Ontology and Acceptance
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1. Introduction

According to Beebee (2018), methodological problems and intractable disagreement in philosophy suggest that we should not believe any philosophical claims, but (in brief) accept them as working hypotheses. Beebee takes van Fraasseen (1980) as inspiration, whose scientific instrumentalism recommends such "acceptance" for claims about unobservables in microphysics. In this paper, I argue that Beebee-style acceptance faces problems which have no analogue for van Fraasssen-style acceptance. In short, philosophical beliefs for the equilibrist are not optional in a way that beliefs about microphysics are. Or rather, that is so unless a fairly radical deflationism about truth and meaning is joined with equilibrism. For what it's worth, I am not entirely opposed to this under certain qualifications. Regardless, radical deflationism would be a significant liability for equilibrism, and so it is unlikely to be welcomed by Beebee.

2. Getting Oriented

Beebee adopts the label 'equilibrism' to signal an alignment with Lewis (1983). When despairing about persistent, widespread disagreement among philosophers, Lewis declares:

> Our [philosophical] 'intuitions' are simply opinions…and a reasonable goal for a philosopher is [only] to bring them into equilibrium. Our common task is to find out what equilibria there are that can withstand examination. (p. x)

Take heed that Lewis describes two tasks here, one for the individual, and one for the collective. Lewis presumes that the individual already has philosophical beliefs concerning (say) the

existence of God, of values, of ordinary objects, etc. Philosophical inquiry is then an attempt to resolve various gaps and gluts among these pre-existing beliefs. But not all individuals start with the same philosophical beliefs, and not all individuals want to resolve gluts and gaps in the same way. This gives rise to the intractable disagreements. The individual can bring her own beliefs into equilibrium, but the ambition of establishing consensus begins to look foolish, and this motivates an alternative collective task. Philosophers should instead test which sets of beliefs (at an internal equilibrium) can withstand external, dialectical stress. Identifying the "resilient" equilibria in the face of dialectical pressure would indeed be worth knowing about.

Beebee adds to Lewis's view, however, a kind of metaphilosophical skepticism. Widespread disagreement on philosophical matters means that we should not commit to philosophical propositions in a way that amounts to *belief*. But here's the twist: If the individual lacks philosophical beliefs, she would have nothing to bring into equilibrium, which would scuttle the equilibrist program. Beebee replies, however, that the believing-attitude toward philosophical propositions should be supplanted with an attitude of *acceptance* in the style of van Fraassen. Acceptance here means that adopting philosophical propositions merely as "working hypotheses." Later, we shall unpack this further. For now, suffice it to say that it is a more tentative attitude than belief. Yet accepted propositions still have truth-values and can be brought into internal equilibrium, thus forming a stable philosophical "view." In this manner, Lewis's agenda for philosophy might be preserved while respecting Beebee's prescription against philosophical belief.

Nonetheless, as Beebee is aware, van Fraassen-style acceptance is not a good model in one respect. For van Fraassen, acceptance of a theory principally means believing in its *empirical adequacy*. But normally, philosophical theories are at such a far remove from the empirical fray

that, vacuously, they will be compatible with the empirical data. And surely not all of these are ripe for "acceptance."

Beebee of course agrees that empirical adequacy is not central for whether a philosophical theory should be accepted. If I understand her correctly, Beebee instead suggests we focus on "dialectical adequacy," i.e., whether a philosophical theory can withstand various objections that a philosophical audience might raise. What is more, there is the suggestion (also based in van Fraassen) that acceptance means having a certain commitment to the theory, albeit not a commitment to its literal truth. It is rather a *practical* commitment to develop the theory further as new evidence comes in—or as new philosophical arguments arise, as the case may be. (But I expect there are limits: If a theory accumulates too many problems, it presumably should be abandoned.)

However, Beebee seems to inherit from Lewis an optimistic view about the potency of dialectic. Early on, Beebee approvingly cites Lycan (2019) as similarly frustrated by the lack of consensus in philosophy. But part of why Lycan is frustrated is the perceived *ineffectiveness* of dialectic in disqualifying philosophical views. Consider that among his "cynical sociological observations," we have this zinger:

> Any interesting philosophical view faces tough objections that can be answered by
> anyone who really holds the view. (p. 75)

Elsewhere (Lycan 2022), Lycan expresses pessimism about dialectic in the claim that the only way to refute a philosophical position is by (quoting n. 1):

> (a) actually deducing a contradiction from it,
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> (b) showing it to contradict well-established science, or
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> (c) à la Moore, by exhibiting conflict with a plain everyday truth.

The implicature is clear that such things are uncommon. Yet if so, that seems bad for Beebee. For most any philosophical theory then appears to qualify as "dialectically adequate." And so again, Beebee looks poised to "accept" most any philosophical theory. The rejoinder from Beebee, however, would be to raise the standards on what is dialectically adequate. Yet as far as I know, she has not yet articulated in more precise terms what dialectical adequacy requires. And so, although equilibrism is far from refuted, it remains a bit murky on what deserves acceptance.[1]

3. Is Philosophical Belief Avoidable? Round One

My principal question, however, is whether Beebee can comply with the prescription to avoid belief in philosophical propositions. My thesis is that she cannot, unless she accepts a wide-ranging (and controversial) version of deflationism about meaning and truth. But bracketing deflationism for now, I shall suggest that Beebee's equilibrist (henceforth, just 'equilibrist') unavoidably believes at least one philosophical proposition.

The primary argument shall depend on further details on what acceptance amounts to for the equilibrist, and there remain a number of possibilities. The argument will thus take a bit of time to unfold. But before embarking, it is worth noting a few quick-and-dirty arguments for the same thesis. My point is to show awareness of these arguments, yet to explain why I find them limited, despite an affinity for their conclusion.

One argument begins by reminding us that the equilibrist often judges whether a set of beliefs is at an internal equilibrium, and judges how much dialectical pressure the belief-set can withstand. But judgment is a kind of belief; if I judge that p, then I believe that p, at least on a natural reading of 'judge' and 'believe'. Moreover, a judgment that "value realism can achieve

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[1] In conversation, Lycan once self-identified as an "equilibrist," but he may have had Lewis's view in mind more than Beebee's. Again, the difference is that Lewis does not advise against philosophical belief.

internal equilibrium" and that "value realism can withstand a substantial amount of dialectical pressure" are pretty clearly philosophical judgments. After all, internal equilibrium and dialectical pressure concern (at least in part) how well the relevant beliefs meet a kind of coherence-condition, both internally and in relation to the beliefs of others. Moreover, as expressed canonically by Bonjour (1985), coherence is not mere logical consistency; it is a much thicker notion that involves explanation, ideological and ontological parsimony, and more. It therefore seems like a *philosophical* notion, meaning that judgments about coherence suffice for a believing attitude toward *bona fide* philosophical propositions. Thus, insofar as Beebee requires such judgments, she is immersed in philosophical belief.

A second, quick argument is rather similar. The key observation is that equilibrism judges that philosophical belief should be withheld in light of persistent, widespread disagreement among professionals. But such a judgment itself seems sufficient for a philosophical belief; it is a metabelief about the evidential appropriateness of philosophical beliefs. So here too, the equilibrist succumbs to philosophical belief.

Third argument: Beebee has a philosophical account of what acceptance is, to wit, it is adopting a proposition as a working hypothesis. And following on that, she will make judgments about *which* hypotheses are optimal for doing philosophical "work." Now perhaps her account of acceptance is a purely psychological account rather than a philosophical one. Yet judgments about *which* hypotheses best serve philosophical work seem undeniably (meta)philosophical in kind.[2]

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[2] Fourth argument: Equlibrists believe in the existence of pervasive disagreement in philosophy. Yet it turns out that even this is philosophically debatable. Stoljar (2017) provides a compelling case that disagreement is *not* pervasive;, suggesting that there is widespread and increasing *agreement* in philosophy too. Still, I relegate this fourth argument to a footnote; Stoljar's view surely will provoke an "incredulous stare." And even if it does not, the argument against equilibrism would remain flimsy—the same rebuttal is available as to the other three arguments of this section.

But all three arguments above can be rebutted quite effectively. The equilibrist can just "double down," as it were, and politely report that she merely accepts propositions about which hypotheses work, that she merely accepts that philosophical belief should be withheld, and that she merely accepts that various belief-sets are equilibria that can withstand a fair amount of dialectical pressure. We might want to say in reply, "well, don't you *believe* that you merely accept these philosophical claims? And isn't *that* a (meta)philosophical belief?" But this gets us nowhere, for the equilibrist may again politely reply "I merely accept that I merely accept those claims…" and so on.[3] The tactic may feel like sophistry, but it would be wildly unfair if we let that feeling sway us. Equilibrism deserves a better shot.[4]

4. Is Philosophical Belief Avoidable? Round Two (Pragmatic Attitudes)

In contrast to the quick arguments, the argument developed below is that acceptance of a philosophical proposition p will require, at some stage or other, a believing-attitude toward a philosophical proposition q. So acceptance of p will unavoidably implicate a philosophical belief, contra Beebee's prescription. Again, the argument will depend on the details of "acceptance" and different views are possible. The strategy will thus be to consider these one-by-one, showing that each suggests, albeit in different ways, that acceptance of a philosophical p rests on belief in a philosophical q. (The exception will be a deflationary view, but as alluded to, such an account avoids philosophical belief only by embracing a rather unpopular stance.)

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[3] This stalemate also occurs when directly confronting Beebee with "do you *believe* equilibrism?"

[4] Some may instead object to the timid kind of self-knowledge that results from all this. Apparently, Beebee accepts that she may very well believe one of these philosophical claims, although she does not accept that. Yet on second thought, timid self-knowledge seems exactly in line with Beebee's ethos of intellectual humility. Contra the objector, I find this aspect of her view appealing.

Timid self-knowledge also helps defuse a *cogito*-style argument for certainty in the existence of acceptance. The argument would be that if Beebee accepts that acceptance exists, then by that very fact, acceptance certainly exists. Beebee's retort? "Philosophical arguments never create certainty, or so I accept. Thus, I would say that I accept the existence of acceptance, but maybe I am wrong about that."

Prima facie, it may seem strange to say that multiple accounts of acceptance remain in the running, for Beebee herself proposed that to accept means to adopt a philosophical claim as a "working hypothesis." However, the "working hypothesis" account is in danger of imputing philosophical beliefs. The key word is 'adopt'. To "adopt" a philosophical proposition as a working hypothesis should not mean *believing* it, even if it is believed only for pragmatic reasons. And it invites circularity to say that adopting means *accepting* the claim as a "working hypothesis." So what is adopting?

Beebee could just say that acceptance as hypothesis-adoption (on pragmatic grounds) is *like* belief except weaker. Like belief, it rationally motivates further research into a theory. But unlike belief, it is not a commitment to the literal truth of the theory (and we do well here to think again of van Fraassen).[5] However: If there is *no* commitment to truth, it is puzzling how acceptance of a philosophical theory is indicative of one's philosophical "view." Recall that this is indeed one desideratum for Beebee; acceptance is supposed to be a sincere alignment with a theory over its competitors, which nonetheless falls short of belief (2018, p. 18). Moreover, such alignment is *not* a desideratum for van Fraassen. Van Fraassen exploits microphysics for research purposes with only a pragmatist's attitude. And so, it would be quite misleading to suggest that current microphysics is part of his scientific *view*. To the contrary, his pessimism toward microphysics seems at least as great as his optimism, and one might readily suspect it is greater.

Similarly, philosophers often pursue a research program while being fairly incredulous about it. So to understand things just in terms of research pursuits would not make acceptance

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[5] Besides van Fraasssen-style acceptance, Beebee also considers but rejects the attitudes proposed by Goldberg (2013) and by Barnett (2019). She suggests that these authors cave too much to the higher-order evidence from peer disagreement. (Beebee herself feels the pressure from peer disagreement—so her point is apparently that Goldberg and Barnett go too far. But how so exactly? I am not clear on this.)

indicative of a philosopher's sincere "view." The pragmatic attitude thus seems insufficient for the view-forming feature that Beebee is seeking.[6]

But there is perhaps one way in which a philosophical theory can be a "working hypothesis" that does not extend to scientific theories. Consider that if value realism is deployed in decision making, that might facilitate things considerably. I can then treat values as straightforwardly real, rather than as (say) mere preferences rooted in myself or my culture. That avoids "open questions" about whether decisions based on these values have normative force. This approach is available even if I am ultimately agnostic about value realism. Value realism then does "work" for me, beyond supplying a research paradigm. As a different example, I might navigate through my cluttered office guided by the thought that ordinary, middle-sized dry goods exist. Without that, reaching the other side would be a matter of luck, I assure you. Again, this expedient is available even if I have no settled view on whether mereological nihilism is true.

Such philosophical ideas function as tools for action within what Sellars (1962) calls the "manifest image." I suspect it would enrich the account of acceptance to incorporate this.[7] Even so, acceptance in the enriched sense still looks insufficient for indicating one's philosophical "view." Again, value realism or anti-nihilism can function this way even despite agnosticism. Some even use these tools while positively rejecting them in the philosopher's study. And so, it remains elusive how acceptance indicates sincere alignment with a philosophical thesis over its competitors, in a way that does not amount to belief.

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[6] This point still holds even if the equilibrist switches to talking of "regarding" or "treating" or "using" a philosophical claim as a working hypothesis. In all cases, the pragmatic attitude may be implicated, but it again fails to reveal a non-believing attitude which nonetheless suffices for a kind of sincere endorsement.

[7] At least, it helps counter Daly's (n.d.) objection to Beebee that philosophical theories do not really do "work" outside of the discipline.

The broader lesson is that it is one thing to use a thesis opportunistically (in research or beyond), and it is another thing to endorse it in some sense or other. Beebee has thus far explained acceptance in the former way, but she intends it to suffice for the latter as well. It starts to seem that what she needs to add is some sort of belief, if only tentative or highly defeasible belief.[8] But that of course will land us with philosophical beliefs, contra the intention.

5. Is Philosophical Belief Avoidable? Round Three (Low-ish Credences)

More promising, perhaps, is to identify the mere-acceptance attitude with a relatively low subjective probability or credence.[9] Imagine, for example, that I accept a four-dimensionalist view of ordinary objects, and hence, accept neither 3-dimensionalism nor mereological nihilism. Assuming (for simplicity's sake) that these exhaust the possibilities, my acceptance may then amount to a credence of $\approx$.5 in 4D, in contrast to (say) a credence of $\approx$.3 in 3D and a credence of $\approx$.2 in nihilism. (I shall normally omit '$\approx$', but it should be understood as implicit.) From my perspective, the truth of 4D as about likely as its falsity—and so, my attitude would certainly not qualify as belief. But I nonetheless regard 4D as more likely than any individual alternative. That may be a clear sense in which I "accept" 4D among the possible options without believing it.[10]

One important fact is that "credences" here concern *rational* credences; a typical philosopher has no patience for non-rational credences. In which case, my "credence" in 4D is

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[8] But this raises a different sort of question. Why exactly should Beebee's metaphilosophical skepticism discount even *tentative* or *highly defeasible* beliefs in philosophical claims? Perhaps it is because methodological problems and peer disagreement have already defeated them. Yet then, why wouldn't the warrant for acceptance also be defeated? I am unsure how Beebee would reply.

[9] This is not to imply that subjective probability is the only kind of probability (and not even that it is the most important kind), but just that it has theoretical utility in the present case. When it comes to the interpretation of probability, even that arch-critic of Bayesianism, Deborah Mayo, once admitted (in conversation) "we're all pluralists now."

[10] I am willing to allow that some credences well above .5 may still amount to mere acceptance. E.g., my credence that Fodor's concept-nativism is false may be at .7, and yet still not amount to belief. But having noted this, let us now bracket the matter.

(tacitly) assumed to be, e.g., probabilistically coherent with all my other credences. But probabilistic coherence is not the only factor. General coherence-conditions should also constrain credences (Foley 1987). The basic intuition here is that a personal credence in *p* should not be indifferent to how well *p* coheres with the rest of your theory—and that seems close to uncontroversial. But then the relevant sort of credence would also rest on judgments about coherence-conditions, which as we saw in the previous section, are philosophically "thick." Thus, having a .5 credence would depend on beliefs about philosophical matters. That of course would be contra Beebee's prescription.

Yet the equilibrist may "double down" here too, replying that she can merely accept hypotheses about how well 4D meets various coherence conditions. But in this particular instance, the tactic would invite trouble. It is now agreed that a credence rests on assumptions; this presumably means that a credence would be determined on the basis of these assumptions. So for example, if the relevant coherence-conditions are named by 'C', then my credence for 4D would be determined as per the following deductive argument (where again the concern is with rational subjective probabilities only):

(1) 4D meets conditions C to degree *n*.

(2) If (1) is true, then the subjective probability of 4D is .5

(3) So, the subjective probability of 4D is .5. [From (1) and (2)]

Recall that the equilibrist's current gambit is that (1) and (2) are each merely accepted as well, meaning that each has some low-ish credence (albeit one that is higher than the credence for any competing claims). But this creates a problem once we remember that the conclusion of an argument can be no more likely than the conjunction of its premises. Applied to the present case,

if we assume that (1) and (2) each have a .5 credence as well, then the conclusion can have a subjective probability of no more than .25.

This might be something Beebee could live with, seeing it as a kind of second-order humility about first-order credences. But the problem is that a credence of .25 edges toward *disbelief* in the conclusion, i.e., toward a belief in its negation. Thus far, however, the point is tendentious—a credence of .75 is not obviously enough for belief. Yet one should admit at this point that premise (1) is really a conjunction of several claims regarding the various aspects of coherence (logical consistency, ontological and ideological parsimony, explanatory-predictive scope, etc.). Even if some of these conjuncts are not philosophical propositions, some of them are—and none will have probability 1. So once we multiply together all these probabilities, it is reasonably clear that premise (1) will have a significantly lower probability than .25. That, in turn, will bring us beyond the penumbra into the disbelieving territory.

In concrete terms, it forces me to positively reject that I have a credence of $\approx.5$ in 4D, even though that is my credence ex hypothesi. That alone is disturbing. But for Beebee, what's worse is that believing that I do *not* have that credence suffices for a philosophical belief. Again, credences here are rational credences, so my belief concerns the *irrationality* of $\approx.5$ being a rational credence in 4D. That kind of epistemic-normative belief concerning a subjective, personal likelihood re: 4D is pretty clearly philosophical in kind.

One more thought. Could the equilibrist backtrack a bit, suggesting that acceptance is not a matter of having *rational* credence but just a (possibly non-rational) credence? That would block the current objections and may even be an admirable sort of humility. ("Accepting" a philosophical thesis would not include any implication that it is rational to do so, not even relative to the individual's own evidential perspective!) The problem here, however, is that

Beebee accepts that acceptance *is* a rational attitude to have toward philosophical claims, given the methodological problems and widespread disagreement within philosophy. Thus, the proposed backtracking would conflict with what has already been accepted.

6. Is Philosophical Belief Avoidable? Round Four (Fictionalist Discourse)

So we are still seeking to understand the Beebee's kind of acceptance, where acceptance of a philosophical claim does not covertly indulge in philosophical belief. The next idea one might have, again with van Fraassen in mind, is to opt for a "fictionalist" understanding. Although, n.b., while some versions of constructive empiricism are fictionalist, it is ultimately misleading to describe van Fraassen's version this way (See Armour-Garb & Woodbridge 2015, ch. 1, for excellent discussion.) Still, since we have now appreciated a discontinuity between Beebee and van Fraassen, this may be a good sign.[11]

The fictionalist would understand philosophical utterances as a kind of storytelling, where neutrality is maintained on whether elements of the story are true. 'Story' may have the connotation that its elements are positively false—and while that is always a possibility, no element must be deemed false to be part of the story. Indeed, some novels have factual elements; *War and Peace* mentions Napoleon as the then-leader of France (Kripke's 2013 example). Regardless, to understand an utterance as part of a "story" is, at the very least, not to be committed to the truth of the utterance.

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[11] For his part, Daly (n.d.) interprets Beebee as a fictionalist about philosophical discourse. He then objects that such fictionalism requires belief in various philosophical propositions. I concur with Daly's conclusion, yet on somewhat different grounds. My suspicion is that the equilibrist could reply to Daly with the "doubling down" tactic, where the alleged philosophical beliefs required for a fictionalist treatment of the discourse could be replaced with acceptance.

Applied to philosophical discourse, my uttering 'Statues have temporal parts' would not express a commitment to its literal truth, but rather to participate in a practice of storytelling.[12] Yet my telling the 4D-story would be what constitutes my acceptance of 4D over the alternatives. Thus far, however, it is unexplained how my utterance of 'Statues have temporal parts' can be non-committal, yet still be saying something about statues and temporal parts. How exactly does that work?

There are different views. One is Lewis's (1978) prefix semantics, where an utterance can commit the speaker to its truth-in-fiction, yet not commit the speaker to its truth. In general, prefix semantics interpret storytelling utterances in line with the following example:

 (i) 'Sherlock Holmes lives in London' is true iff, according to the Conan Doyle stories, Sherlock Holmes lives in London.

Thus, an utterance of 'Sherlock Holmes lives in London' is literally true on this interpretation, yet it does not commit the speaker to Holmes living in actual-world London. It commits the speaker only to the relevant *fiction* claiming that Holmes lives in London.

Similarly, my acceptance of 4D could be a matter of my uttering sentences like 'Statues have temporal parts'. But crucially, these would not be interpreted as not as claims about what is actually true, but rather as claims about what a certain philosophical theory says. Explicitly, 'Statues have temporal parts' when uttered by me would be interpreted as follows:

(ii) 'Statues have temporal parts' is true iff, according to the four-dimensionalist theory, statues have temporal parts.

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[12] By the way, it may be advisable for Beebee to apply fictionalism more broadly. If she asserts a commonsense truth like '*David* is in Florence,' the belief expressed seems philosophical, given that it entails the existence of a statue, hence, the falsity of mereological nihilism. But if the utterance is instead shorthand for 'According to a non-nihilist view, *David* is in Florence', then the belief expressed would not contradict nihilism, and so, would perhaps escape being philosophical. However, the idea that ordinary language generally has a fictionalist semantics is an empirical claim and would require linguistic evidence before it could be favored.

So note well: My utterance would not amount to the expression of a four-dimensionalist *belief*. It would not express that actual-world statues have actual-world temporal parts—rather, it would express only that *four dimensionalism* makes such a claim.[13]

Yet there must be more than this, for even a three-dimensionalist could utter 'Statues have temporal parts' if it is interpreted in this manner. Again, it just amounts to a non-committal description of what four-dimensionalism alleges—and the three-dimensionalist can very well agree that four-dimensionalism alleges the temporal parts of statues. So, for there to be an *acceptance* of four-dimensionalism, there must be some addition by 4D is part of the speaker's philosophical view.

But here is where things stall. We are looking to supplement (ii) in a way that makes 'Statues have temporal parts' something only that a four-dimensionalist would utter. Sure, only a four-dimensionalist would accept the four-dimensionalist fiction, yet that point just makes for circularity. The alternative, however, would be add that the four-dimensionalist *believes* the theory. Yet of course, that is a philosophical belief, contra Beebee's metaphilosophical prescription.

The problem is, in fact, not specific to Lewis's account of storytelling. Consider Walton (1990), who leaves unchanged the semantics of 'Sherlock Holmes lives in London' and instead modifies the illocutionary force of its utterance. The idea is that even though the sentence is interpreted literally and thus is false, the speaker's utterance is not an *assertion* of the sentence but (more or less) a *pretend-assertion*. The speaker thus does not express belief in its truth. In like manner, applied to 'Statues have temporal parts', the utterance could also be seen as failing

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[13] I deliberately leave open whether the fictionalist interpretation is meant to be descriptive or prescriptive vis-à-vis my utterance of 'Statues have temporal parts' (cf. Burgess & Rosen's 2002 distinction between hermeneutic vs. revolutionary fictionalism). Either fictionalist approach would suit my purposes in this context.

to express a commitment (i.e., a belief). Yet for Beebee's purposes, the fictionalist again goes too far—even a three-dimensionalist could *pretend* that 'Statues have temporal parts' is true. Once more, some addition is needed to distinguish the four-dimensionalist. But the obvious (non-circular) addition is to say that unlike the three-dimensionalist, that the four-dimensionalist *believes* what the sentence says. That would disqualify the fictionalist account for Beebee's purposes.[14]

Fictionalism is, in the first place, a way to talk the talk without walking the ontological walk. That is perhaps clearest in the case of modal fictionalism (Rosen 1990, Nolan 2002), where possible-worlds discourse is preserved and the ontological commitments are *completely removed*. Yet ontological commitments—in some sense or other—is part of what Beebee needs in her account of "accepting" a philosophical claim. So fictionalism *per se* is ill-suited for her. Note, again, that the parallel issue does not arise for constructive empiricism. Van Fraasseen does *not* incline toward the truth of microphysics at all, despite opportunistically using it as a working hypothesis (for various empirical purposes).

7. Is Philosophical Belief Avoidable? Final Round (Deflationary Attitudes)

Fictionalism may seem at cross-purposes with equilibrism for another reason. In the first instance, fictionalism is an account of a discourse; the account hopes to explain how one can use the discourse without incurring its ontological commitments. Equilibrism, on the other hand, is looking for a special sort of propositional attitude, a non-believing yet sincere pro-attitude toward philosophical claim. Granted, some propositional attitudes can be identified by the

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[14] On occasion, fictionalists appeal to Davidson's (1978) account of metaphor to fill out the details of storytelling instead. But the same kind of issue reccurs. The three-dimensionalist may very well affirm a *non-literal* reading of 'Statues have temporal parts', and so again, we need to add that the four-dimensionalist believes it, making things uncongenial to Beebee.

sentences that express them. But fictionalism *starts* with a skeptical attitude toward the ontology of a discourse, and tries to recast the discourse so that it floats free of the ontology.[15]

Yet in principle, there's no reason not to go in reverse, starting with a semantics for a discourse, and then highlighting an attitude expressed by certain parts of the discourse. That is the stratagem of the final account of acceptance. Here, we begin with a *deflationary semantics* for philosophical discourse, and then identify the characteristic propositional attitude expressed by its declaratives. My suggestion will be that the attitude we find here *is* apt for Beebee's purposes—it is a non-believing attitude that nonetheless suffices for a kind of endorsement. Yet in order to make this deflationary option work, Beebee will be forced to accept not just that philosophical discourse has a deflationary truth-predicate, but also that her language more broadly *lacks* an inflated truth predicate. For my part, this does not necessarily spell doom, although caveats are required. Regardless, such uncompromising deflationism would make Beebee's position substantially more controversial than has been hitherto recognized.

For our purposes, a deflationary semantics can be identified (roughly) with a truth-conditional semantics—except that the truth-predicate does not express a robust semantic relation of "correspondence" or "representation" between a sentence and the world.[16] Rather, the theoretical function of the predicate consists entirely in its interlinguistic, inferential role. This role (in a classical language) is exhausted by inferences licensed by the scheme:

(T) "*p*" is true* iff *p*.

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[15] As a mental fictionalist, I in fact would not ultimately say that fictionalism always starts with propositional attitudes. There's no need to delve into this here but interested parties may consult Parent et al. (in press).

[16] The present deflationism thus departs from a minimalist view such as Horwich's (1990), where truth* is predicated of propositions rather than sentences. Deflationism might also be thought to conflict with truth-conditional semantics, and for a time, there was debate on whether this was so. But it seems less of an issue now, and I concur that they are compatible for reasons given in Bar-On et al. (2000).

I add the asterisk to maintain clarity that the predicate is not necessarily the same as 'true' in natural language. In fact, the natural-language 'true' is likely used in an inflationary way, at least in some contexts.[17] Still, we can think of the deflationary semantics as concerning the fragment of English where 'true' is used in a deflationary way—if only by explicit stipulation—where it is the dual of classical negation (a useful description from Beall 2018).

The scheme tells us that the inferential role of 'true*' is that of licensing disquotational and converse-disquotational maneuvers. From the ascription of truth* to a sentence, the sentence can be deduced, and vice-versa. The *locus classicus* is Quine (1970), although I am more informed by works collected in Field (2001). One element of Field's approach is a certain computational perspective (see especially his chapter 5). The utterance of a deflated declarative is akin to a computer tokening a string of symbols for processing by means of purely syntactic rules. I shall return to this shortly. However, the essential point about deflationism is that declarative sentences are assigned non-representational truth*-conditions only. The articulation of a sentence's truth*-condition is inferentially equivalent to the sentence itself, and that exhausts the matter.

The motivation for deflationism is not just dissatisfaction with inflationary semantics, but also the desire to avoid problematic ontologies suggested by various discourses on their face-value readings. Field, for instance, is keen to avoid the Platonist ontology of mathematical discourse. Putting ontology at arm's length would also fit with Beebee's metaphilosophical humility; thus, deflationism regarding philosophical discourse could seem apropos.

The central idea would be that acceptance is the attitude that is (normally) expressed by a philosophical declarative on its deflated interpretation. But in line with Field's computational

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[17] Cf. the non-disquotational examples of 'true' provided in Parent (2023).

perspective, this would not really be an "attitude" at all, at least not in the folk psychological sense. Uttering a deflated declarative is simply producing the declarative for subsequent use in inferential processes. If one wanted to anthropomorphize computation, one could say that the declarative is "endorsed" by a syntactic engine as an input for processing, insofar as it will use that declarative and not use others. Even so, the basic phenomenon is just the tokening of the declarative and its subsequent processing, without any separate event of "endorsement" occurring along the way. This would be the model for deflated declaratives in human discourse.

Aside: It is not the truth* predicate *per se* which makes for this non-believing default "attitude;" it is possible to utter ' 'God exists' is true*' and thereby express a full-blown belief in God. (Think of Jc Beall's deflationism.) It is not merely the presence of 'true*', but rather a *deflationary semantics* for the discourse which would result in the non-believing default "attitude." Consider: If a sentence has a truth*-condition only, then it does not robustly represent a condition or state-of-affairs. In other terms, it does not semantically indicate a proposition. And if it does not indicate a proposition, then its utterance will not indicate a proposition toward which the speaker has the believing attitude.

So again, non-believing acceptance could be a matter of tokening and using in inferences a deflated declarative. (Caveat: The relevant tokenings are ones where the sentence is unnegated, where it doesn't start a proof by *reductio*, etc. Also, using the sentence to instantiate logical truths or analytic equivalences doesn't count.) What amounts to the same, mere acceptance would be a matter of predicating 'is true*' to a sentence and using the truth*-ascription in inferences. But note well, ascribing truth* to a sentence is not the magic ingredient needed for deflationary acceptance, for one could instead just token and using the sentence itself. Again, this is assuming that its meaning is deflated (i.e., it has only a "meaning*").

Some looseness remains: Since one might accept a claim without ever actually tokening the relevant sentence, in what sense would acceptance be a matter of using the sentence? One could appeal to *dispositions* to using the sentence, although as is well-known, dispositions can be correct or incorrect, and there is unclarity on which dispositions are the correct ones (but see Parent 2017, §0.8). Alternatively, one could argue that one's "tokening" the sentence is really shorthand for the sentence being a member of (the closure of) a theory stored in memory. Yet difficulties arise here too. A third option would be to appeal to counterfactuals; sentences that you *would* token and use in inferences in "nearby" possible worlds. That certainly leaves much unclarity, but the unclarity in counterfactuals is a problem for everyone; it is not the special problem of deflationary equilibrism. At any rate, I shall assume that one of the options of this paragraph is at least viable, and despite some hand-waving, shall continue speaking as if being a "user" of a sentence is tolerably clear.

So again, according to the present proposal, to be an inferential user of 'Statues have temporal parts' and other sentences from 4D (in a deflationary language) would be to accept the theory *sans* the believing-attitude. The user can be assumed consistent, in which case, acceptance of 4D *ipso facto* is a non-acceptance of competing philosophical theories. As things stand, this seems like a viable way to explicate Beebee-style acceptance. If it helps, one could say that it is an "hyper-pragmatist" approach: Acceptance consists in using (parts of) the theory in various inferential processes—yet since the business of a deflated discourse is nothing but inference, treating sentences as available for inferences *exhausts* whatever "attitude" one has toward them.

But here too, we may not have adequately separated four-dimensionalists from three-dimensionalists. A three-dimensionalist could equally well speak a deflated language, and even use 'Statues have temporal parts' in inferences. For there are still plenty of inferences at her

disposal. E.g., from the premise 'Paintings have temporal parts', there is a reasonable ampliative inference to 'Statues have temporal parts'. In which case, she is an inferential user of 'Statues have temporal parts', even though *ex hypothesi* she is not a 4D-er.

This requires us to refine what it is to be a "user" in the relevant sense. A useful analogy asks us to imagine the sentence as an essential part of the "operating system" of the user—meaning it is not simply used hypothetically (so to speak) in some add-on program. Relative to the 4D-er's operating system, 'Statues have temporal parts' would be an unconditional theorem. This would not be the case in the OS for the three-dimensionalist. I am not suggesting that people are hardwired with immutable philosophical views—an OS can receive updates, after all. But the theoremhood of 'Statues have temporal parts' within the OS is probably the best analogy for acceptance on the deflationary approach.

The deflationary Beebee has been doing reasonably well; however, there is a cloud on the horizon. Earlier, I admitted that 'true' in ordinary English may not be deflationary, at least not in all uses. Modesty would support this admission. But if 'true' has an inflationary use, then this may cause trouble. Or rather, that is so, assuming that the deflationary Beebee is user of at least one negative existential.

For concreteness' sake, suppose she accepts that there are no such things as souls. Then, on the present account, her acceptance is a matter of her inferential use of the following sentence:

(B1) 'There are no souls' is true*

And since she is keenly attuned to logical consequences, her inferential engine also uses the following:

(B2) 'There are souls' is not true*

Now as Asay (2010) observes, the following sort of principle seems beyond reproach (where we let 'True' express the inflationary use of 'true'):

(Neg)   If $\exists x\Phi x$ is not true*, then $\exists x\Phi x$ is not True.[18]

So, adapting Asay's reasoning, since Beebee is an inferential user of (B2), she is an inferential user of:

(B3) 'There are souls' is not True.

Whence, in virtue of some trivial equivalences, Beebee uses in inferences:

(B4) 'There are no souls' is True.

However, her acceptance of the non-existence of souls was supposed to be nothing beyond using 'There are no souls' or ascribing truth* to that sentence. Yet now we have her ascribing *inflationary* truth to the sentence.

The reader might suspect, moreover, that ascribing inflationary Truth to a sentence is enough to express *belief* in the sentence. After all, the import of a Truth-ascription is that the sentence *robustly represents how reality is*. Yet we need not insist on this for there to be an issue. It is awkward enough that acceptance was supposed to be simply the use of a truth*-ascription— for now it seems that acceptance occasionally implicates use of a Truth-ascription.

The only reasonable way to elude the Asay-argument, as far as I can tell, is to reject (Neg). But if we grasp the meaning of (Neg), it is hard to deny. The suggestion, then, would be to deny that we grasp its meaning—and in particular, to claim that 'True' is a defective predicate. In that case, Asay's principle (Neg) will not be a well-formed formula, hence, cannot be leveraged to force something beyond acceptance. The downside, however, is that this amounts to a *global*

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[18] Asay in fact expresses that if x does not exist, then x does not EXIST—where 'exist' is an ontologically non-committal predicate, unlike 'EXIST'. But I assume that (Neg) is basically a terminological variant of Asay's point, or nearly enough for our purposes.

deflationism: It is not just deflationism toward philosophical discourse, but about our language more broadly, given the rejection of 'True' *per se*. While I myself could be friendly to global deflationism in some guises, it would be a serious dialectical burden in any guise for Beebee's position.

Addendum: It turns out that deflationists about truth are almost always global deflationists. So *de facto*, equilibrism is not in danger of losing dialectical power within the deflationist camp. However, while the language likely allows a deflated use of the truth-term, *global* deflationism about natural language seems unwarranted by the evidence. As explained in Parent (2023), the major argument here appeals to Ockam's Razor in a way that glosses the linguistic data considerably. More broadly, there is an unfortunate tendency among semanticists to push for universal rules for how natural language functions. But to the contrary, natural language is opportunistic, stochastic, and constantly being negotiated, much like what happens in a game of Nomic or Calvinball. This is likely a highly adaptive feature of language, supporting communication in a wide variety of unpredictable situations. And it suggests that no term (including 'true') is blessed with invariant rules of usage, making a view like global deflationism empirically quite dubious.

At the same time, global deflationism may well be a beneficial stipulation for a *regimented* language. The simplicity of such deflationism helps bypass certain philosophical perplexities, which of course is the point of regimenting. The approach still has its perils; in particular, there is a problem in understanding how any sort of ontological commitment is possible using a thoroughly deflated language. (This point was made famous in metaethics by Dreier 2002, although it has a precedent in the theory of content; see Boghossian 1990, p. 178.) The "creeping minimalism" problem may be resolvable (see Parent forthcoming), but the fact

remains that even in the context of regimentation, global deflationism would hardly be useful in selling equilibrism to philosophers at large.

8. Conclusion

The broader lesson of the discussion is that, barring such deflationism, philosophical beliefs seem to be unavoidable. Beebee-style equilibrism plumps for an admirable sort of philosophical humility, yet the underpinning of such humility consists in philosophical beliefs notwithstanding.[19]

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