A MINIMALIST EXPLANATION OF TRUTH'S ASYMMETRY

ABSTRACT

Suppose that Eleanor is drowsy. *Truth's asymmetry* is illustrated by the following fact: while we accept that <Eleanor is drowsy> is true because Eleanor is drowsy, we do not accept that Eleanor is drowsy because <Eleanor is drowsy> is true. This asymmetry requires an explanation, but it has been alleged, notably by David Liggins, that the minimalist about truth cannot provide one. This paper counteracts this pessimism by arguing that the minimalist can successfully explain the asymmetry conceptually, rather than metaphysically. It then goes on to defend this account against objections, in the end concluding that explaining truth's asymmetry is no problem for the minimalist.

1. There is an explanatory asymmetry in our thinking about truth. Let us stipulate that <Eleanor is drowsy> is true.[1] Why is it true? Because Eleanor is drowsy, of course. But suppose we now ask why Eleanor is drowsy. There could be any number of reasons: she might have been working too hard; she might have been out all night at a party; she might suffer from narcolepsy. One thing is for sure, though: we cannot say that Eleanor is drowsy because <Eleanor is drowsy> is true. While the proposition owes its truth to Eleanor's being drowsy, Eleanor does not owe her drowsiness to the truth of any proposition.

More generally, the thesis we may call *truth's asymmetry* consists in the following fact. Whenever '*p*' is replaced with a true sentence, the resulting instance of

(GS) <*p*> is true because *p*

is true, while the corresponding instance of (GS)'s converse,

(ConGS) *p* because <*p*> is true,

is false.[2] That there exists an asymmetry here should not be surprising, since explanation is asymmetric and 'because' is used in instances of (GS) to give explanations (Schnieder 2010: 321-322).[3] What has to be explained is why the direction of explanation is as it is: why, when we replace '*p*' with a truth, the resulting instances of (GS) and (ConGS) are true and false, respectively. Such an explanation will be an explanation of the nature of truth's dependence on how things are. For this notion of dependence is an asymmetric one: we think that the truth of a proposition depends upon how things are, but not *vice versa* (Rodriguez-Pereyra 2005: 21).

Clearly, the kind of explanation involved in a true instance of (GS), such as

(1) <Eleanor is drowsy> is true because Eleanor is drowsy,

is non-causal (Armstrong 1997: 115; 2004: 5). While causation is a contingent relation, there is no possible world in which Eleanor is drowsy without its also being the case that <Eleanor is drowsy> is true. But merely noting this does not get us very far. If the 'because' in (GS) is not causal, what kind of 'because' is it?

2. Correspondence theorists of truth believe that truth is a metaphysically rich concept. Specifically, they hold both that truth is the concept by which we articulate the relation between thought and reality, and that this articulation takes the form of a specification of the nature of the correspondence obtaining between a true proposition and some thing or things in the world. This being so, correspondence theorists will seek to come up with what I shall call a *metaphysical explanation* of

truth's asymmetry: an explanation that appeals to the obtaining of an underlying determinative or dependency structural relation in the world (Ruben 1990: 210). In short, they will want to explain the asymmetry of truth by uncovering a determinative relation whose relevant obtaining underlies the correctness of instances of (GS) and whose relevant non-obtaining explains why the corresponding instances of (ConGS) are false. This way, they presume, the explanatory asymmetry will be revealed as the correlate of a metaphysical asymmetry.

The causal relation is a familiar such determination relation, and in causal explanations the direction of explanation follows the direction of causal determination. But we have seen already that the kind of explanation involved in (1) is not causal. Consequently, the correspondence theorist will hold that the metaphysical determination relation whose obtaining underpins the correctness of the instances of (GS), and whose non-obtaining explains why the corresponding instances of (ConGS) are incorrect, is a determination relation of a non-causal, albeit metaphysical, kind.

Specifying the nature of this supposedly non-causal determination relation is none too easy a task. Certain candidates – for example, necessitation, counterfactual dependence and supervenience – in fact hold symmetrically with respect to the left-hand sides and right-hand sides of instances of (GS), and hence cannot explain truth's asymmetry. While, for example, the truth of <Eleanor is drowsy> is necessitated by Eleanor's being drowsy, is counterfactually dependent on it, and supervenes on it, the three respective converse claims also hold (Rodriguez-Pereyra 2005: 19-25). Meanwhile, the appeal to the relation of truthmaking (Rodriguez-Pereyra 2005: 26), while initially promising in its introduction of a relation that

is both asymmetric and hyperintensional (and thereby capable of holding asymmetrically between things that exist in exactly the same possible worlds), is controversial in its reliance on a principle – the truthmaker principle – that many have thought to be undermotivated.[4]

This is by no means to say that there is no mileage in the project of explaining truth's asymmetry by means of a metaphysical asymmetry. David Liggins has recently floated the idea that the relevant metaphysical asymmetry explaining the asymmetry of truth is supplied by the theory of *grounding* (Liggins 2016: 99-100). Grounding, so its defenders claim,[5] is the non-causal determination relation we appeal to when we claim, for instance, that {Socrates} *depends on* Socrates, that an object's dispositional properties are *owed to* its categorical features, and that semantic facts *depend upon* non-semantic facts (Schaffer 2010: 3; Rosen 2010: 110-111). While admitting that our understanding of grounding is 'dim as yet', Liggins is attracted by the thought that the metaphysical asymmetry undergirding truth's asymmetry consists in the following fact: that the instances of (GS) are underpinned by some relevant grounding, while the corresponding instances of (ConGS) are not (Liggins 2016: 99).

3. Whatever the merits of invoking grounding to explain truth's asymmetry, this strategy is unavailable to minimalists about truth. In this section I shall explain why.

The core doctrine of minimalism is that the (non-paradoxical) instances of the so-called *equivalence schema*,

(E) <*p*> is true if and only if *p*,

exhaust everything that can be said about what it is for

propositions to be true. From this benchmark claim, three further theses follow about truth itself, the function of the truth predicate, and the concept of truth, respectively. First, there can be no explanation of what distinguishes the true propositions from the false ones. To put it another way, there is no property, *F*, shared by all and only the true propositions, such that the true propositions are true because they possess *F* (David 1994: 65-66).

Second, since (E) exhausts the concept of truth, the function of the predicate, 'is true', is expressive only: it exists solely to facilitate the making of compendious endorsements of propositions (such as 'Everything Eleanor says is true') or indirect such endorsements (as in 'What Eleanor just said is true'). As Quine has put it, '[s]o long as we are speaking only of the truth of singly given sentences, the perfect theory of truth is … the disappearance theory of truth' (Quine 1970: 11).

Third, since there is nothing more to the truth of propositions than is supplied by the (non-paradoxical) instances of (E), possessing the concept of truth consists in nothing more than having a disposition to accept these instances (Horwich 1998: 35-36; 2001: 158, 159, 164 n. 23). According to the minimalist, we do not need to deploy any metaphysically heavyweight notions in order to understand this concept.

Let us call this conjunction of theses *the minimalist conception of truth*. One thing is clear: given the slender resources supplied by her conception of truth, the minimalist cannot help herself to grounding as a means to explain truth's asymmetry. The only materials for explaining truth's asymmetry available to the minimalist are the (non-paradoxical) instances of (E), the thesis that 'is true' is a mere expressive device, and the claim that

our grasp of the concept of truth consists in our being disposed to accept (E)'s non-paradoxical instances. Since any talk of grounding would quite obviously take the minimalist beyond these resources, it follows that she cannot explain truth's asymmetry in terms of grounding (Liggins 2016: 99-100).

Since this is so, the minimalist must use the slender resources at her disposal to come up with some other explanation of truth's asymmetry. If she fails to do so, she will be guilty of failing to answer a compulsory question on the examination paper: something that should give her cause to consider abandoning her minimalism in favour of a more substantial conception of truth that can fill this explanatory lacuna.

In my view, the minimalist can meet this challenge, and the rest of this paper is devoted to demonstrating this fact. Building on the work of Wolfgang Künne (2003: 150-157), Benjamin Schnieder (2006a, 2006b, 2010) and Julian Dodd (2007), I argue that truth's asymmetry can be explained in a way compatible with minimalism: specifically, as a conceptual asymmetry, rather than a metaphysical one. Liggins disagrees. In his view, this sort of attempt to explain truth's asymmetry is unsuccessful; and so, since no other explanatory option is available to the minimalist, we should seriously contemplate abandoning minimalism in favour of those accounts of truth that invoke grounding (Liggins 2016: §§4, 5).

4. With a view to making the case for the kind of explanation of truth's asymmetry I favour, let me start by turning the tables on those who would seek to explain truth's asymmetry in terms of grounding. A familiar charge against the idea of grounding is that the notion is insufficiently developed to figure in metaphysical

explanations of any kind.[6] This might be true, but it is not the worry I want to press here.

At its most abstract, my criticism of grounding explanations of truth's asymmetry is that the *explanandum* appears to be a very different kind of phenomenon to those that admit of the sort of metaphysical explanation of which a grounding explanation is a potential instance. To see this, note, first of all, how *thin* are the explanations supplied by instances of (GS). Specifically, whenever '*p*' is replaced by a true sentence, the sentences on either side of the 'because' are not just intensionally equivalent, but in the following sense *cognitively equivalent*: for any context *c*, nobody who understands both sentences can take one of them to express a truth with respect to *c* without thereby being disposed to take the other to express a truth with respect to *c* as well (Künne 2003: 42).[7,8] While

(1) <Eleanor is drowsy> is true because Eleanor is drowsy,

gives us an explanation of why <Eleanor is drowsy> is true, such instances of the dependence of truth on reality look quite insubstantial. Although (1) is not itself a conceptual truth, it is undeniable (Horwich 1998: 104; Merricks 2007: xiii), one might even say *truistic*.

This fact about the character of the explanations delivered by instances of (GS) sets them apart from paradigmatically metaphysical explanations and, in particular, putative grounding explanations. Consider the following explanations that Liggins would regard as claims of grounding (Liggins 2016: 99):

(2) My lover's eyes are beautiful *on account of* their colour.

(3) My drink's containing vodka *makes it* alcoholic.

(4) My eraser is flexible *in virtue of* its microphysical properties.

(5) My bicycle's mass is *owed to* the masses of its parts.

And let us add to (2) to (5) a couple of putative explanations that have a certain level of support amongst metaphysicians, namely,

(6) An object's dispositional properties *are determined by* its categorical properties,

and

(7) Individual substances persist *by virtue of* being composed of temporal parts.

While, as we have seen, (1) comprises 'because' flanked by cognitive equivalents, (2) to (7) are altogether more substantial. Specifically, each of (2) to (7) contains a pair of (nominalizations of) sentences that are not mere cognitive equivalents, and it is precisely this feature of these explanations that encourages the thought that their explanatoriness has what David-Hillel Ruben calls 'a solid metaphysical basis' (Ruben 1990: 232).

By contrast, since the pairs of sentences flanking the 'because' in (GS)'s instances are cognitive equivalents, these sentences lack precisely that feature – the clear conceptual distance between *explanandum* and *explanans* - that is characteristic of explanations that genuinely work by virtue of resting on substantial determination relations

in the world. Truisms are themselves insufficiently substantial to be susceptible of explanation by such metaphysically heavyweight relations.

Schaffer (2008: 308), in what is perhaps an unguarded moment, says that the intuition that truth depends on reality 'is an intuition about *dependence* (or grounding, or ontological priority)'. The same kind of thinking would have us regard an acknowledgement that truth depends on reality as a commitment to some kind of correspondence theory of truth: namely, a theory which takes correspondence to the fact that *p* to consist in being grounded by the fact that *p*. But to say that truths depend on reality – or, equivalently, that truths owe their truth to how the world is – is not in itself to take a metaphysical stand; it is merely to acknowledge truth's asymmetry, which is truistic. Furthermore, as I have just noted, there is good reason to distinguish the sort of explanation effected by instances of (GS) from metaphysical explanations. Once this distinction is made, we are in a position to make the by-now familiar minimalist move of signing up to *the correspondence intuition* – i.e. truth's asymmetry – while passing on correspondence theories of truth (Horwich 1998: 104-105).

5. Naturally, the aforementioned minimalist strategy of acknowledging truth's asymmetry, and yet denying that it is underpinned by the sort of metaphysical determination relation beloved of correspondence theories, can succeed only if truth's asymmetry admits of minimalist explanation. The competitor explanation of truth's asymmetry available to the minimalist – and the one I will defend in the remainder of this paper – has two salient features. First, it assumes no more about truth than one of minimalism's constitutive theses: specifically, that our grasp of this

concept consists in our being disposed to accept the (non-paradoxical) instances of (E). Second, it appeals to this feature of the minimalist conception of truth in the context of treating the explanatory 'because' in (GS) as *conceptual*, rather than (non-causally) metaphysical. Let me start by focusing on this latter feature.

It is plausible to think that there is a distinctive kind of explanation, of which the following explanations are examples:

(8) Joseph is Eleanor's cousin because he is a child of a sibling of one of Eleanor's parents (Künne 2003: 155).
(9) 17 is a prime number because it is only divisible by itself and 1.
(10) Eleanor cannot know that Beethoven was French because it is not true.
(11) This vase is coloured because it is red (Schnieder 2006a: 32).

Call such explanations *conceptual explanations*. Focusing on the simplest kind of case, in which the *explanandum* is expressed by a subject-predicate sentence, in *conceptually* explaining why *a* is *F* we explain why the concept *F* applies to *a*. We have a familiar ordinary language locution for this kind of explanation: we say that the *explanans* in such an explanation explains why *a counts* as *F*. Explaining why *a* counts as *F* in this sense is a way of explaining why *a* is *F*.

So what exactly is going on in a conceptual explanation? This matter needs careful handling. The *explananda* of conceptual explanations are not themselves facts about our concepts; they are worldly phenomena. The distinctive feature of conceptual explanations lies,

rather, in the kind of explanation they give of such phenomena: namely, one in which we explain why *a* is *F* by explaining why the concept *F* applies to *a*. In a conceptual explanation of a worldly fact, the *explanans* presumes certain conditions of application for the concept *F* and points out that these conditions are met.[9] As Schnieder notes (2006a: 32), the relevant conditions of application are recorded in conceptual truths: that is, truths that are necessary and *a priori* knowable (Künne 2003: 25). And the relevant such conceptual truths for (8) to (11) respectively are these: that someone is your cousin just in case he or she is a child of a sibling of one of your parents; that a number is prime just in case it is only divisible by itself and one; that one can only know that *p* if it is true that *p*; and that something is coloured if it is red. Why is 17 a prime number? Because something is a prime number just in case its only divisors are itself and 1, and 17 meets this condition. This explanation is abbreviated as (9). None of this denies that 17's being a prime number, or this vase's being coloured, or Joseph's being Eleanor's cousin, are facts about real things, rather than facts about concepts. The point is that these facts can be explained by saying why certain concepts apply to the real things they concern: a kind of explanation that is based on conceptual relations that are themselves codified in conceptual truths.

Since the 'because' in conceptual explanations (8) to (11) is asymmetric, we require an explanation of why the explanation in these sentences runs in the direction that it does. Such an explanation is ready to hand. In a conceptual explanation the 'because' signals what we may describe as a decrease in conceptual complexity left-to-right across this connective. Usually, such a decrease in conceptual complexity consists in the fact that the

explanans deploys more primitive concepts than those figuring in the *explanandum* (Schnieder 2006b: 406). Such conceptual primitiveness may be of three kinds. Sometimes, as in (8) and (9), the key concept deployed in the *explanandum* is *fully analysable* in terms of the concepts deployed after the 'because'. (8) and (9) are both true because the key concepts invoked to the left of the 'because' (those of *cousin* and *prime number* respectively) are analysable in terms of the concepts figuring on the right. Sometimes, as in (10), the conceptual repertoire deployed in the *explanans* offers a *partial conceptual analysis* of the *explanandum*'s key concept. In (10), the concept of truth (which occurs in the *explanans*) is more primitive than that of knowledge (which occurs in the *explanandum*) by virtue of being *one of a family* of concepts that provides a conceptual analysis of the concept of knowledge. But occasionally, as in (11), the *explanans* may contain a concept that is more primitive than the key concept figuring in the *explanandum* in the following, generic sense: mastery of the *explanandum*'s key concept requires mastery of the *kind* of concept that figures in the *explanans*, albeit not of any particular concept of that kind. In (11), the concept *red* is more primitive than the concept *colour* in just this way. *Red* is the kind of concept (*i.e.* a concept of a determinate colour) that a thinker must possess, if she is to possess the concept *colour* (Schnieder 2006a: 33).

Interestingly, however, there is a way in which the *explanans* of a conceptual explanation may be less conceptually complex than its *explanandum*, even if both exploit exactly the same repertoire of concepts. The following is recognisably a conceptual explanation:

(12) ¬¬¬Snow is black because ¬Snow is black.

Why is it the case that ¬¬¬Snow is black? Because triple negation reduces to single negation and snow isn't black. (12) is an abbreviated form of this explanation. But although '¬¬¬Snow is black' and '¬Snow is black' evidently do not differ with respect to the concepts they deploy, we have not thereby uncovered a counter-example to the thesis that the direction of a conceptual explanation follows a diminution of conceptual complexity. Rather, what we have here is just an illustration of the fact that two propositions involving exactly the same concepts may still differ with respect to their conceptual complexity if one of them *uses* these concepts in a more elaborate way than the other. Although '¬Snow is black' and '¬¬¬Snow is black' use exactly the same concepts, the former, in employing single negation rather than triple negation, puts these concepts to work in a less complicated manner. Consequently, on this occasion, the direction of explanation is owed, not to the fact that the *explanans* involves more primitive concepts than the *explanandum*, but to the fact that it exploits these same concepts more economically. Nonetheless, as is the case in paradigmatic conceptual explanations, the explanation offered by (12) relies upon a conceptual truth, and so duly counts as a conceptual explanation.[10] The significance of (12) thus lies, not in its undermining the claim that 'factors of conceptual complexity' (Schnieder 2006: 33) determine a conceptual explanation's direction, but in its revealing how these factors are not exhausted by considerations concerning the primitiveness of the concepts themselves.[11]

Having elucidated the notion of conceptual explanation, we can now appeal to it in order to explain truth's asymmetry. Instances of (GS) are conceptual explanations in the sense just elaborated. In

(1) <Eleanor is drowsy> is true because Eleanor is drowsy,

we explain why <Eleanor is drowsy> is true by using semantic descent to show that the proposition meets the relevant condition for the concept *truth* to apply to it. This condition – recorded by the conceptual truth underlying the conceptual explanation – is this:

(13) <Eleanor is drowsy> is true if and only if Eleanor is drowsy.

The reason why it is (1), and not its converse, that is correct is that the right-hand side of (13), although both intensionally and cognitively equivalent to the left-hand side, is conceptually simpler in a way familiar from our discussion of (11). While the concept of truth can be grasped by someone totally ignorant of both Eleanor and drowsiness, its mastery consists merely in the tendency to accept the non-paradoxical instances of

(E) <*p*> is true if and only if *p* (Horwich 1998: 126).

In other words, it is the fact that the (non-paradoxical) instances of (E) are conceptual truths that underpins the correctness of instances of (GS), with the direction of explanation determined by a diminution in conceptual complexity from left to right. Since mastery of the concept of truth consists in our ability 'to relate statements involving it to statements involving only conceptual resources already at hand' (Schnieder 2006a: 36), the right-hand side of an instance of (GS) counts as conceptually more simple than its left-hand side; and so,

as in (11), a proposition involving an elaborate concept (in this case, *truth*) is explained by a proposition that is conceptually less complex. Our explanatory asymmetry is explained, not by a metaphysical asymmetry, but as a conceptual one.[12]

As promised, this account of the asymmetry of truth is compatible with minimalism about truth, since what does the work in the *explanans* is just the minimalist's claim about what grasp of the concept consists in. The challenge for the minimalist laid out at the end of §3 can, it seems, be met. Explaining truth's asymmetry seems to be well within the minimalist's compass.

6. Some philosophers might be dissatisfied by this proposed minimalist explanation of truth's asymmetry. I shall therefore end by dealing with the three most significant sources of such dissatisfaction, the first two described by Marian David (2005), the latter by Liggins.

The first such source is resistance to the claim, essential to the proposed explanation of truth's asymmetry, that the instances of (E), such as (13) are conceptual truths. One reason for withholding conceptual status[13] to these so-called *T-biconditionals* (David 2005) is this: if propositions are construed along Russellian lines – that is, as having the entities they concern as constituents – then propositions concerning contingent existents will themselves exist only contingently, thereby rendering T-biconditionals such as

(15) <Eleanor does not exist> is true if and only if Eleanor does not exist

merely contingently true. To see this, suppose that <Eleanor does not exist> has Eleanor herself – a contingent

existent – as a constituent. On this assumption, <Eleanor does not exist> would not have existed, had Eleanor not existed; but this means that (15) would not have been true, had Eleanor failed to exist (David 2005: 390).

A further reason given for denying that the T-biconditionals are conceptual truths is that the left-hand side and right-hand side of a T-biconditional are not synonymous (David 2005: 411). If we take conceptual truths to be *analytic* – roughly, true in virtue of their meaning – we will want an explanation of their possession of this status; and the most obvious such explanation would seem to be that their respective left-hand sides and right-hand sides have the same meaning (David 2005: 211). T-biconditionals would seem not to meet this latter condition. It is desperately hard to see how the left-hand side of a T-biconditional, which implies the existence of a proposition, could be synonymous with its right-hand side, which has no such implication (David 2005: 411).

Finally, Liggins has argued that the T-biconditionals cannot be conceptual truths because they have ontological entailments (Liggins 2016: 90). As he points out, if

(16) <All tigers are tigers> is true if and only if all tigers are tigers

is a conceptual truth, then so is the logical truth,

(17) All tigers are tigers.

But (16) and (17) jointly entail

(18) <All tigers are tigers> is true;

and (18), in turn, entails

(19) <All tigers are tigers> exists.

Hence, it transpires that 'we have a merely conceptual truth that there is something rather than nothing' (Liggins 2016: 90). Since, according to Liggins, conceptual truths cannot logically entail existence claims, it follows that (15), and the other T-biconditionals, cannot be conceptual truths (Liggins 2016: 90).

As it turns out, however, none of these reasons for denying conceptual status to the T-biconditionals is compelling. Let me start with that offered by Liggins.

Liggins says that '[i]t is plausible to think that the lesson of the ontological argument is that conceptual truths lack ontological entailments' (Liggins 2016: 90). But, first, it is far from clear that this is, in fact, the lesson of the ontological argument. Perhaps one moral of the said argument is that our possessing a concept of an *F* does not entail that there exists an *F*.[14] But it does not follow from this that a conceptual *truth* cannot have ontological entailments. This is a different question entirely, and the only ground that I can discern for ruling out this latter possibility *tout court* is a commitment to the principle that the conceptual and the extra-conceptual are entirely self-standing realms: a picture which holds that we could possess exactly the same conceptual repertoire even if it turned out that the extra-conceptual realm was very different to how it is actually, or did not exist at all. To adopt this *separate realms principle*, though, involves taking a highly controversial stand against content externalism. As such, it has little to recommend it.

Notably, Volker Halbach, whom Liggins quotes with approval (Liggins 2016: 90), acknowledges that the

minimalist will take the T-biconditionals to be conceptual truths (Halbach 2001: 175), explains that the T-biconditionals have ontological commitments (Halbach 2001: 179), and yet concludes that this consequence does not show minimalism to be wrong (Halbach 2001: 189). I agree. Until the minimalist is given a reason why conceptual truths cannot have existential entailments – something more substantial than the charge of *fishiness* pressed by Liggins (2016: 90) – she is entitled to sit tight.[15]

David's two objections to the thesis that the T-biconditionals are conceptual truths can be dealt with more quickly. First, although he has shown that treating the T-biconditionals as conceptual – and, thereby, necessary – truths is incompatible with Russellianism about propositions, this view of the T-biconditionals is compatible with an alternative, Fregean proposal as to the ontological nature of propositions (*e.g.* Evans 1982). As David himself admits (David 2005: 390), Fregeans, who take propositions to be composed of senses, commonly insist that senses are necessary existents, thereby side-stepping this problem.

Second, David's suggestion that the T-biconditionals could be conceptual truths only if their respective left-hand sides and right-hand sides were synonymous sees him operating with a notion of a conceptual truth that is stricter than mine. Specifically, like Liggins (2016: 89), he describes such truths as 'analytic' (David 2005: 409) and, as a consequence, thinks that a biconditional can be in this sense conceptual only if its two sides are synonymous. But the reading of 'conceptual truth' I favour makes no such commitments, which thereby allows for the existence of biconditional conceptual truths in which 'if and only if' is flanked by sentences that differ in meaning. Indeed, (13), I contend, is in this respect like

(20) *x* is an equiangular triangle if and only if *x* is an equilateral triangle.

Both (13) and (20) count as conceptual truths because they are both necessarily true and *a priori* knowable, even though their respective left-hand sides and right-hand sides do not have the same meaning.

7. The second source of disquiet at the minimalist's conceptual explanation of truth's asymmetry is scepticism about the very idea of conceptual explanation. One form such scepticism might take is a suspicion that the claimed examples of conceptual explanation are not really explanatory at all (Hofweber 2009: 270). For instance, it might be alleged that (8) does not explain *why* Joseph is Eleanor's cousin and that (9) does not explain *why* 17 is a prime number. This charge looks unconvincing, however. In both cases we explain what *makes* something *F*; it is just that the kind of making we have in mind is neither causal, nor non-causally determinative, but *classificatory*. Explaining why *a counts as F* is a perfectly respectable way of explaining why *a* is *F*.

Note, too, that in making the case for conceptual explanation, I am not making the elementary error of confusing an explanation of why *a* is *F* with an explanation of why the predicate '*F*' applies to *a*. Some people might make this use-mention conflation, but not me. In taking (11) to be a true explanation, I do not confuse it with

(11a) The vase satisfies 'is coloured' because the vase is red.

I claim that (11) explains why the vase is coloured by virtue of drawing on the conceptual truth that something's

being red suffices for its being coloured, and by stating that the vase is red. Such an account is avowedly non-meta-linguistic. The application conditions of the *concept* of being coloured, not the *predicate* 'coloured', are what figure in the account.

At this point, one thing the sceptic might do is point to a feature of the use of candidate conceptual explanations that he thinks undermines their status as explanations proper. One such feature might be the fact that (8)-(12) can all be used to help someone understand the key concepts deployed on their respective left-hand sides. We can easily imagine contexts in which (9), for example, is used not so much to explain why 17 is a prime number as to teach someone what a prime number is; and this might be taken as evidence that (9) is not in the business of explaining why 17 is a prime number at all. But in the wake of the intelligibility of the notion of conceptual explanation, this observation provides no support for scepticism. For it is not true in general that a sentence seeming to have a certain function fails to have this function if it can also be used to elicit a grasp of one the concepts it employs.

Of course, the philosopher suspicious of the idea that (8)-(12) are genuinely explanatory might be ingenious enough to come up with an alternative account of the role of the 'because' in these sentences. Here is the one I take to be the most promising.[16] Rather than employing 'because' in an explanatory sense, candidate conceptual explanations all use 'because' as an *inference-marker*: that is, as an expression signalling that the matter following it provides a justification for believing the sentence preceding it. On this view, then, 'because' in (11), for example, functions in the same way as it does in this claim:

(21) Eleanor has been making toast because there are toast crumbs all over the kitchen floor.

(21) is an abbreviation of an argument such as this:

(21a) Eleanor was the only person in the kitchen; there are toast crumbs all over the kitchen floor; *therefore*, Eleanor has been making toast.

Analogously, the account currently on the table says that (11) abbreviates an argument such as this:

(11b) The vase is red; *therefore*, the vase is coloured.

On this reading, the fact that the vase is red does not *explain why* the vase is coloured; it merely provides conclusive evidence for it.

But this proposal is unconvincing. If the 'because' in candidate conceptual explanations functioned as an inference-marker, then there would be no sense in which the material following the 'because' could count as an explanation of the material preceding it. The putative *explanans* could no more explain the putative *explanandum* than can the fact that there are toast crumbs on the floor explain why Eleanor has been making toast. But, in contrast to (21), (8)-(12) all seem to give perfectly acceptable answers to *why* questions, and so all of them would seem to be *bona fide* explanations. Why is Joseph Eleanor's cousin? Because Joseph is a child of a sibling of one of Eleanor's parents. Why is 17 a prime number? Because its only divisors are itself and 1. Why is the vase coloured? Because it is red. Why cannot Eleanor know that Beethoven is French? Because it is not true that Beethoven is French. In each of these cases we seem to be given an explanation

of why *p* for some *p*. A fact is cited in order to explain why some other fact obtains.[17] Naturally, if it turned out that no sense could be made of how candidate conceptual explanations could be genuinely explanatory, then we might have to think again, and perhaps take the inference-marker account more seriously. But given the preceding discussion of the nature of conceptual explanation, we need not think again. Conceptual explanation is not mysterious.

8. Liggins begs to differ, and in so doing he introduces a second form of scepticism about conceptual explanation. To see how, let us focus on two candidate conceptual explanations:

(22) Xanthippe became a widow because Socrates died.
(11) This vase is coloured because it is red.

Liggins's view of (22) and (11), expressed with admirable clarity, is this:

> [I]t is striking that the *explananda* have nothing to do with concepts: they concern a particular woman and a particular vase. It is hard to see how the fact that the concept *widow* can be analysed as *woman whose husband has died* bears on the explanation of why Xanthippe became a widow. Similarly, even though it is a conceptual truth, it remains to be seen how that conceptual connection is relevant to the explanation of why the vase is coloured. *Prima facie*, these facts about concepts are irrelevant to the phenomena to be explained. … How do concepts help us to explain why someone is a widow or why a particular vase is coloured. (Liggins 2016: 91)

Taking this question to be unanswerable, Liggins comes to the conclusion that candidate conceptual explanations (such as (8)-(12) and (22)), though typically explanatory, cannot be conceptual explanations. (Presumably, whenever such candidate conceptual explanations are truly explanatory, he takes them to be non-causal, metaphysical explanations.)

But, looked at in the right way, unencumbered by philosophical doctrine, the status of these sentences as conceptual explanations is not at all puzzling. To reply to Liggins's question directly, a conceptual truth recording the application conditions for a concept *F* can help us explain why *a* is *F* by virtue of specifying a condition which, if met, tells us why *a* counts as *F*. Why is the vase coloured? Because the vase is red, and because if something is red, it is coloured. Why is 17 a prime number? Because a number is prime just in case its only divisors are itself and 1, and this condition is met by 17. And so on.

No doubt, a sceptic of Liggins's stripe will not be moved by this rejoinder. He will profess incomprehension at how facts about concepts can possibly explain facts about real things, such as people, vases, and numbers. The fact that 17 is a prime number and the fact that a certain vase is red are facts in the mind-independent world, he will insist; hence, whether such facts obtain has nothing to do with our concepts. Impressed by the force of such a question, this sceptic will maintain that such *explananda* can only be explained by invoking real, thoroughly worldly relations such as causation and varieties of non-causal dependence.

In essence, our second sceptic's worry is this: if facts about the world are mind-independent, then how can the nature of our concepts figure in a genuine explanation of them? But such incomprehension has the same, and

controversial, theoretical source that we saw underpin Liggins's rejection of the idea that the T-biconditionals could have existential entailments: namely, the separate realms picture described in §6. It is tempting to regard this picture as obligatory, but it is not. David Wiggins has stressed 'the doubtfulness of the separation, supposedly obvious or truistic and still widely insisted upon, between ontological and conceptual questions' (Wiggins 2001: xii): a separation challenged by his own view that horses, leaves, the sun, and the stars, though in no sense constructed by us, have their natures fixed by our concepts of them (Wiggins 2001: chs, 4, 5, esp. 151-152). Although, according to Wiggins, we do not bring such things into existence as we do artefacts, there would not have been *those* objects, if they had not corresponded to *those* concepts.[18]

This is one way of challenging the metaphysical picture motivating our second sceptic's objection to the very idea of conceptual explanation. Another response points out a dangerous slippage in this sceptic's notion of a mind-independent fact. Specifically, from the wholly appropriate thought that the facts are not up to us, our second sceptic drifts towards what John McDowell has characterized as the myth of a fact as 'an unconceptualized configuration of things in themselves' (McDowell 1982: 287-288). That the myth is a dangerous one is recorded by the following truth: while it is right to point out that the facts are not determined by what people think, the facts are, nonetheless, essentially expressible in true sentences and essentially denotable by 'that'-clauses formed by nominalizing true sentences. In this sense the facts are conceptualized.[19] But once we appreciate this, it becomes clear that our second sceptic has provided us with no principled objection to the possibility of the sort of

conceptual explanation that he professes to find so hard to understand. The facts, in being essentially expressible by sentence-types, are things that are of their nature 'conceptually organized' (McDowell 1996: 6): they share a structure with things we can say and think. So there is no obstacle to acknowledging that some of these facts might admit of explanation of a conceptual kind: a form of explanation in which we explain why *a* is *F* by pointing out why the concept *F* applies to *a*.[20]

9. So there is nothing wrong with the idea of conceptual explanation *per se*. However, someone might accept the intelligibility of the idea of conceptual explanation, and yet doubt whether the explanation effected by an instance of (GS) can be conceptual. This is the third and final source of dissatisfaction with the proposed account of truth's asymmetry I offer on behalf of the minimalist, and I will finish by briefly trying to disarm it.

Philosophers are apt to characterise what they present as commonsense realism with claims such as these: that Eleanor's being drowsy is the *source* of the truth of <Eleanor is drowsy>; that Eleanor's being drowsy is the *truth-conferrer* for the proposition; and that the truth of the proposition is *ground out* at the interface of language of reality.[21] Such rich causal metaphors are bound to suggest that the dependence of propositional truth on reality is an instance of some kind of a non-causal sibling of causal dependence. But there is a convincing reason why we should resist the temptation to think of truth's dependence on reality in this way. In short, conceiving of truth's dependence on reality as an instance of a kind of metaphysical dependence is to insist on more than suffices to do justice to the truth of commonsense realism. Such realism consists merely in the thought that

the truth-values of propositions depend on how the world is, rather than *vice versa*: as such, it is a commitment to truth's asymmetry, no more, no less. Say, if you like, that Eleanor's being drowsy is the *source* or *ground* of the truth of <Eleanor is drowsy>. Say, if you like, that Eleanor's being drowsy is the said proposition's *truth-conferrer*. But handle these metaphors with care. The literal truth in the vicinity is that <Eleanor is drowsy> is true because Eleanor is drowsy, and not *vice versa;* and in saying this we give a conceptual explanation, not a metaphysical one.

10. It is open to the minimalist about truth to offer a conceptual explanation of truth's asymmetry. This explanation is plausible, avoids appeal to partially understood and esoteric metaphysical dependence relations, and survives the extant objections made to it. So my conclusion is this: troubling objections to minimalism may exist, but that it cannot explain the truth asymmetry is not one of them.

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NOTES

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[1] In this paper I follow Paul Horwich (1998: 10) in taking propositions to be the bearers of truth. I also follow him in writing '<*p*> is true' for 'the proposition that *p* is true'.

[2] Here I adopt Jennifer Hornsby's names for the two schemas (Hornsby 2005: 42). The familiar paradoxical exceptions to

(E) <*p*> is true if and only if *p*

are also exceptions to (GS). Some think that further restrictions are in order. Gonzalo Rodriguez-Pereyra (2005: 18), for example, denies that replacing the occurrences of '*p*' in (GS) with a sentence expressing an analytic truth yields a true instance of (GS). But such niceties do not matter for my present purpose, since all agree that there is a large class of true sentences that supply true instances of (GS) but false instances of (ConGS).

[3] As Benjamin Schnieder explains (2010: 321), the asymmetry of explanation consists in the truth of the following: $\forall x \forall y(x \text{ explains } y \rightarrow \neg y \text{ explains } x)$; and a connective '$\triangleright$' is asymmetric $\Box_{df.}$ $\forall p \forall q((p \triangleright q) \rightarrow \neg(q \triangleright p))$.

[4] The truthmaker principle is the thesis that necessarily, if <*p*> is true, then there is some entity in virtue of which <*p*> is true (Rodriguez-Pereyra 2005: 18). Those who have questioned its motivation include Julian Dodd (2002: 79–80), David Lewis (1992: 216; 2001: 612–614), and Fraser MacBride (2016: §3).

[5] For more on grounding, see Clark and Liggins 2012, Correia and Schnieder (eds.) 2012, Rosen 2010, and Schaffer 2009, 2010.

[6] See, for instance, Daly 2012, Hofweber 2009, and Wilson 2014.

[7] This insubstantiality is why, in most non-philosophical contexts, someone who asked 'Why is it true that Eleanor is drowsy?' would feel dissatisfied by the answer: 'because she is drowsy' (Künne 2003: 150).

[8] In fact, Künne's definition of cognitive equivalence replaces my 'without thereby being disposed' with 'without immediately being ready'. I take Künne's somewhat unclear locution to be explained by mine.

In addition, adopting the dispositional explication of cognitive equivalence nicely enables us to explain away alleged counter-examples to the thesis that the respective left-hand sides and right-hand sides of the relevant instances of (GS) are cognitively equivalent. For example, although someone sceptical about the existence of propositions might believe '*p*' to express a truth without believing the same of '<*p*> is true', this will be a matter of her disposition to believe that the latter sentence expresses a truth being defeated by her scepticism about the existence of propositions. (Essentially the same response can be made in the case of someone who holds an evaluative sentence, '*Fa*', to express a truth and yet, since she takes there to be no evaluative property *F* to serve as a constituent of <*Fa*>, denies the existence of the proposition that must exist if '<Fa> is true' is to express a truth. Here the disposition to believe that the latter sentence expresses a truth is defeated by a commitment to anti-realism about the evaluative properties concerned.)

I thank an anonymous referee for raising these cases.

[9] Künne does not get this point quite right when he claims that the *explanans* in any conceptual explanation 'elucidates the sense' of its *explanandum* (Künne 2003: 155). For one thing, putting the point in Künne's way might create the misleading impression that a purported conceptual explanation of why *a* is *F* is really an explanation of why the *predicate* '*F*' applies to *a*. Second, and as we shall see in the next paragraph, although the *explanantia* of some conceptual explanations point out that the relevant application conditions for *F* are fulfilled by offering (complete or partial) conceptual analyses of the concept *F*, not all do. (11) is a conceptual explanation, but the concept *coloured* cannot be analysed in terms of the concept *red*.

[10] (12) is a conceptual explanation that, due to the form of its *explanandum*, does not explain why an object counts as having a certain property. Despite this, the 'counting' locution distinctive of conceptual explanations applies here too. (12) exploits the conceptual truth that triple negation and single negation are equivalent to explain why it *counts as true* that ¬¬¬Snow is black.

[11] It should be noted that the decrease in conceptual complexity left-to-right across the 'because' in (12) involves a kind of conceptual complexity that must be explained in terms of concept-tokens, rather than in terms of concept-types (as is the case in the conceptual complexity in play in (8) to (11)). It does not follow from this, however, that 'conceptual complexity' is ambiguous, only that there are two ways in which one sentence can be less conceptually complex another: by involving concepts

that are more basic, and by using fewer tokens of the same concept(s).

[12] At first blush, a critic might wonder whether the following instance of (GS) provides a counter-example to my account of how the direction of a conceptual explanation is determined:

(14) <<*p*> is true> is true because <*p*> is true.

Unlike the case of (1), the right-hand side of (14) contains no concept that is more primitive than some concept figuring on the left-hand side, since the two sides of the 'because' share exactly the same concepts. Does this not show that there can be conceptual explanations whose direction is not determined by factors of conceptual complexity? No. It is nevertheless true that the right-hand side of (14) is less conceptually complex than the left-hand side, and this for the same reason given in the case of (12). Although the *explanandum* and *explanans* in (14) deploy exactly the same concepts, the *explanans* does so in a less complex way: in this instance, by using a level of semantic descent to dispense with the *explanandum*'s nested proposition and iterated use of the truth predicate.

[13] In fact, David says 'analytic'. This will turn out to be important in what follows.

[14] Peter Millican denies even this much, arguing that the flaw in the argument lies in a subtle scope ambiguity in the key phrase, 'something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought' (Millican 2004).

[15] It should be noted, too, that as long as we characterise conceptual truths as I do – that is to say, as necessary and *a priori* knowable – Liggins's claim that such truths lack ontological commmitments looks susceptible to counter-example. 'The null set exists' would seem to be a necessary truth knowable *a priori*. (I thank an anonymous referee for this observation.)

Liggins, however, prefers an account of conceptual truths as analytic, and he takes an analytic truth to be 'a sentence true in virtue of its meaning' (Liggins 2016: 89); so perhaps he is operating with a demanding account of conceptual truths that prevents 'The null set exists' from counting as conceptual. But I would like to make two points at this stage. Schnieder, whose claim that the T-biconditionals are conceptual truths is the target of Liggins's criticisms, does not commit himself to such a demanding account of conceptual truths and, indeed, does not use the word 'analytic' to describe them. Second, Liggins does not motivate or defend an account of conceptual truths that rules out the envisaged counter-

example to his claim that such truths have no ontological commitments.

I return to the question of the nature of conceptual truths below.

[16] Liggins made this suggestion in correspondence and in an earlier draft of his 2016.

[17] At this point, the sceptic might reply as follows. Just as 'because' has a non-explanatory use, so does 'why'. To draw on the example involved in (21), someone unconvinced that Eleanor has been making toast might utter 'Why was Eleanor making toast?' as a request for evidence rather than explanation. So perhaps 'why' functions in this non-explanatory way in the questions prompting (8)-(12), thereby indicating that the answers to these questions are not explanations.

This response is ingenious but I am unconvinced by it. First, I find it difficult to detect a non-explanatory use of 'why' even in the putative example of it with which we have been supplied. Someone asking why Eleanor has been making toast (as opposed to why we should *believe* that she has been making toast) is seeking an explanation of why this behaviour has occurred, not evidence of its having done so. Second, the claimed conceptual explanations that serve as answers to the *why* questions cited above state facts that are not merely suitable for serving as evidence for its being the case that *p*, but facts which (we want to say) *make* it the case that *p*. That 17's only divisors are itself and 1 may, indeed, be one's justification for believing that 17 is a prime number, but in this case its justificatory strength consists in the fact that this is what *makes* 17 a prime number. My proposal concerning the nature of conceptual explanation amounts to a gloss on this notion of *making* for such cases. The fact that 17's only divisors are itself and 1 makes it the case that 17 is prime in the following sense: given our concept *prime number*, the obtaining of the said fact entails that 17 falls under this concept (*i.e.* that 17 *counts* as prime in the sense introduced earlier).

[18] This way of describing the view is not Wiggins's, but borrowed from Michael Morris (1992: 16), who does much to clarify the kind of 'conceptualist' position that Wiggins wishes to adopt. The reason why conceptualism does not imply that we construct reality is, first, that it is *our concepts*, and not acts of singling out, which fix the natures of worldly objects, properties, and facts and, second, that our concepts exist timelessly (or, at least, sempiternally). This enables the conceptualist to do justice to the commonsensical realist thought that, for example, the white cliffs of Dover existed before there was any sentient life.

[19] Two clarifications are in order at this stage. First, by 'true sentence' here, I mean 'true sentence-type'. Second, I want to leave room for the possibility that there are facts expressible by sentence-types that we cannot (as we are now) understand. As McDowell puts it, '[t]here is no guarantee that the world is completely within the reach of a system of concepts and conceptions as it stands at some particular moment in its historical development' (McDowell 1996: 40).

[20] That the facts are conceptualized in the sense of being essentially expressible by sentence-types does not entail that every fact admits of conceptual explanation. That some fact admits of conceptual explanation is determined, not by its being essentially expressible, but by its being the case that its explanation rests on objective relations between concepts that are encoded in conceptual truths.

[21] All of these ways of speaking are owed to Crispin Wright: (1992: 26), (1996: 940), and (1988: 28,) respectively.