Abstract:

I examine and reject Alston’s minimalist realism. According to minimalist realism, anyone who grasps the “conceptual necessity” of any arbitrary instance of the schema “The proposition that p is true if and only if p” will thereby have acquired a realist conception of truth. After clarifying the sense in which Alston’s theory is ‘minimal’, I argue that, given plausible constraints on a realist theory of truth, grasping the necessity of any instance of the T-schema is far from sufficient to qualify as an alethic realist. I conclude with a discussion of the motivations behind and desirability of a minimalist theory of truth.

Recently, certain influential realists have maintained that a minimal account of truth constitutes, in itself, a realist conception of truth. William Alston, who has offered the most thorough defense of this thesis, maintains that a person who grasps that any arbitrary substitution instance of his T-schema

(T) The proposition that p is true iff p

is “conceptually, analytically true” will thereby possess a realist conception of truth.

Understanding that amounts to recognizing how it is that the content of a proposition, what it is “a proposition that”, determines a (necessarily) necessary and sufficient condition for the truth of that proposition. And once we see that, we grasp what it is for a proposition to be true in a realist sense. 1

James Van Cleve appears to adopt a roughly similar view:
It has long seemed to me that a minimal notion of truth is all that realism needs. In particular, realism need not (contrary to what is often alleged) be wedded to a correspondence theory of truth – at least not to any correspondence theory that involves a particular ontological account of what the “correspondents” are.

It is not difficult to see the importance and, if one has any realist sympathies, the attractiveness of this thesis. It is undeniable that the plausibility of alethic realism would be greatly enhanced, and that of its competitors greatly diminished, if it could be established without invoking an ontology any more elaborate than that contained in the T-schema. Nor is it difficult, for me at least, to be sympathetic with the motives underlying this position. Alston, in particular, is especially concerned to defend the idea that our beliefs are answerable to a reality that they do not help to create or constitute, and to preserve the importance of truth in areas as diverse as logic, epistemology, and practical reasoning.

As laudable as these motives are, however, I will argue that neither a minimal theory of truth nor a minimal conception of truth—such as that which can be acquired by grasping the conceptual necessity of any set of instances of Alston’s T-schema—is nearly enough for realist purposes, given certain plausible constraints on any theory of truth worthy of the name ‘alethic realism’.

I begin, in the first section, by discussing the sense in which Alston’s theory of truth is minimal, and compare and contrast it with other theories varieties of minimalism. Unlike most versions of deflationism and minimalism, Alston’s minimalism is not committed to a minimal ontology of truth, but is minimally committed to any particular ontology of truth. These, I hope to show, are totally different things.

In the second section I discuss the sense in which Alston’s theory is a realist theory. Alston’s core doctrine of realism, I argue, consists in the theses that i) truth is a
property and ii) the truth value of a proposition has nothing to do with its epistemic status. I suggest that Alston also holds that iii) propositions have whatever truth value they have because or in virtue of the way the world is, and not vice versa, and this, too, is plausibly a necessary condition for any version of alethic realism.

In the third section I examine Alston’s “Intensional Argument” against identifying the concept of truth with that of ideal justifiability. Though this argument is successful, it does not in any way rule out the compatibility of an epistemic analysis of the property of truth and the concept of truth that Alston claims to be derivable by anyone who grasps the conceptual necessity of the T-schema. I argue that this instantly disqualifies his theory from counting as a realist theory, and on his own terms no less. That Alston presents additional arguments against the epistemic theory of truth, and that they are largely successful, does nothing to promote his central thesis.

Finally, I argue that no theory of truth that attempts to analyze truth in terms of the T-schema or its substitution instances alone can fully capture the fact that propositions are true if and only if and because of the way the world is. That a given proposition that p is true if and only if p neither says nor implies that the proposition is true because of p.

I.

In billing his theory as ‘minimal’, one would naturally suppose that Alston’s theory bears a close resemblance to deflationism or, perhaps, Horwich’s slightly less anemic minimalism. First, consider deflationism. Though deflationism to some extent defies definition—it is, as Crispin Wright remarks, more of a tendency than a position—virtually every deflationary account of truth makes essential use of some variant of
Tarski’s equivalence of the form (T). Depending upon a given philosopher’s choice of truth bearers, two of the more popular formulations are

(ST): The sentence “s” is true in L iff p, where “s” is the canonical name of p in L.

(PT): The proposition that p is true iff p.

Following Daniel Stoljar, I will understand deflationism to be the view that

(a) someone has the concept of truth if and only if he accepts all of the substitution instances of (PT), or all of the nonparadoxical substitution instances of (ST), and

(b) (ST) or (PT) “captures everything significant that can be said about truth.”

This formulation, which I have found to be one of the most helpful in the literature, does have one minor problem, namely that (a) and (b) themselves do appear to say something significant about truth but are not themselves instances of (ST) or (PT). Nevertheless, the essential point remains: in order to understand what truth is, on this view, a person does not need to know that truth bearers must somehow match reality, as correspondence theories maintain. Nor must one be aware that true propositions are those which are justified by the best available evidence or that are bound to be affirmed by everyone whose opinion counts at the end of inquiry, as various epistemic theories of truth contend. This, according to deflationists, is because all substantive theories along these lines are false, as is any other theory that treats truth as a genuine property that all and only the non-deviant members of the set of true things have in common. Truth, as it is often put, has no nature. I leave the reader to determine the difference between a something with no nature and a nothing.
As for Horwich’s theory, it undoubtedly satisfies both of Stoljar’s conditions, and Horwich himself considers his minimalism to be a “particular variant” of deflationism. What sets Horwich’s theory apart is his admission that truth is a property. He does, however, insist that “truth is not a complex or naturalistic property but a property of some other kind” and that is has no “hidden structure.” As one might expect on the basis of such remarks, Horwich’s contention that truth is a property turns out to be a much smaller concession to substantive theories of truth than one might initially suppose. In fact, I think it is no concession at all. This is because Horwich assures us that “the truth predicate exists solely for the sake of a certain logical need,” for instance our need to generalize over infinitely many propositions and to say such things as “What Oscar said is true.” (Horwich, 2) Again, he tells us that the truth predicate “acts simply as a de-nominalizer”, that is, as a means of moving from “the proposition that p is true” to “p”. (Horwich, 5) But if performing this logical role is the sole reason any language possesses the (or a) truth predicate, then statements involving the predicate “is true” do not, like most other statements with a similar surface grammar, attribute a property, simple or otherwise, to their grammatical subjects. De-nominalization is not the same thing as property attribution. Even if we charitably grant that the referent of a predicate whose sole task is to denominalize propositions is a property, this is surely not what any “inflationist” has in mind when he calls truth a “property”.

Thus understood, deflationary theories are minimal in an ontological sense. Like atheism, or austere physicalism, deflationism is committed to a minimal ontology. Interestingly, theories that are minimal in this sense are typically far from uncontroversial, even if their only positive ontological commitments are those that most
sane people would unhesitatingly accept. This is because such theories typically take a
strong stand with respect to the nonexistence of entities whose reality many take to be
quite evident. Reductive physicalism is a case in point: while committed to a minimal
ontology, it is one of the most controversial philosophical positions on the market today.
Most philosophers would unhesitatingly agree that the entities which the physicalist
believes exist do exist. But only a fraction of those would agree that the entities which
the physicalist insists do not exist do not exist.

Alston’s minimalism does bear some superficial similarities with deflationary
theories, especially the heavy use he makes of the T-schema in elucidating the concept of
truth. Unlike the deflationary theories considered above, however, Alston’s account of
truth is not ontologically minimal at all. Alston’s theory, he says, “is minimalist in that it
does nothing to spell out what the relation is between the proposition that \( p \) and the fact
that \( p \) by virtue of which the fact makes the proposition true.” (39) It is, we might say,
epistemologically minimal, insofar as it restricts itself to a very limited number of robust
claims about the nature of truth. But to refuse to spell out the relations between
propositions and facts is a far cry from saying that there is nothing there to be spelled out.
Consider, for instance, what he says about the nature of propositions, which Alston
singles out as the primary bearers of truth:

So long as they can serve as subjects for truth-value attributions, the metaphysical chips
can fall where they may. For that matter, propositions don’t even have to “be there” in
any robustly metaphysically realist sense. It would be enough to exhibit them as subjects
of truth values in a “fictional” or “instrumental” spirit. My project is even tolerant of
reductive accounts of propositions. (21)

Because Alston’s minimalism places no restrictions on where the metaphysical chips fall,
his account is not only, as he urges, consistent with metaphysical anti-realism about truth-
bearers, but is also consistent with truth and truth-bearers being considerably more metaphysically robust than the most freewheeling correspondence theorists have hitherto supposed. His task, he says, is merely to elucidate the concept of truth, which is a way of uniquely picking out the property of truth, but which does not necessarily specify all of the latter’s essential properties. (37-8) That analyzing the concept of x and analyzing the essential nature of x are potentially different investigations is something that is widely agreed upon. Tigers, water, and gold, to cite familiar examples, all have essential properties that cannot be teased out of the layman’s concepts tiger, water, and gold. But even to admit that this might be the case with respect to truth is plainly incompatible with Stoljar’s second condition of deflationism. Alston even characterizes his minimalist realism as “an inchoate correspondence theory.” (33) But if there is even potentially more to learn about truth than what the T-schema can teach us, then deflationism is wrong. Instead of being committed to a minimal ontology of truth, like deflationists, Alston is minimally committed to any particular ontology of truth. And that is not only different than, but inconsistent with, the sort of minimalism put forth by Horwich.

This point would not be worth making if not for the fact that Alston does not seem fully to appreciate the difference between his own brand of minimalism and the ontological minimalism of Horwich. For instance, Alston assures us that truth is a property. “My minimalism (along with the minimalism of Horwich…) is firmly committed to there being a property of truth, and to apparent attributions of truth values being just what they seem.” (41) But as we have seen, Horwich’s claim that his minimalism treats truth as a property is either misleading or false. Moreover, Horwich very explicitly states that apparent attributions of truth values are not at all what they
“An expression might have a meaning that is somewhat disguised by its superficial form – tending, as Wittgenstein warned, to produce mistaken analogies, philosophical confusion, and insoluble pseudo-problems. The word ‘exists’ provides a notorious example. And we are facing the same sort of thing here.” (Horwich, 2)

II.

Having determined the sense in which Alston’s theory is ‘minimal’, let us determine the sense in which it is a ‘realist’ theory. At the center of Alston’s realism are the following claims:

(i) Contrary to deflationary views, truth is a property.

(ii) Whether a given proposition is true does not in any way depend upon its epistemic status.

This latter condition is the one that Alston is, with good reason, most eager to defend. He says that “…if our concept of truth is a realist one, then all our beliefs owe their truth value to the fact that they are related in a certain way to a reality beyond themselves.” (8)

Finally, Alston also appears to regard the following as an additional commitment of the alethic realist:

(iii) A truth bearer is true or false because or in virtue of the existence or non-existence of what it is about.

As he puts it, “A state of affairs’ being the case is the worldly realization that renders the proposition true. What is the case is the truth maker. What is true is the truth bearer.” (52) This latter condition is, I think, especially important for a realist theory of truth.

What a truth bearer is about—the truth maker—does not have whatever character it has
because or in virtue of the properties of the truth bearer(s) which represents it. Thus, when the alethic realist is asked “Why is the proposition that grass is green true?” he may respond, “Because grass is green.” But when asked “Why is grass green?” he will not respond, “Because the proposition that grass is green is true.” In short, true propositions are not fact makers.

I take it that not only is Alston committed to the claim that any realist theory of truth must endorse (i)—(iii), but that he is correct. And it should be obvious at once that someone who is committed to (i)—(iii) is not a deflationist or an ontological minimalist about truth, since i), if interpreted to read that truth is a property in the same way that color and size are properties, is patently inconsistent with deflationism. Our task now is to determine whether a commitment to (i)—(iii) is compatible with Alston’s epistemological minimalism.

III.

If Alston’s minimalist realism is correct, then anyone who grasps the conceptual necessity of any arbitrary substitution instance of the T-schema will thereby endorse i)-(iii) above. The first consequence of this is that anyone who understands the conceptual necessity of any instance of the T-schema will not be a deflationist about truth. Another consequence is that such an individual will thereby reject, as an analysis of the concept of truth, the Ideal Justifiability Conception of truth (IJC), according to which “To say of a belief that it is true is to say that it would be justifiable in a situation in which all relevant evidence (reasons, considerations) is readily available.” (204) As I hope to show in this section, however, is that while Alston does level an effective argument against the IJC, he
does not manage to secure condition ii) above, according to which the truth of a proposition does not depend upon its epistemic status.

Briefly, Alston’s “Intensional Argument” against the IJC runs as follows: anyone who recognizes that a given instance of the T-schema is conceptually true will realize that p is both necessary and sufficient for the truth of the proposition that p. To borrow his example, there is nothing more and nothing less required for the truth of the proposition that sugar is sweet than that sugar be sweet. “How then,” he rhetorically asks, “can some epistemic status of the proposition (belief, statement) that p be necessary and sufficient for the truth of p?” (209) The IJC appears to diverge from the T-schema in two ways: it does not claim that sugar’s being sweet is necessary for the truth of the proposition that sugar is sweet, and clearly states that it is not sufficient.

Alston considers the response that sugar’s being sweet itself depends on the epistemic status of the proposition that sugar is sweet. On this view, that the proposition that sugar is sweet would be justified in ideal epistemic conditions is necessary and sufficient for the fact that sugar is sweet. Alston rejects this proposal because the IJC is a claim about the concept of truth. The defender of the IJC must maintain that it is conceptually (semantically) necessary that it is the case that p (and hence that it is true that p) if and only if a belief that p would be ideally justifiable. Anything less than that would not reconcile his position with the T-schema. (213)

But, argues Alston, the IJC is not conceptually necessary. A person who maintains that it is at least possible for there to be a true proposition that could not be verified under ideal conditions might believe something false, or even necessarily false, but he has not thereby shown himself to lack the concept of truth or to not know the meaning of the
word “true”. The same cannot be said of someone who rejects the conceptual necessity of any substitution instance of the T-schema.

Even if the epistemic theorist recognizes the soundness of Alston’s argument against the IJC, there remains another option for him to take, as Alston is well aware, and that is to reject the IJC, which identifies the concepts “true” and “ideally justifiable”, and instead identify the property of truth with the property of ideal justifiability. This position does not, as Alston himself admits, fall to the Intensional Argument, since that argument was directed against an epistemic account of the concept of truth. Since entities may have essential properties that cannot be gleaned from an analysis of their concepts, there is nothing incoherent about a position that treats the statement “Truth = ideal justifiability” as the expression of a necessary synthetic proposition. As Alston puts it,

One who claims that the property of truth is ideal justifiability, and avoids claiming that the concept of truth is the concept of ideal justifiability, need run into no conflict with the view that the concept of truth is specified by the T-schema. (230)

Alston is right about this—it is possible to possess the concept of truth specified by the T-schema (and believe that it is the proper concept of truth) and hold that the property of truth just is the property of ideal justifiability. What just is not possible, on any remotely plausible characterization of what a realist conception of truth is (including Alston’s), is to possess and endorse a realist conception of truth and believe that the property of truth is identical with that of ideal justifiability. Thus, to possess and endorse the concept of truth specified by the T-schema is not to possess a realist conception of truth.

Let us examine this argument more closely. I think that it is as uncontroversial as anything that someone who embraces an epistemic theory of truth is not a realist about
truth. All parties to the debate appear to assume that much. But according to Alston, it is possible for someone to hold such a view about truth itself and to maintain that the proper concept of truth is picked out by the T-schema. But if a person believes the latter, Alston insists, then he will also maintain that the realist conception of truth is the proper conception of truth. And in maintaining that, he will have adopted a concept that picks out a property whose instantiation does not depend upon our epistemic attitudes. Just in virtue of endorsing that concept as the proper conception of truth, he will hold that the truth value of a truth bearer “…has to do with what the truth bearer is about, rather than with some “internal” or “intrinsic” feature of the truth bearer, such as its epistemic status, its place in a system of propositions, or the confidence with which it is held.” (7-8) In short, the realist conception of truth itself specifies certain conditions of satisfaction that anything must meet if it is to fall within the extension of that concept. And independence from our epistemic attitudes is one of those conditions: the realist conception of truth picks out a property which does not depend, for its instantiation, on the level of justification or warrant that our beliefs possess. But if that is so, then someone who grasps and endorses the realist conception of truth will maintain that the property picked out by that concept is not identical with the property of ideal justifiability. How, then, could Alston possibly admit that it is possible that the realist concept of truth picks out that property? Simply put, he cannot. Whoever is a realist about truth will embrace neither an epistemic account of the concept of truth nor such an account of the property of truth. Finally, insofar as someone might hold that each instance of the T-schema is conceptually true and maintain that the property of truth is identical with that of ideal justifiability, it follows that holding that each instance of the T-schema is conceptually
true is insufficient for acquiring a realist conception of truth. The T-schema simply fails to rule out a possibility that the realist conception of truth straightforwardly rules out.

It might be pointed out that, although it is true that someone could consistently grasp the conceptual necessity of each instance of the T-schema and still believe that truth = ideal justifiability, Alston does manage to devastate epistemic theories of truth on independent grounds. I heartily agree. Alston’s arguments against epistemic theories of truth, and against anti-realism generally, are among the most effective in the literature. But this has no bearing on the question at hand. What is at stake here is whether grasping the conceptual necessity of each instance of the T-schema is sufficient for possessing a realist conception of truth, not whether doing this plus appreciating Alston’s arguments against epistemic theories of truth is sufficient.

IV.

Thus far I have focused on Alston’s minimalism and its incapacity to rule out epistemic theories of truth. Because all epistemic theories count as substantive accounts of truth, ontologically minimal theories of truth, such as Horwich’s minimalism, do manage to rule them out. In this section, however, I hope to show that no account of truth that attempts to analyze it, or the concept of it, in terms of the T-schema alone can capture what is arguably an essential component of alethic realism, namely condition (iii) above.

Alston himself, as we have seen, seems to hold that there is an asymmetrical dependence between the truth-value of a proposition and the state of affairs that the proposition designates. Unfortunately, this is not something that can simply be read off of any substitution instance of the T-schema, even by someone who grasps its conceptual necessity. The reason is quite simple: that the proposition that p is true if and only if p
does not entail that the proposition that $p$ is true because of $p$ (or vice versa). Alston himself confesses that the appropriate relation of dependence is not explicit in any substitution instance of the T-schema. “To be sure, this talk of facts making propositions true is not on the surface in the T-statement, but it is not difficult to see it just below the surface.” (38) Is this supposed to mean that anyone who grasps the conceptual necessity of any substitution instance of the T-schema will, just in virtue of that, come to see this relation of dependence? If so, then I think Alston is plainly wrong. Someone who merely grasps that some particular T-statement is conceptually true might, with perfect consistency, maintain that the truth of the proposition that $p$ makes the state of affairs designated by $p$ obtain. Or he may be entirely agnostic about the relation of dependence between them. Again, Alston insists that “…in saying that the proposition that lemons are sour is true if and only if lemons are sour, we are, in effect, committing ourselves to the thesis that this proposition is made true by lemons being sour.” (12, my italics.) On the contrary, one might with equal justice commit oneself to the thesis that the sourness of lemons is made to obtain by that proposition’s being true, or that the relationship between the truth of the proposition and the sourness of lemons is no more intimate than the relationship between the fact that $2 + 2 = 4$ and the fact that nothing can be red and green all over at the same time.

Alston does, it is true, offer one formulation that comes close to having the required asymmetry built in to it.7 He writes, “A statement is true if and only if what the maker of the statement is attributing to what the statement is about, in making that statement, does actually qualify what the statement is about.” (26) This formulation, unlike several others Alston offers, explicitly attributes aboutness to statements. And, it
might be thought, such an attribution implies that statements are true because of the
nature of what they are about. This is, admittedly, a natural conclusion to draw.
However, so long as the aboutness relation is left unexplicated, no such conclusion
obviously follows. The topic of aboutness or, more generally, intentionality, is one of the
most contested in philosophy, and more than a few philosophers have come to the
conclusion that in directing itself upon an object, the mind (or language) thereby does
something to—constructs, distorts, or even creates—that object. So barely
acknowledging the intentionality or aboutness of statements is hardly enough to
acknowledge that they owe their truth-value to the nature of what they are about, rather
than vise versa. On the other hand, if Alston were to explicate the aboutness relation and
establish that it does not, contrary to constructivist accounts, in any way alter the object
term of that relation—which he does not—then his account would no longer be minimal
at all. Any robust account of representation would *eo ipso* be a robust account of
accurate representation, which would in turn constitute a robust account of truth.

Simply put, “If and only if” *never* means the same thing as “because”, since the
proposition “p iff q” has the same truth value and meaning as the proposition “q iff p,”
but “p because of q” does not have either the same truth value or meaning as “q because
of p”. For this reason alone, no substitution instance of the T-schema manages to say or
imply that a proposition is true because a fact obtains and not vise versa, or even that
there is any relation of asymmetrical dependence between the two entities.8

Paul Horwich is one minimalist who specifically addresses this worry:

In mapping out the relations of explanatory dependence between phenomena, we
naturally and properly grant ultimate explanatory priority to such thing as the basic laws
of nature and the initial conditions of the universe. From these facts we attempt to
deduce, and thereby explain, why, for example,
(3) Snow is white.
And only then, invoking the minimal theory, do we deduce, and thereby explain, why 
(4) <Snow is white> is true. (Horwich, 105, my italics.)

I am not sure that Alston would endorse Horwich’s argument, but it is worth examining. 
The first and most obvious difficulty with this response is that to deduce is not at all the 
same thing as to explain. For we can just as legitimately deduce “snow is white” from 
“the proposition that snow is white is true”, in which case, if we are to trust Horwich’s 
claim that to deduce is thereby to explain, we will have explained why snow is white. 
We can also deduce any proposition whatsoever from itself, but this would not constitute 
an explanation. Horwich at least admits that minimalism only entails the explanatory 
asymmetry “given certain further facts.” (Horwich, 105) But this is precisely to concede 
the point that a person who grasps the conceptual necessity of any arbitrary T-statement 
will not, just in virtue of that, come to see this explanatory asymmetry. Moreover, the 
facts to which Horwich is apparently referring—the explanatory primacy of the laws of 
nature and the initial condition of the universe—will not help at all, since none of these 
laws or these facts have any bearing whatsoever on the relation between propositions and 
realities, and so do not have any bearing on whether one is explanatorily prior to the 
other. That a given proposition that p is true if and only if and because p is entirely 
independent of any law of nature; not a single instance of this schema would be false if, 
for instance, the weak nuclear force were a little weaker or the strong nuclear force were 
a little stronger. Granted, such laws and facts will help explain why snow is white, and 
thus why the proposition that snow is white is true. But they will not help explain what 
needs explaining: why the proposition that snow is white is true if and only if and 
because snow is white. Moreover, if the T-schema and all of its instances are necessary 
truths, as Horwich admits, then the relation between the truth value of propositions and
the structure of reality cannot be a contingent one, and so cannot fall under or be explained by contingent laws or facts. If, on the other hand, the “further facts” in question turn out to concern the nature of propositions, facts, and the relations between them, then we will almost certainly have something besides a minimal theory on our hands.

V.

To sum up, then, Alston’s attempt to develop and defend a minimalist realism cannot succeed. Even Alston’s core doctrine of realism, which is as weak a version of alethic realism could possibly be, does not follow from the conceptual necessity of any set of substitution instances of the T-schema. And the only slightly more full-bodied conception of alethic realism – one that adds condition iii) to Alston’s core doctrine – cannot be captured by any theory that attempts to analyze truth in terms of the T-schema or its substitution instances alone.

I would like to conclude with a few programmatic reflections on the motivations for and the desirability of minimalistic theories of truth. First, the motivations: there can be little doubt that the canons of philosophical reputability are today are, in large measure, determined by philosophical naturalism. This is not to say that naturalism constitutes some sort of philosophical orthodoxy, but merely that, in many areas of debate at least, the burden of proof falls squarely on the shoulders of those whose beliefs embrace more than what is ontologically respectable by naturalistic lights. No account of the general character of today’s philosophical climate can afford to ignore this fact. In such a climate, minimalist theories of anything are bound to have a broad appeal. Alston’s brand of minimalism, which is minimally committed to any ontology, certainly
does not qualify as a naturalistic theory, but neither does it step on any naturalistic toes. In particular, his theory does not carry with it any commitment to irreducibly semantic entities or properties which are, familiarly, among those things that many naturalists regard with suspicion. Most contemporary deflationary theories go a step further: not only do they insist that a theory of truth need not carry any commitment to the existence of irreducibly semantic entities and relations, but maintain that no such entities need to be summoned in a complete account of truth. And this amounts to eliminating such things entirely. If we don’t need to explain something as fundamental as truth in terms of accurate representation, then what possible explanatory role could be left for the relation of representation at all? Conversely, if one has no qualms about the reality of representation, what could possibly motivate misgivings about the reality of accurate representation? Deflationism about truth, it seems to me, is unintelligible apart from skepticism about representation, reference, and intentionality.

In addition to naturalistic pressures, contemporary philosophical thinking seems to be guided in large measure by considerations of parsimony. Michael Devitt, I think, expresses this attitude in about as flat-footed a manner as possible: “For, in ontology, the less the better.” If this is so, then how could a minimal theory ever fail to be better than a more inflated counterpart? Upon reflection, however, this attitude should not go unchallenged. Neither ontological minimalism nor epistemological minimalism are unconditional virtues of a theory. Someone who does not believe that there are such things as tables, believes something quite remarkable and owes us a sophisticated philosophical defense of that claim. And someone who is agnostic about the existence of tables is also in a remarkable epistemic condition and owes us an explanation. The
burden of proof, in such cases, does not fall on the person who believes more. Neither disbelieving in entities, nor failing to believe in entities, automatically renders one’s beliefs less controversial or susceptible to criticism.

There are several desiderata of any theory of anything that are more important than parsimony, including, but perhaps not limited to, truth, comprehensiveness, and predictive power. A principle of parsimony like Ockham’s Razor, properly construed, is a normative constraint to the effect that, of multiple theories all of which are equally good candidates along these dimensions, the simplest or most conservative is that which we are most justified in embracing. This is just good sense. But this is not at all the same as the normative constraint which states that of multiple theories, the one that attributes the simplest nature to what both are about is preferable, for this second principle does not insist that the simpler theory be complete or even true. A theory of linguistic behavior which, for instance, enables us to do without meanings is not preferable tout court to one that does, but is only preferable if there are in fact no such things as meanings, and if there is no such phenomenon as employing or grasping those meanings to mean something. And a theory of truth which does away with such things as facts and the relation of representation is only preferable to a theory that retains them if facts and representations have no essential connection with truth. Ockham’s Razor does not bid us to embrace simplicity simpliciter, but simplicity ceterus paribus. A taste for desert landscapes—a taste for anything, for that matter—cannot be a rational reason to believe or disbelieve anything, unless one also has independent reasons to suppose that the layout of reality itself is somehow responsive to or dependent upon those tastes.
In light of these considerations, exactly what are the merits of minimalism about truth? With respect to theories committed to a minimal ontology, which claim to provide complete accounts of truth without summoning irreducibly semantic relations, such theories do not have any advantage in terms of being uncontroversial. Though their positive ontological commitments are minimal, and minimally controversial, they are not minimally controversial theories, since the entities they leave out seem quite manifestly to exist. Alston’s minimalism, with its minimal commitments to an ontology, may be minimally controversial, but it is also minimally informative about the subject matter that it addresses. This is not to say that it would not be a virtue of Alston’s theory if he were able to establish his version of realism on the basis of minimally controversial claims. It would indeed. But it would be a greater theoretical virtue to go at least some way towards spelling out the nature of the relation between propositions or statements and facts or states of affairs, especially since doing so is, if the arguments above are sound, is precisely what is required to defend a realist theory of either the property or the concept of truth.


Notes

1 William Alston, *A Realist Conception of Truth* (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 27. Unless indicated otherwise, all parenthetical references in the paper are to this text.


6 Horwich, p. 37 and p. 2. Interestingly, Horwich seems to identify complex properties with naturalistic properties throughout the work. Surely this cannot be right, for it would mean that all of the simples out of which these complexes are composed must be non-naturalistic. One reason, apparently, that Horwich prefers to call his theory ‘minimalism’ as opposed to ‘deflationism’ is to distinguish his view from the more radical redundancy theories, according to which the proposition that p is true is identical in sense, and not merely necessarily equivalent in truth value, with the proposition that p.

7 I owe this point to an anonymous referee.

8 In light of this, the fact that using the “if and only if” form is the preferred method of analysis and explanation in philosophy ought to be source of wonderment. Something doesn’t qualify as an explanans or an explanandum, or a definiens or a definiendum, just in virtue of being placed on the right or left hand side of a biconditional.

9 As Marion David puts it, the correspondence theory “explains truth and falsehood in terms of states of affairs and the relation of representation. There is considerable doubt among philosophers whether we are entitled to these explanatory resources by the standards of “good scientific methodology”. For many, these standards are set by physicalism, which is roughly the thesis that physics can in principle explain everything…. But entities like states of affairs and relations like the semantic relation of representation are paradigmatic examples of explanatory resources that are not prima facie physical. So if they cannot be explained in physical terms, then they have to go…” (*Correspondence and Disquotation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 55)