Remarks on Christopher Hill’s *Thought and World*

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One of Christopher Hill’s aims in his new book is to bring about what he calls a “marriage of heaven and hell.”¹ Hill proposes a way of joining together ideas about the concept of truth that are often seen to be in irreconcilable conflict: deflationism and the correspondence theory.² Hill’s proposal, I want to suggest, is one that correspondence theorists can happily accept. It is the deflationists that are likely to resist it. But I do not see in this any argument against Hill’s elegant proposal.

Hill’s proposal works, essentially, by assigning separate domains to the conflicting parties: there are two notions of truth, and one is to be allotted to the correspondence theorists and the other to the deflationists.³ Both notions pertain to *propositions* – or in Hill’s preferred terminology, which I shall follow, *thoughts*. Thoughts, as Hill conceives of them, are objects of attitudes such as belief and desire. More specifically, they are logically structured entities and have concepts as their fundamental constituents. Both notions of truth have thoughts as their domain of application, but the two carve out this domain in different ways.

The notion allotted to the correspondence theorist – call it “correspondence truth” or “truthᶜ” – may be defined as follows:

\[(C) \text{ An object } x \text{ is trueᶜ iff there is a state of affairs } y \text{ such that } y \text{ is actual and } x \text{ semantically} \]

¹*Thought and World: An Austere Portrayal of Truth, Reference, and Semantic Correspondence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). All parenthetical references are to the pages of this book.


³I am departing from Hill’s exposition in speaking of the two notions of truth. Hill recognizes only one notion of truth, the one allotted below to the deflationists (fn. 2, 145-6). But Hill does talk about our two notions of *truth-conditions* (116), and the notion I allot to the correspondence theorists can be defined using concepts that Hill thinks are legitimate and important.
If we take facts to be actual states of affairs, then (C) yields the familiar formulation of the correspondence theory: a thought is true iff it semantically corresponds to a fact. I should stress that the concepts of semantic correspondence and state of affairs used in (C) are not the ones that deflationists can construct out of their minimal resources.\(^5\) States of affairs, as Hill conceives of them, are built out of objects and properties. And semantical correspondence is in general a substantial relationship between conceptual stuff and extraconceptual reality. Hill offers several arguments for the importance in our conceptual scheme of a substantial concept of state of affairs and of semantic correspondence – arguments that should please the correspondence theorists.

The correspondence theorists have reasons to be pleased also with the notion of truth allotted to them. It will serve all the philosophical functions that they might assign to it. For example, it will serve as the foundation of the realism/antirealism debates: the realist affirms that thoughts in an area of dispute (e.g., ethics) are truth-apt (i.e., truth\(_\alpha\)-apt), while the antirealist denies it. For another example, the notion will serve in articulating a truth-conditional (i.e., truth\(_\alpha\)-conditional) account of meaning and content. A final example: the notion can be used by the physicalists to underwrite their attempts to understand language-world relations in physical terms. Since words express concepts, there is a derived but substantial semantical relationship between words and the world. And nothing precludes physicalistically inclined philosophers from exploring the physical basis of this relationship. Correspondence theorists have reasons, then, to be pleased with their allotment in Hill’s proposed compromise.\(^6\)

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\(^4\)Note that (C) is superficially similar to Hill’s (CT), which he rejects (39, 54-55). The difference between the two is that while (C) is merely a stipulative definition, (CT) is a claim. It affirms the equivalence of the two notions of truth.


\(^6\)Hill shows that the concept of semantic correspondence can be defined using his substitutational quantifiers and one non-logical notion, namely, “the state of affairs that \(p\).” In one sense, then, what Hill is granting to the correspondence theorists is quite minimal. Yet the notion granted them is powerful enough to serve all their inflationary ends.
The notion allotted to the deflationists – call it “deflationary truth” or “true\(_d\)” – is defined thus:

(D) \(\text{An object } x \text{ is true [strictly: true}\_d\text{] iff } (\Sigma p)(p \text{ and } x = \text{ the thought that } p)\).\(^7\)

Here \(\Sigma\) is, in Hill’s terminology, an *existential substitutional quantifier*. Note that, unlike first-order quantifiers, \(\Sigma\) binds variables in sentence positions.

Hill’s theory (46-52) yields the following relationships between the two notions of truth. Truth\(_d\) implies truth\(_o\), but not conversely. However, on thoughts that semantically correspond to states of affairs, the converse implication holds also and the two notions coincide.

Hill observes that (D) improves on the paradigmatic deflationary theory, namely, Horwich’s Minimalism. Minimalism takes truth to be implicitly defined by the totality of thoughts of the form (T):

(T) The thought that \(p\) is true iff \(p\).\(^8\)

Thus, according to Minimalism, the implicit definition of truth has an infinity of axioms – an infinity larger than the cardinality of any set. Yet, despite this abundance of axioms, the Minimalist definition is quite weak. It fails to imply generalizations about truth (e.g., that only thoughts are true and that modus ponens preserves truth). On the other hand, despite its deductive weakness, the definition is ideologically heavy: its definientia contain all the concepts. It appears, therefore, that the definition places unreasonable demands on what is needed for a full grasp of the concept of truth.\(^9\) In contrast, as Hill observes, the ideological resources invoked in the definiens of (D)

\(^7\)This definition – and (C) also – is meant to apply only to non-indexical thoughts. Hill develops an attractive theory of indexical thoughts, but our purposes do not require us to delve into it.

\(^8\)I am ignoring the problems created by the paradoxes.

\(^9\)For a fuller presentation of these problems, see my “Minimalism,” *Philosophical Perspectives* 7 (1993), 359-69, and “A Critique of Deflationism,” *Philosophical Topics* 21 (1993), 57-81.
are modest.\(^\text{10}\) And (D) is logically stronger than Horwich’s implicit definition. It implies all the instances of (T) and at the same time yields the desired generalizations about truth.

Hill’s definition improves on Minimalism, then, in important ways. Still, the deflationists have reasons to be concerned about their allotment in Hill’s compromise. Let me indicate three such concerns. As one would expect, all the concerns center on Hill’s substitutional quantifiers.

First: Hill’s definition is acceptable only if substitutional quantifiers are available independently of ‘true’. But is that so? Does English have independent means of expressing these quantifiers? Hill addresses this issue (24-7) and suggests that the expression ‘so-and-so’ works as a sentential variable and ‘it invariably happens that’ works as a universal substitutional quantifier, in at least some of their uses. Here is a slight variant of Hill’s example:

(1)  It invariably happens that when Joe predicts that so-and-so, it turns out that so-and-so.

Hill seems to me to be right that ‘so-and-so’ is working like a sentential variable here. (Note that ‘so-and-so’ is quite versatile in English; it can occupy name and verb positions as well.) However, there can be reasonable doubt about the functioning of ‘It invariably happens that’. It is plausible to read it as generalizing on the occasions on which Joe issues predictions. (1) seems to be equivalent to

Whenever Joe predicts that so-and-so, it turns out that so-and-so.\(^\text{11}\)

If it is, then we do not have in (1) a clear instance of substitutional quantification. Hill gives other

\(^{10}\)Hill also offers a direct challenge to the ideology objection (64-74). I respond to Hill’s challenge in the postscript to the reprinting of “A Critique of Deflationism” in, Bradley Armour-Garb and J. C. Beall (eds.), *Deflationary Truth* (Chicago: Open Court), forthcoming.

\(^{11}\)It may be objected that (1) expresses a complete thought, but on the proposed reading it contains the parameter ‘so-and-so’. Response: It is common to express complete universal thoughts using parameters. We find this in mathematics and also in ordinary discourse. An example is ‘He who rides a tiger will find it hard to dismount’. Note that this kind of use of parameters is insufficient to express (D).
examples but reasonable doubts can be raised about them also.\textsuperscript{12}

Second: Even if English can express substitutional quantifiers, do these quantifiers really “provide the foundations for the commonsense concept of truth (25)”\textsuperscript{12}? Perhaps substitutional quantification is to be explained in terms of the concept of truth. Or perhaps the two are interdependent. A natural way of explaining $\Sigma$ is this:

\begin{center}
(\Sigma E) \quad \text{The thought expressed by}
\end{center}

\begin{center}
(\Sigma p) \ldots p \ldots
\end{center}

is true iff one of its substitution instances is true.

But this explanation is unavailable if one uses substitutional quantifiers to define truth. How, then, are the substitutional quantifiers to be explained? Hill addresses this issue (17-22) and proposes that the quantifiers should be explained in terms of the rules of inference governing them. Hill formulates the logical rules for the existential and universal substitutional quantifiers – they are parallel to the rules governing the first-order quantifiers – and he claims that these rules suffice to define the quantifiers.\textsuperscript{13}

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\textsuperscript{12}Corresponding to names, there are in English (and other natural languages) the categories of \textit{pronoun} and \textit{common noun}. Dorothy Grover, Hill, and others have noted that some expressions in English can be viewed as the sentential analogues of pronouns, i.e., as \textit{prosentences}. Question: Can some expressions in English be viewed as the sentential analogues of common nouns? In the Prosentential Theory of Grover, Joseph Camp, and Nuel Belnap, a prosentence such as “It is true” can have a noun phrase (e.g., ‘every statement’) as its antecedent. To make the parallel between pronouns and prosentences complete, it is desirable to have sentential analogues of common nouns. An easy way of obtaining such analogues is to hold that ‘statement’ is systematically ambiguous. In some of its uses it functions as a common noun, but in some others as the sentential analogue of a common noun. But I am not sure that this idea can be made to fit the linguistic evidence.


\textsuperscript{13}It seems to me that Hill’s rule of Universal Elimination should be liberalized to allow instantiation with open thoughts (with the usual restriction about the conflict of bound variables). The liberalization is needed to capture inferences such as “Everything Barry believes is true, and
It seems to me that the logical rules do not fix a determinate sense for Σ, or even one
determinate enough to ensure that (D) defines a deflationary notion of truth. Suppose, for
example, that we take truth to be the norm governing assertion. That is, we hold that only true thoughts should be affirmed and that valid inferences are those that preserve truth. Suppose further that we introduce a quantifier Σ* with a semantics parallel to (ΣE) but with ‘true’ interpreted as truth. Now the inferences that are logically valid for Σ* are exactly the same as those that are valid for Σ. If we look simply at the patterns of logical inferences governing Σ, we cannot tell it apart from Σ*. For all we know, ‘Σ’ means Σ*, with the consequence that deflationary truth, as defined in (D), is no different from correspondence truth. The deflationists may well worry that they are being given correspondence truth in a shiny new logical wrapper.

Third: Even if the two concerns above are alleviated, deflationists will likely remain dissatisfied. For Hill’s definition (D) undermines one of their central theses, namely, that truth performs a vital logical function. The point is clearest with those deflationists who follow W. V. Quine and maintain the primacy of first-order logic. Quine observed that in first-order logic we can generalize directly on name positions. For example, we can generalize on ‘Fred’ in

(2) Fred believes that something is blue, and something is blue,

and obtain

(∃z)(z believes that something is blue, and something is blue).

But we cannot generalize directly on sentence positions – for example, the positions occupied by ‘something is blue’ in (2). The following is not well-formed in first-order logic:

(3) (∃x)(Fred believes that x, and x).

everything Terry believes is true; hence, everything that Barry believes Terry believes is true.” Parallel remarks apply to the rule of Existential Introduction.

The point holds also for the prosentential theory of truth. In this theory, truth is assigned to the logical category of prosentence and is entirely non-redundant.
Once the truth-predicate is available, however, we can in effect generalize on sentence positions using first-order variables. The intent of (3) can be expressed thus:

\[(\exists x)(\text{Fred believes } x, \text{ and } x \text{ is true})\].

Truth, according to Quine and his deflationist followers, performs an essential logical function. It enables us to generalize on sentence positions using nominal variables. In contrast, the notion of truth allotted to the deflationists in Hill’s compromise is fully redundant. Once substitutional quantifiers are available, it can be thrown away. Deflationists are likely to complain of unfairness when they compare their allotment with that of the correspondence theorists. What is likely to arouse their ire is not their own meager allotment – even the deflationists will recognize that they are deserving of it – but the substantial allotment of their rivals.

Hill’s compromise is not a brash deflationism, one that would interrupt the philosophical debates over realism and antirealism, or one that would dictate the form of a theory of meaning, or one that would try to derail physicalistic investigations into word-world relationships. Hill’s compromise is a polite and well-considered view, one that makes strong claims and raises interesting questions, but one with which only a brash deflationist will want to pick a quarrel.\(^{15}\)

\(^{15}\)I wish to thank Dr. José Martínez-Fernández for his helpful comments on this essay.