ways. Some hold that such sentences are not meaningful; if this were right, then such sentences would provide no reason for believing Gappiness, couched as it is in terms of meaningful sentences. Others say that such sentences fail to express propositions, or that they do not have interpretations; and so if the

¹⁴I distinguished three distinct senses of 'minimalism' in (Holton 1993), all of which are current in recent literature: theories can be minimally committing, minimally revisionary or minimally complex. Since then, in unpublished work, John A. Burgess has brought the tally up to five.

¹⁵There are two traditional employments for truth-value gaps that I will not discuss in any detail: to treat vagueness and to treat paradox. I avoid the former since it seems to run into a number of problems specific to it; see (Williamson 1994). I will mention paradox from time to time, but only in footnotes.

¹⁶There are some grounds to think that the claim should be weakened, to the claim that non-referring terms only give rise to truth-value gaps when they are the topics of the sentence in question; on this see (Atlas 1988).

equivalence thesis is made precise in terms of propositions or of interpreted sentences, they will fall outside its scope. My feeling about such arguments is that they are wide of the mark: that questions about meaningfulness, and about propositions and interpretations, have their place at the level of sense rather than of reference; and that a term can have sense without reference. However, this is a difficult area, and I do not want to rest my discussion here on such contentious views. So let me now present two further reasons for accepting Gappiness. In both cases there is far less motivation for saying that the sentences involved somehow fail to say anything.

II. Gappy predicates

Gappy predicates are predicates that are not defined for certain arguments. Scott Soames gives the following artificial example:

Smidget: stipulative definition

- (i) any adult human being under three feet in height is a smidget;
- (ii) any adult human being over four feet in height is not a smidget;
- (iii) anything that is not an adult human being is not a smidget.¹⁷

This predicate is not vague; its conditions of application are perfectly precise. But it contains a perfectly precise gap. Confronted with Bill, who is three feet six inches tall, we should accept neither

- (2) Bill is a smidget

nor

- (3) Bill is not a smidget.

Given the equivalence thesis, we should equally refuse to accept both

- (4) 'Bill is a smidget' is true

and

- (5) 'Bill is a smidget' is false.

So arguably *Bill is a smidget* is neither true nor false.¹⁸ Note that compared to cases of reference failure it is much less plausible to say that *Bill is a smidget* is meaningless, or fails to express a proposition. Every part of the sentence is meaningful, and the parts are put together in a coherent way. Had Bill been seven inches shorter it would have been true.

It might be wondered whether there are real examples of gappy predicates. I suspect that many predicates are gappy: that is a natural way of understanding what happens in the case of a category mistake. They become particularly

¹⁷(Soames 1989) p. 584.

¹⁸This is not how Soames would describe the sentence; and nor, ultimately, will I, for reasons which will become clear in §6. Soames insists that the gappiness exhibited by (2) and (3) should be distinguished from the type of gappiness generated by reference failure. He holds that unlike (2) and (3), (1) is clearly not true; however, this is exactly what I will question. I doubt that there is a good reason for treating the two kinds differently.

pertinent to our current concerns with the realization that on Kripke's account (as developed by Soames) the truth predicate itself is gappy: it is simply not defined when it is predicated of sentences that themselves lack truth-values. Such an account is quite in keeping with the minimalist's positive claim about truth: if *S* is equivalent to '*S* is true', then we would expect one to lack a truth-value just in case the other does.

III. Other presuppositional failures

The requirements that the terms in a sentence refer, and that its predicate be defined for its arguments, might be understood as presuppositions of the sentence. But these are not the only kinds of presupposition that are found in natural language. Consider the following sentences:

- (6) What Harry lost was his diary. (Presupposition: Harry lost something.)
- (7) It was Louise who found the diary. (Presupposition: Someone found the diary.)
- (8) Harry regrets that he is so absent minded. (Presupposition: Harry is absent minded.)
- (9) Harry has stopped blaming Louise. (Presupposition: Harry blamed Louise at one time.)
- (10) Even Louise loses her diary sometimes. (Presupposition: Others, besides Louise, lose their diaries; Louise is amongst the least likely to do so.)¹⁹

Each has the presupposition given in parentheses (amongst others). Suppose that the presuppositions are false. What is the truth-value of the sentences? A natural thing to say is that they are neither true nor false. Again it doesn't seem at all plausible that we should hold that they are meaningless, or fail to express propositions. It is precisely because we know what they mean, because we understand which proposition they express, that we realize they fail to have truth-values.

4. THE *PRIMA FACIE* CASE FOR COMPATIBILISM

I have sketched a family of minimalist accounts of truth; and I have sketched some reasons for embracing Gappiness. This should be enough to see how we might want to fit the two together. Let us return to our earlier picture, and imagine ourselves as omniscient gods sorting through the meaningful declarative sentences of English. Suppose we start by considering those that do not contain the truth predicate. Some we want to affirm; others we want to deny; yet others, those that suffer from presuppositional failure of some kind, we want neither to affirm nor deny. Now suppose we predicate the truth predicate of each of these sentences. Given the equivalence thesis, the result of each predication will give us

¹⁹For a fuller list of this kind, see (Soames 1989) p. 571. (10) is highly controversial; many people who accept Gappiness would say that *even* introduces pragmatic rather than semantic presuppositions. They would say that an utterance of (10) whose presupposition wasn't fulfilled would be pragmatically infelicitous, rather than lacking a truth-value.

a sentence which is equivalent to that with which we started. So if we started with a sentence that we affirmed, the resulting sentence will also be something that we will affirm. If we started with a sentence that we denied, the resulting sentence will be one that we will deny. And if we started with a sentence that we neither affirmed nor denied on the grounds that its presuppositions were not fulfilled, the resulting sentence will be one that we neither affirm nor deny since its presuppositions will not be fulfilled either. The process will continue indefinitely, as, at the next level, we predicate truth of sentences that already contain one instance of the truth predicate; and we will need a method for handling sentences in which truth is not predicated directly of sentences, and for compounding sentences of which truth has been predicated with other sentences. But the details here need not concern us. What does concern us is that we can think of the first class as containing the true sentences, the second as containing the false sentences, and the third as containing those sentences which are neither true nor false. We have a sketch of an approach which enables us to be minimalists about truth, whilst accepting Gappiness; in short, we have a sketch of a compatibilist position.²⁰ Moreover, this account has not traded on the details of any particular version of the equivalence thesis. It will work equally well on any of the versions presented at the outset. However, all we have so far is a sketch. We need to see whether the position can stand up to scrutiny. There are two arguments that suggest it cannot. The first, from Paul Boghossian, focuses on minimalism's negative thesis, and can be rebutted fairly easily; the second, which focuses on the positive thesis, will be more troublesome. Let us take them one at a time.

5. BOGHOSSIAN'S ARGUMENT AGAINST COMPATIBILISM

Someone who endorses Gappiness will hold that there is substantial requirement that a sentence needs to meet before it is either true or false. But what is the source of that requirement? Boghossian argues that 'any proposed requirement on candidacy for truth must be grounded in the preferred account of the nature of truth'.²¹ From this he concludes that minimalism's negative claim is inconsistent with Gappiness. For if neither truth nor falsity are substantial properties, how can the property of being either true or false itself be substantial?

My aim in this section is to show that this is not a good argument. The minimalist's negative claim was that nothing more than the competence described by the equivalence thesis is needed for understanding the notion of truth; there is nothing more to be understood. In particular, there is no substantial characterization of the difference between the true and the false. Now I worried that such a formulation was vague. But we do not need to make it precise here, for my complaint is with the validity of Boghossian's argument. However we understand the claim that there is no substantial property of being

²⁰The sketch is inspired by the account of truth given by Kripke in (Kripke 1975). But where Kripke envisages constructing two classes—the true and the false—I envisage constructing three. Note that whilst merely ungrounded sentences can be consistently placed into this third class, paradoxical sentences in general cannot, for fear of generating further paradox (see below, n. 31). So the rule had better not be that the third class will contain all the meaningful declarative sentence that we refuse to affirm or deny; but rather that it will contain all of these where our refusal is explained by presuppositional failure.

²¹(Boghossian 1990) p. 165.

true, and no substantial property of being false, it does not follow that there is no substantial property of being one or the other. To see this, consider a parallel. Suppose we have a machine that has the task of choosing winning lottery tickets. Some (a few) it assigns to the class of winners; the others it assigns to the class of losers. And suppose that it is truly a random chooser; the only explanation of why a given ticket is a member of the one class rather than the other is that the machine has assigned it to that class. So we will have to give a sort of minimalist theory of what it is to be a ticket that the machine chooses as a winner: it is just to be so chosen by the machine. Does this mean that we can say nothing substantial about the features that something must have in order to be either a ticket that the machine chooses as a winner or a ticket that the machine chooses as a loser? Absolutely not. Such a thing will simply be a lottery ticket, and we can give a substantial account of what that is: it is to be something issued in a certain way, under a certain authority, and so on. What we lack is a substantial account of what distinguishes those that the machine assigns to the class of winners from those that it assigns to the set of losers; we do not lack a substantial account of what distinguishes the members of the union of these classes from everything else. If Boghossian's style of argument were correct, we should have to say that 'any proposed candidate for being a ticket must be grounded in the preferred account of being a winning ticket'. But that is simply not true.

Clearly then there is an important difference between having the property of being chosen as a winner, and having the property of being chosen as either a winner or a loser. However, the difference is apt to be missed since the same form of words can be used to describe both properties. Thus suppose our machine is also used to choose winning premium bonds. Now whilst we cannot say what is distinctive about a lottery ticket that is chosen as a *winner* (rather than a loser), we can say what is distinctive about a *lottery ticket* that is chosen as a winner (rather than a premium bond). It is just what is distinctive about lottery tickets. So correspondingly the question 'What is distinctive about a winning lottery ticket?' is ambiguous; on one disambiguation it gets an answer, on the other not.

All this is paralleled in the case of truth. Here too the negative claim about truth doesn't *entail* that no substantial characterization can be made of being either true or false. What was denied by the negative claim was that anything substantial could be said about what distinguished the truths from the falsehoods; this is quite compatible with the claim that something substantial can be said about what distinguishes the truths and falsehoods from everything else. Again the question 'What is distinctive about the truths?' is ambiguous. In asking it, someone could be asking what is special about the truths that distinguishes them from the falsehoods. Alternatively they could be asking what *sort* of things the truths are: what distinguishes them from different sorts of things. The minimalist about truth denies that there is any answer to the first question, but need not deny that there is an answer to the second.

The basic point should be clear: it is possible for there to be a substantial characterization of a class without there being a substantial characterization of either of two proper subsets into which it is partitioned. Perhaps, then, Boghossian simply formulated his argument the wrong way round. Perhaps his thought was not that any requirement on candidacy for truth must be grounded in the preferred account of the nature of truth; but rather that any account of candidacy for truth must be inherited by the account of truth. After all, if an object has a property when considered as a member of a set, it will still have it

when considered as a member of a proper subset of that set. If there is a substantial property of being a lottery ticket, then all of the winning lottery tickets will inherit that property. Similarly, if there is a substantial property of being either true or false, won't all of the true sentences inherit that property? And isn't that incompatible with the minimalist account?

It is not. Certainly someone who was able to get the extension of the truth predicate exactly right would have to know all about presuppositions: they would have to know which sentences have which presuppositions and whether they are fulfilled. But someone who knew the complete extension of the truth predicate would have to know everything. Minimalism about truth is a claim about what has to be known to be competent with the truth predicate, not a claim about what must be grasped to know its extension. According to minimalism a person could be competent with it just in virtue of the competence described by the equivalence thesis. They could have that competence without understanding anything about presupposition. In short: there can be substantial conditions on being true or false, and hence on being true, without it being necessary that a grasp of the truth predicate requires a grasp of such conditions.

6. THE REAL PROBLEM FOR COMPATIBILISM

The real problem for compatibilism thus does not stem from the minimalist's negative claim. Rather it stems from the positive claim: from the equivalence thesis. The point was put very clearly by Dummett in 1959:

A popular account of the meaning of the word 'true' also deriving from Frege, is that 'It is true that P ' has the same sense as the sentence P ... If, as Frege thought, there exist sentences which express propositions but are neither true nor false, then this explanation appears incorrect. Suppose that P contains a singular term which has a sense but no reference: then, according to Frege, P expresses a proposition which has no truth-value. This proposition is therefore not true, and hence the statement 'It is true that P ' will be false. P will therefore not have the same sense as 'It is true that P ', since the latter is false whilst the former is not.²²

The point is as damaging as it is simple. Dummett directs it against those who interpret the equivalence thesis in terms of sameness of meaning; but it is equally damaging against those who interpret it in terms of material equivalence, at least where this is understood as requiring either that both sides are true, or that both are false, or that both are neither—in short that both get the same truth-value. For if S is a sentence that is neither true nor false, then it does not get the same truth-value as ' S is true, which is false.

There is a related worry. Suppose S is a sentence which is neither true nor false. Then it is not the case that S is true, and it is not the case that S is false. So we should accept: *It is not the case that 'S' is true, and it is not the case that 'S' is false.* But then by the equivalence thesis (however that is understood) we should accept the equivalent *It is not the case that S , and it is not the case that not- S ;* in short: *Not- S and not-not- S .* And to accept that is to accept a contradiction. Now it might be objected that once we concede that there are sentences which are

²²(Dummett 1959) p. 4.

neither true nor false, not all contradictions need be false: we might think that if S lacks a truth-value, then so does $\text{not-}S$, so does $\text{not-not-}S$, and hence so does $\text{not-}S$ and $\text{not-not-}S$.²³ But that will be of little comfort, for just as we shouldn't accept false sentences, so we shouldn't accept sentences that lack truth-values either.²⁴

How might the compatibilist respond? One response is to restrict the equivalence thesis. Say that for any declarative sentence S whose presuppositions are met, S and ' S is true' are equivalent; every other declarative sentence is neither true nor false. There are two problems with this response. Firstly, it immediately complicates the equivalence thesis to the point where it is not obviously minimalist after all: to be competent with the truth predicate a speaker has to have a grasp of presuppositional failure, and of whatever else restricts the truth predicate's application. Secondly, and more importantly, it seems to me to misdescribe our use of the truth predicate. Suppose one person says *Atlantis is more than forty miles across*, and another says *That's true*. Once we know that Atlantis doesn't exist, we intuitively think that they have both made mistakes. But we don't think that they have made different sorts of mistakes, such that the first speaker's sentence is neither true nor false, whereas the second's is false. We think that they have both said the same thing, and both of their claims suffer from the same presuppositional failure. The same considerations apply to our use of the truth operator. We don't think that someone who says *It's true that Chris has stopped doing philosophy* says something different from the person who just says *Chris has stopped doing philosophy*, so that if Chris had never started doing philosophy the first person would have said something false whereas the second would not. Such considerations about ordinary usage should loom large for the minimalist. It is easy to see how someone who proposed a substantial account of truth might argue that ordinary usage does not deserve much respect. If truth consisted in some kind of substantial correspondence relation, then there might well be cases in which such a relation fails to obtain for unobvious reasons. Failing to realize this, ordinary speakers might well be happy to employ the truth predicate; and the enlightened theorist can simply correct their mistake. But I doubt that the minimalist is in a position to make any similar revision to ordinary usage. If the truth predicate simply works as a device of disquotation, in the way explained by the equivalence thesis, then surely it works as such a device wherever ordinary speakers employ it to do so. They don't employ it on sentences in the interrogative or imperative moods, so it doesn't work on such sentences; such applications are simply ungrammatical. But ordinary speakers do appear to employ the truth predicate on *all* sentences in the declarative mood; the minimalist has no resources to restrict its application more any tightly.²⁵

²³Whether or not we accept this depends on whether we accept three-valued truth-tables or else a supervaluational approach; on the latter it will still be false. I work here with three-valued truth-tables. A supervaluationalist who identifies truth with supertruth and who accepts Gappiness will not accept the equivalence thesis. Supervaluationalists accept all instances of the schema S or $\text{not-}S$. But by the equivalence thesis this is equivalent to ' S is true or ' S is false'. But to accept all instances of that schema is to reject Gappiness. For discussion see (Williamson 1994) pp. 162-4, and the references given there.

²⁴An argument along these lines is given in (Heidelberger 1968), and more recently in (Williamson 1994) pp. 187 ff. However, both of these writers use Tarski biconditionals rather than the equivalence thesis.

²⁵Note that this is not to fall foul of the methodological strictures that I introduced at the end of §2. The minimalist about truth is not precluded from revising our use of the truth predicate

The alternative response to Dummett's problem, which I favour, is this: refrain from saying that the problematic sentences are true; and refrain from saying that they are false. And, moreover, refrain from saying that they are not true, and refrain from saying that they are not false. This brings us into territory that is familiar from intuitionism. Intuitionists will not want to say that an undecidable mathematical sentence is true, nor that it is false. But neither will they want to say that it is neither true nor false, for, even in intuitionistic logic, that is equivalent to saying that it is both not true and not not true, and that is a contradiction. However, although the territory is familiar, our motivation is rather different to that of the intuitionists, and can be shared by those unmoved by their concerns. The equivalence thesis tells us that S and ' S is true' are equivalent. But then if there is something that can go wrong with S that renders it both unfit to be asserted and unfit to be denied, we should think that exactly the same fate will befall ' S is true' and ' S is false'. We most certainly shouldn't think that we can describe the defective status of S by saying that it is neither true nor false, since that just will be to say *not- S and not-not - S* . In short, switching to talk of truth and falsity isn't a way of saying something about a sentence that cannot be said by using the sentence itself; the equivalence thesis guarantees that.

What is the effect of these considerations on the compatibilist claim? The first point is this: we cannot say of any particular meaningful declarative sentence that it is neither true nor false. Nor, I take it, can we say that some declarative sentences are neither true nor false; for that would only be true if there were some cases of sentences that were neither, and we are precluded from saying that there are. So we are prevented from endorsing Gappiness as we have formulated it. Can we perhaps at least say that not every declarative sentence is either true or false? That depends on the logic we are using. In classical logic that claim is equivalent to the claim that some sentences are not either true or false. But we have already departed from classical logic in that we are not prepared to assert bivalence: we are not prepared to assert that every meaningful declarative sentence is either true or false. If the logic we have embraced is intuitionistic, then we can say that not every declarative sentence is either true or false, since in intuitionistic logic that does not imply the claim that some declarative sentences are neither true nor false.

However, this is still unsatisfying. Firstly, it is a long step from refusing to assert excluded middle to accepting intuitionistic logic; it is not at all obvious that we are justified in taking it just on the basis of considerations about truth-value gaps (unlike the intuitionist, we have no quarrel with double negation elimination, for instance, but to accept that is to collapse intuitionistic logic back into classical logic). Secondly, even if we do embrace intuitionistic logic, there is still much that we cannot say that we want to say. After all, we can identify the problematic sentences: they are those containing non-referring singular terms and the like. But we cannot *deny* that they are either true or false; we simply have to *refrain from saying* that they are. Is there nothing interesting that we can say about them? Perhaps there is, but as we shall see, the way is rather tangled.

because of a general prohibition on revising the claims of common sense. Rather it is because once a disquotational account of truth is embraced, there is no theoretical reason for restricting the application of the truth predicate. In §8 I discuss some apparent counter-examples to the thesis that the truth predicate can always be predicated of declarative sentences.

7. THREE-VALUED CONDITIONALS AND THE FAILURE OF CONTRAPOSITION

Broadly following some recent usage, let us say that a meaningful declarative sentence whose presuppositions are met (and which isn't flawed in any other way which would prevent us from saying that it is true or that it is false) is *truth-apt*.²⁶ Then let us reformulate Gappiness as follows:

Gappiness (second version): There are some meaningful declarative English sentences which are not truth-apt.

Does this give us a version of Gappiness that we can accept? The hope is this: by talking in terms of truth-aptitude rather than truth or falsity, we can really talk *about* the problem sentences. When we deny that a sentence is truth-apt, we are not thereby involved in somehow asserting that sentence. Unfortunately there remains a problem. We know that those sentences that are either true or false are truth-apt; and we know moreover that those are the only sentences that are. So we surely should be able to accept all instantiations of the following biconditional:

(11) 'S' is truth-apt if and only if 'S' is either true or false

This biconditional can be broken down into two conditional schemas; and then by contraposition, one of these will entail the following schema:

(12) If 'S' is not truth-apt, then it is not the case that 'S' is true or false

But then in a case where we instantiate with a sentence that is not truth-apt, we should, by *modus ponens*, be able to detach the consequent. And that leaves us with the same contradictory result as before: we will be forced to say that a certain sentence is neither true nor false.

We could simply refuse to accept all instances of (11). But that leaves us as badly off as before. We wanted to say that some sentences were neither true nor false; and when we found that we could not say that we retreated to the claim that some were not truth-apt. But having done that, we seem to be precluded from saying that truth-aptitude is related to truth in the obvious way. Once again we seem to be prevented from saying something that seems obviously right. So what other way is open to us? The only response that I can see is to deny contraposition for the conditionals from which (11) is constructed. Now this might seem an absurdly radical move to make in an effort to defend compatibilism. If combining Gappiness with minimalism requires us to give up

²⁶I say that this follows some recent usage. I'm not sure whether this was how Wright intended the notion to be understood when he introduced it in (Wright 1992); as some evidence that he did, see (Wright 1994) pp. 327-30 where Wright is sympathetic to the idea that sentences containing non-referring terms merely aspire to assertoric content, and hence, presumably, merely aspire to truth-aptitude. A natural weakening of the notion given here holds that a truth-apt sentence is one that is true or false with respect to *some* context and circumstance (Holton 1993); (Blackburn 1994) p. 381. Others use the term with even wider scope. (Jackson, Oppy et al. 1994) use it to describe sentences which are 'in the business of being true or false'; by which I understand them to mean something like 'could be reasonably believed to be true or false by someone who fully understood how the sentence worked'. Weir uses the term for those sentences of which the truth predicate may be meaningfully predicated; see (Weir 1996) p. 15.

contraposition, then shouldn't those who are committed to Gappiness simply give up on minimalism? I think that things are not quite so simple. There are independent reasons for denying contraposition for conditionals like those involved in (11), reasons which come simply from Gappiness, and are not dictated by the requirements of minimalism. So the advocate of Gappiness should already be worried about contraposition; the worry is not removed by giving up on minimalism.

As a preliminary, let's draw out some consequences of (11) to give us something that will be easier to work with. I said that the notion of truth-aptitude was to be analyzed in terms of the meeting of presuppositions and the like. Now I don't propose to offer a full account of truth-aptitude, since I don't know what would be involved: that would involve a full account of presuppositional failure, and perhaps of other problems that a sentence can face. But let us say that part of what is required for an atomic sentence to be truth-apt is for its singular terms to have reference. Then if we accept all instances of (11), we will accept all instances of the following conditional schema, where 'a' is to be replaced with a term, and 'F' with a predicate:

(13) If 'Fa' is true or false, then 'a' has a reference.

If we contrapose, giving us

(14) If 'a' doesn't have a reference, then 'Fa' is neither true nor false

then instantiate (14) with a term that does not refer, and finally detach the consequent, we get our problem: the claim that a certain sentence is neither true nor false.

Let us see now how a parallel problem arises on the supposition that referential failure gives rise to truth-value gaps, quite independently of minimalism. Suppose someone puts to us the claim that Frank is brave. We don't know whether or not Frank exists; but we do know that if Frank is brave, then he exists; and if he exists, then 'Frank' refers. Similarly, since we are supposing that referential failure gives rise to truth-value gaps, we know that if Frank isn't brave, then again he exists, and 'Frank' refers. And the same considerations would apply to any singular claim we considered. So we should be able to accept all instances of the schema:

(15) If Fa or not-Fa, then 'a' has a reference.

Now we get the same problem as before. Contraposition gives us

(16) If 'a' doesn't have a reference, then neither Fa, nor not-Fa

and once again, if we have a term that does not refer we can instantiate and detach the consequent, and we are landed in contradiction.

None of this is particularly surprising, given the equivalence thesis. For given that thesis, (15) is equivalent to (13). However, we did not derive (15) from (13) by means of the equivalence thesis; we used other considerations. Acceptance of the instances of (15) is thus independent of minimalism. Yet by contraposition, (15) leads to contradiction. So blocking contraposition is not simply needed to

enable us to reconcile minimalism with Gappiness; it is needed if we are to maintain Gappiness alone.²⁷

How do we block contraposition? The contradictions come because we want to accept conditionals which have non-truth-apt antecedents and false consequents; but we do not want to accept their contrapositives, which have true antecedents and non-truth-apt consequents. The Lukasiewicz table would not allow us to accept either type of conditional, assigning both the value ‘non-truth-apt’ (here represented ‘-’):

if, then	T	-	F
T	T	-	F
-	T	T	-
F	T	T	T

So let us minimally change the table to accord with our wishes, so that a conditional with a true antecedent and a non-truth-apt consequent comes out as true. That gives us:

if, then	T	-	F
T	T	-	F
-	T	T	T
F	T	T	T

The connective given by this table is not so very strange.²⁸ From the two-valued material conditional we are used to the idea that when the antecedent is true, the conditional has the value of the consequent; otherwise the conditional is true. In effect, the two-valued conditional only commits us if the antecedent is true. This truth-table generalizes that idea to three values.²⁹ The resulting connective supports *modus ponens* and conditional proof; it is surely a conditional. Indeed it is, I think, intuitively no stranger than the Lukasiewicz conditional. But it does not contrapose, nor support *modus tollens* (we assume that the Lukasiewicz table for ‘not’ remains unchanged, so that the negation of a non-truth-apt sentence is itself non-truth-apt). And we have an intuitive justification of that fact: since conditionals only commit us when the antecedent is true, we can’t move from the claim that the consequent is false to the claim that the antecedent must also be false. For the antecedent might not be truth-apt.

If we accept this table as the right account of the conditional in (13), then (14) does not follow. Similarly, (16) no longer follows from (15). The contradictions that have worried us are avoided. Moreover, combining the conditional with the Lukasiewicz table for conjunction gives us the following table for the biconditional:

²⁷I have put the point in terms of reference failure, but I could, of course, have put it in terms of whatever other presuppositional factors are held to prevent truth-aptitude.

²⁸However, it does not seem to have been much discussed. The only mention of it I know, brought to my attention by Lloyd Humberstone, is as the functor C in (Sobocinski 1964) p. 147.

²⁹As a result it also brings with it analogues to the ‘paradoxes’ of the material conditional. In particular, any conditional with a non-truth-apt antecedent will be true; for example: If Atlantis is forty miles across, then ‘Atlantis’ does not refer. I return to this matter below.

iff	T	-	F
T	T	-	F
-	-	T	T
F	F	T	T

We can now use this to understand the biconditional linking truth and falsity with truth-aptitude, namely

(11) 'S' is truth-apt if and only if 'S' is either true or false³⁰

Suppose that we instantiate (11) with a sentence that is truth-apt. Then the left hand side will be true, the right hand side will also be true, and so the whole biconditional will be true. The more interesting case arises when we instantiate (11) with a sentence that is not truth apt. Then the left hand side will be false; and following the Lukasiewicz table for disjunction, the right hand side will not be truth-apt. So, once again the whole biconditional will be true. In short, once we accept this as the right account of the conditional, we can accept each instance of (11), which makes compatibilism a much more comfortable position. And the move is not *ad hoc*: we have a reason for accepting that this is the right account of the conditional which is quite independent of minimalism.³¹

Are there costs? Indeed. Firstly the new understanding of the conditional will have implications for our logic. Thus, for instance, the classical contradiction p iff not- p is sometimes true (when both get the value 'non-truth-apt'); but that is so in many three-valued systems, including that of Lukasiewicz. In addition, we can no longer guarantee that substituting one side of a true biconditional for the other will preserve truth value; but again that is true of many other three valued systems, including that of Lukasiewicz. What is much more worrying is the way that this conditional seems to misdescribe the behaviour of the conditional in ordinary English. It is pretty much agreed, in the large literature on the subject, that conditionals inherit the presuppositions of their antecedents.³² Thus the sentence

(17) If Harry has stopped blaming Louise, they'll be at the party

seems to inherit the presupposition that Harry has been blaming Louise. On the account I have offered, a conditional with a non-truth-apt antecedent (i.e. with an antecedent whose presuppositions are not met) will be true. If it is true, then it will be truth-apt. But then, since I have been assuming that a sentence whose presuppositions are not met is not truth-apt, such a conditional cannot have

³⁰Can we think of (11) as defining truth-aptitude? I don't think so. The difficulty comes from the fact that the non-contraposing biconditional does not allow us to substitute under negation. So if all we knew about truth-aptitude was given by (11), we would have no understanding of what it would be for something to fail to be truth-apt. We should instead think that our understanding of truth-aptitude stems from our understanding of presuppositional failures.

³¹Suppose we use this truth-table to understand the Tarski biconditional schema (E). Can we now accept the sentences that result from instantiating with paradoxical sentences? No. Paradox comes immediately when we instantiate with the strengthened liar:

(SL) This sentence is either false or not truth-apt.

Moreover, (SL) shows us why we should not think that our notion of truth-aptitude provides us with any solution to the liar.

³²Quite what becomes of the presuppositions of the consequents is a matter of some dispute, into which we shall not enter. I hope that a similar treatment to that suggested here for the antecedent can be applied to the consequent.

inherited the presuppositions of its antecedent, which, by hypothesis, are not met.

It seems to me that this is a serious problem. One response is to withdraw any claim that the three-valued conditional we have identified corresponds to the *if ... then* of ordinary English. Think of it instead as a technical notion introduced to do some philosophical work, in particular, to show the link between truth and truth-aptitude. That is certainly a possible move; but it is, at the least, rather disappointing. Indeed it is more than just disappointing. Our aim had been to justify the intuitive claim that a sentence is truth-apt if and only if it is either true or false. We haven't succeeded in doing that if our alleged justification turns out to require a special sense of *if*. Is there any way we can do without this special sense?

The problem we face may be thought of as a three-valued version of one of the familiar paradoxes of the two-valued material conditional. Notoriously, a two-valued material conditional with a false antecedent will be true; yet there is a widespread intuition that certain *if then* sentences with false antecedents are false. Our three-valued material conditional shares these problems. But in addition, it comes out as true when it has a non-truth-apt antecedent; yet there is a widespread intuition that certain *if then* sentences with non-truth-apt antecedents will be non-truth-apt. So we might ask whether the various strategies that have been developed to explain away the paradoxes of the two-valued material conditional might be applied to the three-valued case. A well-known approach here is that pioneered by Grice.³³ Grice's idea was that the apparently false *if then* sentences with false antecedents are in fact true. Their fault lies not in being false, but in being pragmatically misleading. They violate a maxim of informativeness: if you know that the antecedent is false, it would be more informative to say so, rather than to assert the weaker conditional which it entails. Could it be that conditionals with non-truth-apt antecedents are in fact true, but pragmatically misleading, in the sense that if one knows the antecedent is not truth-apt, one should say so, rather than asserting the conditional? One indication that they might be is that it does seem possible to cancel the misleading implicatures. Consider

- (18) Well of course if Harry has stopped blaming Louise, they'll be at the party. But what kind of an ogre do you think he is? He would never have blamed her for such a thing. Stop worrying. They're bound to be at the party.

I'm not sure, but that seems acceptable to me. Perhaps then a similar defence to Grice's could be offered here.³⁴ However, if we were to offer such a defence, we

³³ (Grice 1989) Ch. 2.

³⁴ Frank Jackson has pointed out that Grice's account cannot give the whole story (Jackson 1987). Sometimes it is simply not possible to cancel the implicatures. Thus it doesn't seem that one can say

If Harry and Louise were killed this morning they'll be at the party, since I'm sure they weren't killed this morning.

Jackson's suggestion is that conditionals also bring with them an (uncancellable) conventional implicature that the conditional probability of the consequent, given the antecedent, is high. Such a thesis could be incorporated into the account suggested here. It would explain the apparent impossibility of making

If Harry has stopped blaming Louise, then he never blamed Louise

would need to be very careful over how to phrase it. It won't do to say that sentences like (17) are true but unassertible; since by the equivalence thesis (at least in its stronger versions), the claim that (17) is true is equivalent to the claim made by (17) itself, and so should be equally unassertible.³⁵ It would be better, I think, simply to say that (17) is misleading, as is the sentence *(17) is true*. The point is that misleading sentences can sometimes be highly assertible, provided that their misleading features are cancelled.³⁶

Let me briefly review where we have been. I said in the last section that one possibility is just to keep quiet about the problem sentences whose presuppositions are not fulfilled. Do not say they are not true; do not say they are not false; simply shun them. This section has been devoted to an examination of whether there is an alternative to this policy, by introducing a notion of truth-aptitude. I think I have shown that there is an alternative, but at some price. I leave to the reader the question of whether that price is worth paying.³⁷

8. APPLICATION TO EMOTIVISM

I have argued for a version of compatibilism: minimalism about truth does not entail that every declarative sentence is truth-apt. Let us finally turn to ask whether Ayer's position, mentioned at the outset, is coherent. Can one be a minimalist about truth whilst denying, for emotivist reasons, that moral sentences are truth-apt? Michael Smith holds that one can. He argues that an emotivist-minimalist should accept the following argument:

- (a) Truth-apt sentences, when uttered sincerely, make assertions;
- (b) Assertions are expressions of beliefs;
- (c) Moral sentences, uttered sincerely, do not express beliefs, since they have the wrong direction of fit;

Therefore: (d) Moral sentences are not truth-apt.³⁸

What should we make of Smith's argument? In the first place, it is not obvious to me why the emotivist-minimalist should accept it. (c) is the statement of emotivism; let us accept it for now. Smith's contention is that (a) and (b) are platitudes, and so should be accepted by everyone. But what is a platitude? We might think that platitudes are statements which are so obviously analytic that anyone who tried to deny them would simply give evidence that they didn't understand what they were talking about (or else that they were illicitly changing the subject). Understood in this way it seems to me that neither (a) nor (b) are platitudes; both make substantial philosophical claims which can quite coherently be questioned. Alternatively, we might think of platitudes as

acceptable by cancelling any misleading implicatures.

³⁵See (Humberstone 1991) p. 231.

³⁶A basically Gricean account of the presuppositions of conditional sentences was given in (Gazdar 1979); for a recent development see (Kay 1992).

³⁷Note that given the notion of truth-aptitude, we do have the resources to introduce a somewhat less minimal truth predicate i.e. that defined by 'truth-apt and true'. The claim made earlier is simply that this is not the truth predicate of ordinary English.

³⁸(Smith 1994); the same argument is given in (Jackson, Oppy et al. 1994) pp. 293-5.

commonly received opinions. In this sense perhaps (a) and (b) are platitudes; but why should minimalists about truth thereby be obliged to accept them? Smith's idea seems to be that minimalism is a common-ground approach: an approach which is concerned to accept as many platitudes as possible.³⁹ However, this is simply to equivocate on the term *minimalist*. Minimalists about truth are people who accept the thesis about truth that was presented in §2. Whether or not they accept this common-ground methodology is another matter. Perhaps some do; others (notably Ayer) clearly do not. A minimalist's acceptance of (a) and (b) cannot be seen to follow from general methodological considerations. What we need to know is whether (a), (b) and (c) are consistent with minimalism about truth.

It strikes me that they are not; emotivist-minimalists who continue asserting moral sentences cannot consistently embrace (a), (b) and (c). The argument is as follows. Suppose that they say *Eating meat is wrong*. Then by the minimalist theory, that is equivalent to saying '*Eating meat is wrong*' is true. But that sentence entails that *Eating meat is wrong* is true or false, which in turn entails that *Eating meat is wrong* is truth-apt. So by saying *Eating meat is wrong*, and holding the minimalist theory, they are committed to holding that *Eating meat is wrong* is truth-apt.

How could the emotivist-minimalist who wanted to embrace (a), (b) and (c) get out of the difficulty? I see four possibilities, none of which are very attractive.

(i) They might embrace an extreme form of moral scepticism, and give up uttering moral sentences altogether. This would be to assimilate moral sentences to the other cases of presuppositional failure that we have looked at: once you realize that a presupposition is not met, you do not sincerely assert the sentence. However, this is a peculiarly radical response to a meta-ethical worry, and not obviously one that is required by (or even consistent with) emotivism.

(ii) The emotivist-minimalist might deny that moral sentences are meaningful. If *Eating meat is wrong* is not meaningful, then nor is '*Eating meat is wrong*' is true. But then when you utter the latter sentence you have not strictly speaking *said* anything, and so you have not committed yourself to *Eating meat is wrong* being truth-apt. There are passages in *Language, Truth and Logic* in which Ayer does seem to embrace an account along these lines: there the view seems to be that since moral sentences fail the verification criterion they are strictly speaking meaningless. However, emotivism is surely independent of positivism—Ayer said as much in his introduction to the second edition of the work⁴⁰—and the claim that moral sentences are strictly meaningless is a extremely implausible one, which Ayer himself clearly rejected in his later writings.⁴¹

(iii) The emotivist-minimalist might restrict the instances of the equivalence thesis to the non-moral sentences. They might say that *S* is equivalent to '*S*' is true just in case *S* is a non-moral (or, more generally, a belief expressing)

³⁹A number of participants on both sides of the compatibilism debate appear to share this view. See for instance (Divers and Miller 1994) p. 14, and (Smith 1994) p. 24. Divers and Miller cite (Jackson 1994) p. 164 as the source of the idea that the minimalist theory of truth is a 'common ground' approach: one which seeks to accommodate the received platitudes. But in fact it is Wright's account of truth that Jackson describes as a common ground approach; he expresses scepticism that it is properly characterized as 'minimalist'.

⁴⁰(Ayer 1936) p. 20.

⁴¹For a discussion of Ayer's later ethical views see (Wiggins 1992). Stevenson was always careful to distinguish the claim that some ethical sentences lacked *descriptive* meaning from the claim that they were meaningless. See (Stevenson, 1944), Ch. 3.

sentence; otherwise they are not equivalent, and presumably the instance of '*S* is true' will be either false, or else not truth-apt. The trouble with this approach is the same as that mentioned earlier when such a strategy was canvassed: it just doesn't seem to describe our use of the truth predicate adequately. We do pre-theoretically believe that *Eating meat is wrong* is equivalent to '*Eating meat is wrong*' is true. Now this wouldn't be an overwhelming consideration on its own. The important point is that, given the minimalist account of the role of the truth predicate, we do not have theoretical reason for denying this pre-theoretical belief. It would, moreover, be very strange to reject this bit of ordinary usage on the grounds that (a) and (b) are common sense platitudes, and so should not be rejected. As Stevenson wrote:

It is idle then to say that ethical judgements are neither true nor false. Such a view would represent not an effort to preserve our normal habits of speech, but rather to reform them. And although it must be granted that our habits of speech, on occasion, are in need of reform, this particular reform shows every sign of being so inconvenient that its advantages (if any) would fail to justify it.⁴²

I see one way in which the emotivist-minimalist might try to provide a theoretical reason for restricting the equivalence schema. The idea is this: we do antecedently restrict the equivalence so that it does not apply to declarative sentences used as performatives or imperatives. We do not think that *I promise to come* and '*I promise to come*' is true are equivalent; nor are *You will shut the door* and '*You will shut the door*' is true. But if that is right, then all the emotivist-minimalist has to do is to claim that moral sentences fall into the same class as performatives and imperatives.⁴³

This argument can be understood in two different ways. Firstly we might understand it as claiming that declarative sentences used as performatives or imperatives are never true nor false. So if *I promise to help* is neither true nor false, it cannot be equivalent to '*I promise to help*' is true, which is false. But if this is the argument, I think we should reject its premise. Despite the authority of Austin, there are overwhelming reasons for thinking that declarative sentences used as performatives can be true or false.⁴⁴

Alternatively the argument might be understood as claiming that *I promise to help* and '*I promise to help*' is true, have different illocutionary force; the former, but not the latter can be used to make a promise. I think that this is true; but all that that shows is that the equivalence of which the equivalence thesis speaks is not equivalence of illocutionary force. And that is not surprising. Illocutionary force is very sensitive to the form of words used. Legal speech acts often require the use of particular phrases to be effective.

Do these considerations provide the emotivist-minimalist with any reason for removing moral sentences from the scope of the equivalence thesis? I suppose that if they thought (1) that moral sentences have purely illocutionary meaning (like *Hello*); and (2) that this meaning is not preserved when the truth predicate is affixed to them; then they might conclude that they are neither true nor false.

⁴² (Stevenson 1963) pp. 215-6.

⁴³The force of this argument was pressed upon me by Denis Robinson and Bill Lycan.

⁴⁴See especially (Lewis 1970) pp. 222-6 and (Heal 1974).

But it seems to me that (2) is clearly false. *'Eating meat is wrong' is true* has just the same illocutionary force as *Eating meat is wrong*.

(iv) Finally the emotivist-minimalist might claim that the truth predicate is ambiguous. They might say that when predicated of moral sentences, 'is true' gets another sense, or is used metaphorically; and that the truth-apt sentences are just sentences of which truth or falsity are properly predicated in the original sense, and not this secondary sense.⁴⁵ However, at this point my grip on what is being claimed starts to slip. What is the sense of the truth predicate for moral sentence supposed to be? Presumably its role will be entirely explained by an equivalence thesis that is exactly analogous to that given for the non-moral truth predicate. But then in what sense is it really a different predicate? Once we accept minimalism about truth, there is nothing to distinguish the two predicates. Again Stevenson saw the connections clearly:

One may at first suspect ... that ethical judgements are true or false only in atypical senses of the terms—in senses that have little or nothing to do with those that are appropriate to factual contexts. But I am myself inclined to doubt that. I am inclined with Frank Ramsey to think that "true" and "false," even in factual contexts, have a far simpler function than philosophers have usually supposed [i.e. they have the function given to them given by the equivalence thesis].⁴⁶

The general moral is this. We have provided a way of understanding Gappiness, but it only works to discriminate against declarative sentences which, once we realize their defective status, we are not prepared to use. This is not the attitude that emotivists typically take to moral sentences. So the minimalist-emotivist will need to give up at least one of (a), (b) and (c). Which one? One possibility is to give up (c); then emotivists would need to accept a notion of belief which does not require a distinctive direction of fit. I would suggest giving up (b): it seems to me that it is a distinctively emotivist position to claim that what we thought to be moral *beliefs* are not really beliefs at all, but attitudes of some other kind. This, I think, was Stevenson's conclusion.⁴⁷ Alternatively they might reasonably give up (a). However, this is not the place to pursue these questions.⁴⁸

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⁴⁵You could even try to stick the two senses back together by treating 'is true' as one of Kaplan's shifty operators; see (Kaplan 1986) at p. 237. Then 'is true' would be treated as a single predicate, whose interpretation in any given instance would be determined by the nature of the sentence it is predicated of.

⁴⁶(Stevenson 1963) p. 219.

⁴⁷ (Stevenson 1963) pp. 205-7. Of course a moral sentence can express some beliefs along the way—*You shouldn't have lied* expresses my belief that you lied—as Stevenson notes.

⁴⁸For a discussion see (O'Leary-Hawthorn and Price 1996).

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