

Truth, Pretense and the Liar Paradox¹

Bradley Armour-Garb and James A. Woodbridge

0. Introduction

We accept the following three theses, with respect to truth:

T1: Some form of deflationism about truth (henceforth, ‘T-deflationism’) is the correct view of truth (or, better, of *truth-talk*, that fragment of discourse that includes the truth-predicate and other alethic predicates) to adopt;

T2: The best way to construe T-deflationism is to see it as understanding truth-talk to involve a sort of fiction; and

T3: The most plausible form of truth-theoretic fictionalism involves semantic pretense.

Hence, our chief claim, with respect to truth-talk, is that it should be understood as operating in terms of semantic pretense.

Our aim in this paper is not to argue for these theses; rather, our intent is to explain and motivate them and to display their merits. In so doing, we will not address T1. Regarding T2 and T3, after briefly explaining why T-deflationists should endorse, or adopt, a fictionalist account of truth-talk, we present the basic elements of a semantic pretense account of that talk. Once we have that on the table, we identify a nice feature of our view—that it affords a consistent solution to the Liar Paradox.²

1. Why T-deflationists should adopt a fictionalist account of truth-talk

In order to motivate endorsing a fictionalist view of truth-talk, we begin with a general thesis that has been employed to motivate fictionalism about certain fragments of discourse, that of *expressive indispensability*, viz.,

(EI) We need to enlist certain aspects of X-talk, as a means for expressing certain claims that we could not otherwise express.³

In the case of truth-talk, we can see (EI) in effect in our widely acknowledged need to enlist the truth-predicate, which appears to commit us to a property of truth, as a means for expressing certain claims (to be discussed below) that we otherwise could not—or, at least, could not so easily—express.

The impetus for moving to a fictionalist account of truth-talk begins with the T-deflationist's thought that what we are trying to say through our use of truth-talk has nothing to do with truth *per se* and, in fact, but for certain *expressive limitations*, could be expressed without appeal to any such property. Moreover, such expressive needs have nothing to say about truth—its nature or even its existence—or about whether there need be any such property, in order to express what we aim to convey. So, while truth-talk does appear to be *expressively indispensable*, truth, *qua* property, may well be *theoretically dispensable*.

The connection between understanding the notion of truth in this way (as theoretically dispensable but expressively indispensable) and truth-theoretic fictionalism is as follows. Suppose that we can explain the expressive advantages of appealing to truth-talk, and suppose, with the T-deflationist, that these expressive purposes exhaust our use of that talk. Suppose, finally, that what we are trying to get across through our use of truth-talk is not *about* any property of truth, in the sense that what we aim to convey itself has nothing to do with any such property. In that case, because 'true'—the notion of truth, as it occurs in truth-talk—serves essentially in the indirect expression of facts that are not about truth, it simply functions as a *representational aid*.⁴ As we understand things, when the central locutions of some fragment of discourse function as representational aids in this way—making as if to talk about one thing for

the purposes of talking about something else indirectly—that just *is* for that fragment of discourse to operate *via* some element of fiction.

According to the line of reasoning just sketched, T-deflationists should see truth-talk as operating through some element of fiction. After all, T-deflationists acknowledge the *expressive* indispensability of truth-talk, but they do not then go on to conclude that the truth-predicate is “ontologically serious”. Rather, they hold that the truth-predicate functions as a device that allows speakers to talk indirectly about something else, facilitating the expression of facts that are not about truth.

2. Fictionalism via semantic pretense

We take the above to provide a reason for concluding that T-deflationists should endorse a fictionalist view of truth-talk.⁵ Now, there are myriad versions of fictionalism that have been presented, and we do not have space to consider all of the available options here (though for further discussion, see our (2015)). We will point out, though, that not all fictionalist accounts are the same. Elsewhere (2009, 2012, 2014, 2015) we have highlighted an important distinction between fictionalist accounts that are properly described as “error-theoretic fictionalism” (henceforth, *ETF*) and those that are *not* error-theoretic.

The fictionalist approach that we favor is a pretense-involving fictionalism (henceforth, *PIF*) that is non-error-theoretic; it allows that claims from a fragment of discourse understood as involving pretense can still be used to make genuinely true claims. We (2009, 2012, 2015) have argued that certain philosophical problems can be solved, by taking PIF to apply to ways of talking where we have not noticed it at work before.⁶

The particular variety of PIF that we favor with respect to truth-talk is a semantic pretense approach.⁷ This approach involves postulating a semantic mechanism at work in the linguistic functioning of the relevant fragment of discourse, involving a special, but familiar kind of pretense, viz., *make-believe*. Make-believe games (e.g., the classic children’s games of “mudpies”, cowboys and Indians, cops and robbers, etc.) involve pretenses of two types. In the first type, certain pretenses are stipulated, or *expressly pretended*—typically about the props that are employed in the game of make-believe (e.g., globs of mud counting as pies, sticks counting as horses, fingers counting as pistols). The second type involves pretenses that are “generated from reality” *via* the game of make-believe’s *principles of generation* (e.g., it is to be pretended that someone has put a pie in the oven whenever he has put a glob of mud into the hollow stump). These principles are rules for the make-believe that establish a systematic dependency between some of what is to be pretended—that is, which pretenses are *prescribed*—and real-world conditions that are, as it were, outside of the game.

A semantic pretense account of some fragment of discourse appeals to the structural features that make-believe involves and the kinds of systematic dependencies that games involving make-believe exhibit. Postulating such dependencies as holding for the claims from some discourse can explain how speakers can use utterances from the discourse to say indirectly things that the utterances appear unsuited to say. This is done by making utterances that, in a sense, *belong* to a game of make-believe involving the characteristic locutions of the discourse. A typical merit of the approach is that it allows us to use readily available, familiar linguistic resources—ordinary object-talk, predication, and objectual quantification—in order to make much more complicated and technical claims indirectly.⁸

The semantic pretense approach has been fruitfully applied to many areas of philosophically interesting discourse, including, but not limited to, talk putatively of fictional entities, existence-talk, mathematical discourse, possible-worlds-talk, talk of abstract objects (properties, propositions), moral discourse, talk of unobservable entities in science, etc. We will now explain its application in our pretense account of truth-talk.

3. A semantic pretense account of truth-talk

Our semantic pretense account of truth-talk is sometimes presented with the slogan “Truth is a pretense,” the idea being that, really, there is no property of truth; we just talk as if there were.⁹ That is, we speak *as if* we are describing things as having or lacking properties called “truth” and “falsity”, in order to make claims of other (more complicated) sorts indirectly. On our view, truth-talk relies on a game of make-believe, one that allows us to use familiar linguistic resources in order to make more complex claims that would otherwise involve technical and unfamiliar linguistic and logical devices that ordinary language does not even contain explicitly. The kinds of devices that we have in mind are things like schematic sentence variables and substitutional quantifiers, understood as serving to encode infinite conjunctions or infinite disjunctions.

Understanding truth-talk in terms of semantic pretense is to take it as underwritten by a game of make-believe governed, at least in part, by principles of generation like the following:

- (I) It is to be pretended that expressions like ‘is true’ and ‘is false’ function predicatively to describe objects as having or lacking certain properties (called “truth” and “falsity”).
- (II) The pretenses displayed in an utterance of \ulcorner (The proposition) that p is true \urcorner are prescribed if and only if p.
- (III) The pretenses displayed in an utterance of \ulcorner (The proposition) that p is false \urcorner are prescribed if and only if \sim p.

- (IV) If S_1 and S_2 are sentences that are alike except (in some transparent context) one has a subsentence $\lceil p \rceil$ where the other has $\lceil \langle p \rangle \text{ is true} \rceil$ then one can directly infer S_1 from S_2 and S_2 from S_1 (where ‘ p ’ serves as a variable that can be replaced by a sentence and ‘ $\langle p \rangle$ ’ stands for a nominalization of such a sentence).

The roles and functions of rules (I) – (IV) should be understood as follows.

Rule (I) states one of the stipulated, *expressly* made-believe, background pretenses for the relevant game of make-believe. In particular, it specifies certain linguistic expressions as the props for the game and explains what is to be pretended *about* such props. One consequence of this rule is that uses of ‘true’ and ‘false’ involve pretense *intrinsically*, which is to say: There are no pretense-free uses of truth-locutions because pretense is invoked in their basic functioning. As a consequence, the only *serious* content (about the real world, outside of the make-believe) that an instance of truth-talk has (or: possesses) must come from the operation of the make-believe’s *principles of generation*—specifically, rules (II) and (III).

Rules (II) and (III) cover what are arguably the most basic cases of truth-talk, what we call “transparent propositional truth-talk”, so an account of them provides a core for our more general account. These principles of generation make the correctness of a putative attribution of truth or falsity, to some nominalized, sentential content-vehicle, a function (possibly negating) of whether the conditions specified by a use of that content-vehicle obtain. This makes the utterance of an instance of truth-talk an indirect means for specifying those very same conditions, thus determining the content of the instances of truth-talk. Since these indirectly specified conditions can actually obtain, this makes it possible for instances of truth-talk to make (what we might, now employing the very pretense being explained, describe as) “genuinely true” claims about the world outside of the pretense.

Rule (IV) satisfies an important condition of adequacy for any T-deflationary theory of truth-talk, as it provides a version of a rule of *intersubstitution*. Such a rule further captures the sense in which the content of a putative ascription of truth to some content-vehicle just is the content of the content-vehicle itself. The general intersubstitution licensed by this rule is integral to a pretense account yielding the right content for the more interesting cases of truth-talk, viz., ‘true’-involving generalizations. Since those cases are what give truth (or, more accurately, ‘true’) its point, it seems to be a fairly central aspect of any adequate account of truth-talk, and it is integral that any pretense account of truth-talk accommodate it.

To illustrate how truth-talk functions according to this account, consider a straightforward instance of truth-talk, such as

(1) It is true that crabapples are edible.

For reasons explained elsewhere (2012), we understand (1) to be more perspicuously rendered by

(1’) That crabapples are edible is true,

where ‘that crabapples are edible’ is (in the context of the pretense) a referring expression that picks out the proposition that crabapples are edible. Syntactically speaking, the ‘that’-clause is a nominalization of the content-vehicle

(2) Crabapples are edible.

When asserted, a ‘true’-involving sentence like (1’) presents the pretenses it displays as prescribed, where being prescribed is determined by:

- a) the particular principle of generation that governs those pretenses (here, Rule (II)), and
- b) whether the conditions, whose obtaining those principles make prescriptive for the pretenses, actually obtain.

Recall that Rule (II) has it that the prescriptive conditions for the pretenses displayed in (1’) are those specified by the content-vehicle that is nominalized as the subject expression of (1’)—in

this case, (2). In short, by presenting the pretenses it displays as prescribed, (1') specifies indirectly precisely those conditions that (2) specifies directly.

Our talk of the conditions specified by a claim is a central component of what we mean by the *content* of an utterance. However, because, as explained above, a central claim of the pretense account of truth-talk is that, really, there is no property of truth, we do not hold that these conditions can be understood fundamentally as truth-conditions. We call them *M-conditions*. While M-conditions can obtain or fail to obtain, on our view, truth-conditions have only a thin, derivative status, as conditions for the appropriate use of the truth-predicate. The truth-conditions for a sentence are a *by-product* of its meaning, of which M-conditions are a significant component. This thought is in line with the meaning-to-truth conditional,

(MTC) If S means that p, then S is true iff p,
no instance of which we reject.

Now, while some sentences specify M-conditions directly, as is the case with (2), other sentences specify M-conditions only indirectly. Indeed, as should be apparent, one of the consequences of our pretense account of truth-talk is that any specification of M-conditions (that obtain or fail to obtain outside of the pretense) that is accomplished by a 'true'-involving sentence will be accomplished only indirectly, via the operation of the pretense that governs the functioning of the truth-predicate.

The resulting identity of content between an instance of transparent propositional truth-talk of the form 'It is true that p' and the content-vehicle nominalized in it (the sentence that goes in for 'p') means that the game of make-believe behind truth-talk generates all the instances of the equivalence schema

(ES) It is true that p iff p.¹⁰

This is an important result because, as T-deflationists have argued, these equivalences are (some of) the central principles governing truth-talk. Our pretense account has them follow directly from the functioning that truth-talk is given by the game of make-believe that underwrites it.

As is well known, the *real* usefulness of truth-talk is not the kind of use made in (1)/(1'); rather, it is in the use of the predicate 'true' to express generalizations of a certain sort, as might be found in an utterance of

(3) Everything Isabel says is true.

Now, (3) might be expanded to

(4) Everything is such that if Isabel says it, then it is true,

and will ultimately be understood as a means for expressing what would otherwise require something like

(5) For all p, if Isabel says that p, then p.

But (5) involves a special “non-objectual” kind of quantification: substitutional (or perhaps propositional, although, as we (2010) have noted, we suspect that the latter actually makes no sense). This involves providing items to fill in dummy-variables that occupy sentence positions. It generalizes on sentence-in-use positions to cover what would otherwise have to be expressed via a conjunction of conditionals like

(6) If Isabel says that crabapples are edible, then crabapples are edible, and if Isabel says that grass is green, then grass is green, and if Isabel says that power corrupts, then power corrupts, and if Isabel says that the moon is made of cheese, then the moon is made of cheese, and if Isabel says that the mass of the Earth is 47 million kilograms, then the mass of the earth is 47 million kilograms, and if Isabel says....

Since (6) must go on to cover everything Isabel might possibly say, and since that is an infinite number of things, it is impossible for us to assert (6) directly. But we can, and do, express a commitment to what (6) would say, given an utterance of (3), together with the rules that govern

truth-talk. Truth-talk thus provides a way for us to say what we want, finitely, and in an ordinary language like English.

As we see it (and as T-deflationists would agree), allowing us to generalize in this new way on sentence-in-use positions within claims, without having to incorporate new complicated logical devices into our language, is the main, perhaps the central, purpose of truth-talk. And our appeal to pretense explains how truth-talk does this with linguistic resources that seem, on the surface, unsuited to the task (without leaving it a brute, explained fact that it does).

Before moving on to highlight a particular virtue of our pretense account of truth-talk, we should address a question one might have. We have claimed that T-deflationists should be pretense theorists about truth-talk, but given what the pretense account says about the function and purpose of truth-talk, why not just endorse, and adopt, T-deflationism? Why bother also endorsing, or adopting, a *pretense* account of truth-talk? There are two answers to this question.

First, we think that such a question, while reasonable, belies a misunderstanding of what T-deflationism involves.¹¹ On our view, the pretense approach is correlated with the *genus* of T-deflationism as a whole. The different species of this genus (e.g., disquotationalism, prosententialism, inference-rule deflationism, etc.) should all be considered different attempts at cashing out principles of generation for a game of make-believe that could underwrite truth-talk.¹² Our main reason for claiming this is the recognition that a central thesis of T-deflationism is that truth-talk serves only logical and linguistic *expressive* purposes. The truth-locutions exist in order to provide a means for talking about other things, unrelated to truth. So T-deflationism takes the truth-locutions to be “representational aides”, introduced, not to express something about the world directly, but rather in order to facilitate a certain kind of indirect talk about

aspects of the world. Understanding a way of talking in the way T-deflationists view truth-talk just is to see it as involving a kind of pretense.

Second, as we see it, the appeal to pretense does a better job with the generalization problem that confronts T-deflationary accounts of truth-talk, since it makes the logic of ‘true’-involving generalizations actual generalizations, logically speaking, instead of just the collection of the instances.¹³ Moreover, on our view such generalizations already cover new cases that arise with the expansion of a language, without changing the meaning of ‘true’ when the substitution class for the otherwise necessary substitutional quantifiers or schematic sentence variables is changed. Thus, our view better accounts for the role that ‘true’-involving generalizations can play in explanations, the expression of logical laws, etc.¹⁴

Having briefly sketched our pretense account of truth-talk, we will now turn to highlight a central virtue of our pretense account of truth-talk, viz., the solution that it offers to the Liar Paradox.

4. The Pretense View and the Liar Paradox

Starting from our pretense account of truth-talk, the approach to the Liar Paradox (and to semantic pathology generally) that we now favor is a version of the “meaningless strategy”, according to which, in a certain sense, liar sentences turn out to lack content. This is because the pretense account of truth-talk sketched above has an interesting consequence for liar sentences and their kin: They do not specify any M-conditions.

Following the explanation of how the content of any instance of truth-talk is determined, we can see that in the case of a liar sentence, such as

(L) (L) is not true,

any M-conditions that (L) specified would have to be a function of the M-conditions specified by the content-vehicle that this instance of truth-talk putatively denotes. But in this case that is “another” instance of truth-talk (in fact, it is (L) itself). This means that, in order to determine the M-conditions that (L) would specify, we must look to what content-vehicle this “other” instance of truth-talk putatively denotes.

In some cases, this iterated process will “ground out,” as it does for

(7) Sentence (1) is not true.

Any M-conditions specified by (7) indirectly would be a (negating) function of the M-conditions specified by (1). Since (1) is itself an instance of truth-talk, any specifying of M-conditions that it accomplished would also happen only indirectly, as a function of the M-conditions specified by the content-vehicle that it putatively denotes—here, the M-conditions that (2) specifies directly. Thus, (7) indirectly specifies the M-conditions of crabapples not being edible.

Unlike in the (7)-(1)-(2) case, however, with a liar sentence like (L), this multi-step determination process repeats endlessly, with the result that (L) never manages to specify any M-conditions. We basically get content-determination instructions that can never be completed.¹⁵ It is in this sense that a liar sentence like (L) can be said to be meaningless. As a result, we presently endorse a version of the meaningless strategy for dealing with the Liar Paradox.

4.1 Meaninglessness and Understanding

Any version of the meaningless strategy faces an immediate objection, which arises once we recognize that it seems unequivocal that, in some sense, we *understand* liar sentences. In

response, we explain that we do not deny that we understand a liar sentence like (L), but it is important to note that we understand (L) only on a certain notion of understanding. Our claim is that there are (at least) two modes of understanding and that, while we understand (L) on one of them, we do not understand it on the other. Call the sense in which we do *not* understand (L), the sense that would require knowing what M-conditions (L) specifies, ‘understanding₁’. Call the sense in which we do understand (L) ‘understanding₂’.

With understanding₂ the mode of understanding that you possess is primarily *metalinguistic*: You know what the sentence appears to “say”, for example, that it has a particular form, with a certain expression as the subject, in nominal position, employs a particular predicate, etc. And you know the meaning—the *character*, though not the *content*—of the expressions contained therein. Finally, you know how such a sentence could be used to make a meaningful assertion.

Now, our claim is that if you know the form of the sentence, the meanings of the words that are contained therein and how the sentence could be used to make a genuine assertion, then you can be said to “understand₂” the sentence.¹⁶ But insofar as you do not know the M-conditions for some sentence, whether there are any or not, then, while you may—indeed, probably do—understand₂ the sentence, you do not *understand₁* that sentence, since it fails to specify M-conditions and, thus, is meaningless in the way that we have indicated.¹⁷

4.2 Semantic Characterization and S-Defectiveness

Suppose that we are right that liar sentences are meaningless in the sense we have explained and that they therefore cannot be understood₁. It follows from this that there is nothing that they

express and, hence, nothing they put forward that anyone could accept or reject. Since affirming and denying can be understood as the speech acts that express the mental attitudes of acceptance and rejection (respectively), it thus to follow that, on our view, one can neither affirm nor deny liar sentences. But if one cannot do this (and in particular, do it indirectly by assigning liar sentences truth-values), then we still face the familiar question of how we will characterize such sentences. And, as is familiar from attempted consistent solutions to the liar, it is at this point that revenge problems generally emerge.

We believe that we can address these issues and avoid the usual problems to which they appear to give rise. Although we shall only have space here to sketch a way of dealing with them, our hope is that what we will provide will be sufficient.¹⁸

We avoid the “first wave” of revenge problems because we take no positive or negative attitude towards liar sentences, and we neither reason to or from them, or evaluate them semantically—in the sense of ascribing them either a *truth-value* or a *logical value* (e.g., 1 or 0). On our pretense account of truth-talk, liar sentences do not admit of these sorts of evaluation. Indeed, because no M-conditions prescriptive for the pretenses displayed in any of these evaluations are ever determined (since (L) itself specifies no M-conditions), there are no M-conditions that would make it correct to utter the sentence, “(L) is not true”, no M-conditions that would make it correct to utter “(L) is true”, and, for similar reasons, no M-conditions that would make an utterance of “(L) is false” correct.

Keeping in mind that liar sentences (and their kin) cannot, in the relevant sense, be understood₁ and, thus, cannot be evaluated in the standard ways, what can we say about them? More directly, how will we characterize them? We propose the following.

As a means for characterizing liar sentences, we introduce a new predicate, ‘is semantically defective’ (henceforth, ‘s-defective’), which, for present purposes, is to apply to those sentences, which, while perhaps understood₂, have no content. More specifically, we are inclined to claim the following, by way of clarifying ‘s-defective’:

- (i) If a sentence, S, is s-defective, then it has nothing, by way of content, which we can accept or reject.

As a result,

- (ii) If S is s-defective, then S is not understood₁.

Moreover,

- (iii) If S fails to specify any M-conditions—either directly or indirectly—then it is appropriate to attribute *s-defectiveness* to S.

In addition,

- (iv) If S is s-defective, then, since S will not be understood₁, it is not aletheically evaluable.

If S is not aletheically evaluable, it will not be assigned a truth-value. And, more generally,

- (v) S is s-defective only if it is not truth-apt.¹⁹

By way of shedding further light on the term ‘s-defective’ that is relevant to the Liar Paradox, we might say that for a given sentence, S, S is s-defective at least under the following condition: the process that would determine what M-conditions S specifies never finishes in the case of S, and, thus, S does not specify any M-conditions at all. Of course, this does not count as an *analysis* of the notion of s-defectiveness, as it leaves open the possibility that there are other ways in which a sentence may be deemed s-defective (for example, Strawson’s ‘This is a fine red one’, which includes a demonstrative with no demonstratum), but it will do, for what follows. Let us now apply this approach to liar sentences.

4.3 S-Defectiveness and Liars

Consider (L), once again. As we saw, (L) will not specify any M-conditions, which means that, by (iii), (L) will be deemed s-defective, in which case

(8) (L) is s-defective

will be true, and, thus, given the relevant identity,

(9) '(L) is not true' is s-defective

will also be true.

The pressing issue is whether our characterization of (L) as s-defective, and the correctness of ascribing truth to a statement of that characterization, generates revenge problems for us. Let us turn, then, to a familiar sort of revenge problem that one might pose for our present proposal. Such a case is found in the sentence

(λ) (λ) is not true or (λ) is s-defective.

In order to see the problem that (λ) appears to present, suppose that (λ) is any of true, false, or not true. For (λ) to be true it must either be not true or be s-defective—both of which are inconsistent with its being true. It is obvious that inconsistency results, if the left-hand disjunct is true. If the right-hand disjunct is true, then, by (ii), (λ) is not understood₁. But if (λ) is true then it is understood₁. Contradiction. But since a disjunction is true if, and only if, at least one of the disjuncts are true, it follows that (λ) cannot be evaluated as true.

For (λ) to be false, it must fail to be s-defective. But it must also fail to be not true, meaning that, if (λ) were taken to be false, then, *via* some innocuous reasoning, it would seem to follow that it is true, which, again, issues in inconsistency. Similar consequences arise, if we hold that (λ) is not true. After all, if (λ) is not true, then, by enquotation, '(λ) is not true' will be true, and it will follow that '(λ) is not true or (λ) is s-defective' is true. But this mentioned

sentence just is (λ) , so that would just mean that (λ) is true. Thus, if (λ) is not true, it follows that (λ) is true.

Now, we characterize (λ) as s-defective. But because we make this characterization, further paradox appears immanent. For if we maintain that (λ) is s-defective, then we will also accept that ' (λ) is s-defective' is true. But now, by disquotation, or-introduction, and enquotation, we seem to be committed to the truth of ' (λ) is not true or (λ) is s-defective', from whence, as we have seen, inconsistency appears to be unavoidable. So, *prima facie*, we too appear to be mired in paradox, having attributed s-defectiveness to (λ) .

To be sure, it certainly *seems* that we are mired in paradox. But, in fact, we are not. We would be in trouble if we wanted to hold onto classical logic *and* were to grant that (λ) is a contentful sentence, for then we would seem to be compelled to grant that (λ) is true. But, while we may retain classical logic, on our view, paradox is avoided in the case of (λ) , in virtue of the fact that it does not possess any content.

Actually, as we will see, our argument for the claim that, in this case, paradox is avoided, relies on two features, each of which we will motivate. The first is that (λ) is without content. The second is that if a standard, aletheically evaluable sentence is disjoined (or conjoined or otherwise extensionally connected) with a sentence that is without content, then contentfulness cannot be preserved in the resulting complex sentence. We will begin with the first feature, regarding the contentlessness of (λ) . We will then turn to the second.

In order for our attribution of s-defectiveness to (λ) to generate paradox, (λ) would have to have content, in the sense of specifying M-conditions. But it does not have content, and here is why. For any content that (λ) would have, both disjuncts are relevant and would have to contribute. This is so because the meaning of a disjunction is a function of the meanings of its

parts. So, the meaning—and, thus, the meaningfulness—of (λ) relies, at least in part, on that of its disjuncts. If one of the disjuncts lacks content, then (λ) itself does too. Accordingly, we will show that (λ) lacks content, by explaining why one of its disjuncts lacks content, where, recall, a given sentence lacks content if it fails to specify M-conditions. In particular, we will show that the left-hand disjunct in (λ) , viz., ‘ (λ) is not true’, fails to specify M-conditions and, thus, lacks content.

Recall that any M-conditions specified by the left-hand disjunct of (λ) would, as with any instance of truth-talk, have to be a product of M-conditions specified by the putative content-vehicle that the disjunct denotes. However, the supposed content-vehicle that (λ) ’s left-hand disjunct denotes is just the whole of (λ) itself. This means that what is relevant to determining M-conditions for the left-hand disjunct just is the M-conditions specified by (λ) as a whole. But the left-hand disjunct is part of (λ) , so determining what M-conditions (λ) specifies requires determining the M-conditions that ‘ (λ) is not true’ specifies. But that, in turn, requires that we determine what M-conditions (λ) specifies. Accordingly, in order for the left-hand disjunct of (λ) to specify M-conditions, it is required that (λ) already has determined M-conditions. But, of course, M-conditions cannot be settled for (λ) unless, or until, M-conditions are determined for its left-hand disjunct.

So, for any overall M-conditions to get specified by (λ) , there would have to be an impossible sort of semantic bootstrapping, which means that the process for determining what M-conditions (λ) specifies never finishes. Since (λ) fails to specify M-conditions, it follows that the left-hand disjunct does not possess any content, and, so, neither does (λ) itself. As such, both (λ) and its left-hand disjunct lack content. (Notice, though, that both are understood₂.)

As is evident, our response to the revenge argument relies on a premise, to the effect that only contentful sentences may be disjoined with other contentful sentences to yield a disjunction that is, itself, contentful and, thus, aletheically evaluable. We will now provide some support for this premise.

Although a conjunction gets its logical value from its conjunctive parts and a disjunction gets its logical value from at least one of its disjunctive parts, both conjunctions and disjunctions get their *content* from *both* of their respective parts. This is so because the content of a complex sentence—viz., a conjunction, disjunction, etc.—is a function from the contents of its parts. But if the content of a complex sentence is a function from that of its parts, then, if any part of a complex sentence lacks content, the same is true of the sentence as a whole. What this means is that the M-conditions for a disjunctive sentence will be a function of the M-conditions for each of its disjuncts. So, if one of the disjuncts of (λ) lacks M-conditions, then (λ) itself lacks M-conditions.

We have explained why (λ) specifies no M-conditions and thus has no content. This means that any instance of truth-talk (positive or negative) in which (λ) is the supposed content-vehicle putatively denoted will likewise have no content. Since, as a result, the sentence ‘ (λ) is not true’ has no content, disjoining it to another sentence yields a disjunctive string with no content. So, even though ‘ (λ) is s-defective’ has content and is true, disjoining this sentence with ‘ (λ) is not true’, in order to form (λ) itself, yields a sentence that has no content and, thus, is not aletheically evaluable.

This has an important consequence for the aforementioned revenge argument. Recall that the revenge argument began by allowing that if ‘ (λ) is s-defective’ is true then ‘ (λ) is not true or (λ) is s-defective’ will likewise be true, from which paradox appears to follow. But we have

argued that, while we grant that the sentence ‘ (λ) is s-defective’ is true, one cannot disjoin that sentence with ‘ (λ) is not true’ and preserve meaningfulness. In this way, we avoid the putative revenge problem on the table, because (λ) ’s lack of content blocks the argument that the would-be revenge requires. In the terminology that we favor, because (λ) fails to specify M-conditions, we claim, by (iii), that (λ) is s-defective. Thus, the revenge argument cannot bootstrap (λ) into contentfulness and thereby make it evaluable as true or false (or even as not true or not false).

5. Conclusions

In this paper, after briefly explaining why T-deflationists should be fictionalists about truth-talk, we introduced our preferred fictionalist approach and sketched a semantic pretense account of truth-talk. We then showed how this account provides a diagnosis of the problem with liar sentences that enables us to provide a consistent solution to the Liar Paradox. In closing, we should note that the very same considerations that we employed, in order to “solve” the Liar Paradox, also applies to other cases of apparent semantic pathology.

For example, consider the truth-teller, which is exhibited by a sentence like

(K) (K) is true.

This sentence appears to manifest a kind of indeterminacy, since (K) can be assigned either the value ‘true’ or the value ‘false’, but there seems to be no reason for assigning it one over the other, and thus no fact of the matter as to which value it does, or should, possess. While (K) may provide problems for some extant solutions to the semantic paradoxes,²⁰ it poses no problem for our proposed account. To see this, notice that, like (L) (and for essentially the same reasons), (K) specifies no M-conditions and, thus, will likewise be characterized as s-defective.

It is also worth noting that, as we can show, the same holds for another host of cases that appear to make manifest semantic pathology. We think, for example, of Curry's Paradox, which arises given a sentence like

(C) If (C) is true, then every sentence token is true,

as well as for the "dual symptom" cases that elsewhere (2006 and 2008) we have called "open pairs", for example

(A) Sentence (B) is not true

(B) Sentence (A) is not true.

This reveals a further merit of the semantic pretense account of truth-talk. It not only provides a way of dealing with inconsistent cases of semantic pathology, such as the Liar Paradox and Curry's Paradox; it also underwrites a general and unified diagnosis and treatment of semantic pathology more generally, including the indeterminate and dual-symptom varieties. In so doing, it offers a general treatment of the cases of semantic pathology. This is a virtue of the semantic pretense version of PIF that we favor, the version of fictionalism about truth-talk that truth-theorists (as good T-deflationists) should endorse and adopt.

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² This is in marked contrast with Woodbridge (2005), where a dialethic approach to the Liar Paradox is endorsed within an earlier version of the sort of pretense account of truth-talk that we currently champion.

³ While not explicitly formulating the thesis in this way, Yablo (2005) relies on something like (EI) to argue for a particular fictionalist account of mathematical discourse.

⁴ Cf. Yablo (2001, 2005).

⁵ For more on this, see Armour-Garb and Woodbridge (2010, 2014).

⁶ As seems clear, an ETF account of truth-talk would be intolerable, as it would render false all truth attributions, thereby undermining the status of the T-schema, since not every instance of it would be true.

⁷ The source of the semantic pretense approach is Kendall Walton’s (1990, 1993) analyses of representation in the arts and of certain kinds of metaphor in terms of make-believe. Walton applies a semantic pretense approach explicitly in his analyses of talk about works of fiction and fictional entities and of existence-talk. See Evans (1982) for a different but related semantic pretense account of existence-talk.

⁸ For more on the details of make-believe and its role in semantic pretense, see Richard (2000) and Woodbridge and Armour-Garb (2009).

⁹ In order to deflect a possible misinterpretation, we should make clear that we are *not* saying that being true is a matter of being pretended true. There is an important difference between claiming something is true—and the pretenses always involved in such a claim—and *pretending* that something is true. When we claim, or assert, (e.g.) that a given sentence is true, we are *not* pretending that it is true. On our view—and this is in line with T-deflationism—we are indirectly expressing a commitment to what that sentence says.

¹⁰ For present purposes, this is taken to be equivalent to
(ES*) That p is true iff p.

¹¹ For more on the details behind T-deflationism, see Armour-Garb (2012).

¹² For more on this view, see Armour-Garb and Woodbridge (2010). We should note that this understanding of the relationship between deflationism and pretense contrasts with that at work in Woodbridge (2005), where the pretense view is presented as a species of deflationism, in competition with other species.

¹³ Cf. Gupta (1993).

¹⁴ For more on this, see Armour-Garb and Woodbridge (2015).

¹⁵ The same goes for wide-scope negation liar sentences, e.g.,
(L*) It is not the case that (L*) is true.

¹⁶ This allows for a possible contrast between ‘This is a fine red one’ and Chomsky’s (1957) sentence, viz., ‘Colorless green ideas sleep furiously’. The latter sentence is not even understood₂ if we insist that to understood₂ a

sentence, we need how that sentence could be used to make a true assertion.

We should note that, although we are inclined to accept this condition, we need not insist on it, for the points in this paper to go through.

¹⁷ Analogous to the two modes of understanding, we might also grant two modes of *meaning*. As we would describe things, since liar sentences do not specify any M-conditions, we will not grant that they are meaningful₁, though we will, and should, allow that they are meaningful₂. For more on this, see Armour-Garb and Woodbridge (2013, 2015)

¹⁸ Indeed, for a consideration of some of the other objections that our solution to the Liar Paradox faces, see Armour-Garb and Woodbridge (2013, 2015).

¹⁹ To be sure, there is more that we might say about this notion of *s-defectiveness*, which we are importing into our vocabulary. But what is crucial here is that ‘s-defective’ applies directly to sentences—actually, to sentence tokens, though the view will not end up looking like a tokenist view, at least in any interesting sense—rather than applying to what a given sentence expresses or applying to a sentence in virtue of applying to what it expresses. Moreover, the expression, ‘s-defective’, applies to sentences that do not possess content, even though such sentences will (or, at least, may) be understood₂.

²⁰ See Armour-Garb and Woodbridge (2006).