On What it Takes for There to Be No Fact of the Matter

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Abstract
Philosophers are very fond of making non-factualist claims—claims to the effect that there is no fact of the matter as to whether something is the case. But can these claims be coherently stated in the context of classical logic? Some care is needed here, we argue, otherwise one ends up denying a tautology or embracing a contradiction. In the end, we think there are only two strategies available to someone who wants to be a non-factualist about something, and remain within the province of classical logic. But one of these strategies is rather controversial, and the other requires substantially more work than is often supposed. Being a non-factualist is no easy business, and it may not be the most philosophically perspicuous way to go.

I
We’re not sure which philosopher should be credited with the first what we’ll call non-factualist claim. But one of the most famous (and influential) early claims of this sort, one of there being no fact of the matter—and you’ll know about this one, because of its fame and influence—is Quine’s indeterminacy of translation thesis. A version of the thesis goes like this: You might have thought, given a term in our language, “rabbit,” say, that there is fact of the matter whether, in another given target language, Junglese, there is a term, “gavagai,” say, that means the same thing as “rabbit.”
The first claim Quine makes is that, given all our (possible) empirical data, there is no one best translation of “gavagai” into English. There are translations of Junglese to English, all equally compatible with the empirical data, but that differ on what “gavagai” is translated to “Rabbit,” “undetached rabbit parts,” “rabbit stages,” and others, are the various options.¹

As so far put, the claim is compatible with a localized skepticism. There is a fact of the matter about which translation is “right.” And consequently, there is a fact of the matter whether “gavagai” should be translated by “rabbit,” translated by some other term, or whether it evades translation altogether (proves to be “inexpressible” in English). It’s just that, alas, our evidence will always be so limited that we’ll never be able to determine which of the just described options holds. But this is not Quine’s claim. Quine claims (famously) that there is no fact of the matter about how, if at all, “gavagai” should be translated.² There is no fact of the matter about what “gavagai” means. At best we can say this: It means “rabbit” relative to one translation scheme, and “rabbit stages” relative to another, and there is no fact of the matter about which translation scheme is the right one.

Quine also is an avid defender of classical logic, in particular of its bivalence, which he lovingly describes with adjectives like “sweet simplicity.”³ Some care must be taken if one wants to commit oneself both to there being no fact of the matter (about something) and to classical logic, in particular to its bivalence. Quine is clear that bivalence is costly “in respect of harboring undecidables.”⁴ These undecidables aren’t items that we can roundly declare not to be facts of the matter. Rather (and here is the “cost” Quine is speaking of), they lead us to have to make claims like this:

We declare that it is either true or false that there was an odd number of blades of grass in Harvard Yard at the dawn of Commencement Day, 1903. The matter is undecidable, but we maintain that there is a fact of the matter. Similarly for countless similar trivialities. Similarly for more extravagant undecidables, such as whether there was a hydrogen atom within a meter of some remote point that we may specify by space-time coordinates. And similarly, on the mathematical side, for the continuum hypothesis or the question of the existence of inaccessible cardinals. Bivalence is, as Dummett argues (pp. 145–65), the hallmark of realism.⁵

We have now reached the theme of this paper. One must be very careful if one wants to make a non-factualist claim and remain within the province of classical logic. Otherwise one is in danger, if one states one’s non-factualist claim the wrong way, or if one’s non-factualist claim requires being stated in the wrong way, of, as a result, either denying a tautology or embracing a contradiction.⁶ (We will give arguments as to why this is the case in the next section.) And either of these alternatives are very, very bad things to do (at least they are if we’re within the context of classical logic). There
are, we think, only very few strategies—only two by our count (and one of these we suspect is controversial)—available to someone who wants to be a non-factualist about something, and remain within the province of classical logic.⁷

In other words, we're taking for granted here, with Quine, two assumptions: first, that classical logic is too valuable to give up; second, that its principles are topic-neutral: they apply to all areas of our discourse (logical monism).⁸ Our project here is to explore the options for non-factualism within this context. It is worth pointing out that non-factualist claims are made by many philosophers (see footnote 9) who accept both of these assumptions.

Some may feel, despite this, that non-factualist claims cannot be adequately construed unless one or both of these assumptions are given up. If, for example, “bivalence is the hallmark of realism,” then perhaps there is no reason to believe that classical logic can (or should) be hospitable to non-factualist discourse. One thing we argue for in this paper is that this is not the case: there are strategies for housing non-factualist discourse given both assumptions in play.

The rest of this paper goes as follows. We first illustrate how Quine manages to cleave to both bivalence and to his non-factualist claim. Along the way, we’ll suggest a second strategy, a non-Quinean one, for achieving this. We’ll also illustrate how another proponent of a non-factualist claim, Balaguer (1998), fails to sustain his non-factualist claim. We’ll illustrate, that is, the (very small) number of strategies available to someone who wants to do as Quine does, rather than as Balaguer does.⁹

II

How can non-factualist claims lead to trouble with bivalence (broadly construed)? Well, here's one (quick) way to do it. Consider a claim A. Suppose one says that there is no fact of the matter about whether A or ¬A is true. Then (say), one says this: neither A nor ¬A is true. In turn, one says: ¬(A or ¬A), which is a contradiction (or, if you prefer, the denial of a tautology).¹⁰

Here is another way to get into trouble. One says: There are equally good reasons for believing A as there are for believing ¬A. Indeed, here is a really good argument D, for A; and here is another really good argument E, for ¬A. One, therefore, has equally good reasons for believing both A and ¬A. What has one claimed here? Well, one isn’t saying something like: Here are two arguments E and D, but of course they are only prima facie successful arguments—one or both must be wrong, assuming classical logic. (And so one doesn’t know whether to assert A or to assert ¬A.) That would a fine thing to say, but it would hardly be a non-factualist thing to say. To go non-factualist on the question of the truth value of A, to do that, one has to say something like: E and D are equally good arguments, and there are none
better. And in saying this, one can’t mean that $E$ and $D$ are equally bad arguments (and one should ignore both of them). In that case, one would also claim not to know whether $A$ or $\neg A$ is true, and again would have failed to say anything non-factualist. No, one has to mean that both arguments are good, and equally good. But this means that one has asserted $(D \supset A) \& (E \supset \neg A)$, and one has also to assert both $D$ and $E$. And this too leads in short order to a contradiction.  

The point is a simple one: If one is in the classical setting, one must be able to assert $(A \lor \neg A)$, for any sentence $A$. If one nevertheless claims there is no fact of the matter whether $A$ or $\neg A$ is true, then one must be able to say this in a way that is compatible with one’s commitment to $(A \lor \neg A)$ for every sentence $A$ in one’s language.

This brings us to the first strategy available for successfully managing this, Quine’s strategy. To indicate, for a particular sentence $B$, that there is no fact of the matter whether $B$ is true or not, one bars expression of $B$ henceforth from one’s language. If one’s language commits one to $(A \lor \neg A)$, for every sentence $A$, then one had better make sure that $B$ isn’t one of one’s sentences. One certainly detects Quine’s tendency to go this route—radically construed—when he can. Modal idioms he recommends we simply ban from the language. His mood shifts back and forth on propositional attitude talk. He’d ban that too, if he could, and leave us only with the austere language of physics.

But a kinder and gentler Quine also shows up in print, a Quine who doesn’t require that we ban a particularly useful idiom from our language and do without altogether. Rather, he’s willing to let us paraphrase the needed idiom, replace it with something equally as useful (or nearly enough), but more appealing insofar as we can treat it as admitting facts of the matter.  

Before illustrating Quine’s paraphrase move, let’s get a different possible move out of the way: One thought that might occur to some is that translation, being a matter of a mapping of the sentences of one entire language to another, is not something expressible within either language participating in the mappings. And so, the factlessness of a translation of “gavagai” into English isn’t something we need to express within English in any case. This would be plausible if only English didn’t have the resources for quoting phrases from other languages. Quotation is a way that languages have of masticating foreign phrases without having to thereby digest them. Anything, nearly enough, grammatically fits between quote marks, without that (apparently) impinging in any way on the semantics of English. More to the point, the following sentence seems perfectly good English: Either “gavagai” is translated by “rabbit” or it is not the case that “gavagai” is translated by “rabbit.”

Here is where Quine makes his move. Not by faulting quotation in any way, not by denying the expressibility of translation claims in English, but by paraphrasing such claims into a form which doesn’t require the factuality of
what “gavagai” is to be translated by (in English). He replaces the two-place relation “x is translated by y” with the three-place relation “x is translated by y according to z,” where z is taken to range over translation schemes. So although there is no fact of the matter about what “gavagai” means in English, there is certainly a fact of the matter about what “gavagai” means in English relative to one or another translation scheme.

III

It’s interesting, but hardly surprising, that there are deep analogies between Quine’s views on ontological commitment and his views on factuality. Ontological commitment, of course, is a matter he’s written explicitly and famously upon, and, of course, he’s also explicitly discussed what the admissible options he thinks there are for avoiding ontological commitments. If one is uncomfortable with a commitment one’s theory is saddled with, if one is uncomfortable with a particular sentence which (when regimented) begins with an existential quantifier that requires objectual semantics, one must reformulate one’s theory, engage in paraphrase, that is, to avoid the sentence altogether.

So too, we suggest, should one find oneself with a fact of the matter one wants to avoid, one must similarly paraphrase the offending sentence away. In the case of ontological commitment, we don’t have to ban vocabulary items from our language. It suffices to change which sentences, formulable in our vocabulary, we take ourselves to be committed to. In the case of factuality-avoidance, things are different. We must remove vocabulary items (predicates) from the language altogether; otherwise we remain saddled with the undesirable factuality claims, regardless of which sentences we’re willing to commit ourselves to.13 And that’s because factuality claims arise from the tautologies that we’re committed to in any case, and the instances of which involve all vocabulary items of our language.

Perhaps we should say this: Just as Quine has a criterion for what a discourse is committed to, he similarly has a criterion for factuality; and in both cases, in his view, versions of paraphrase are the only escape routes from respective commitments to objects and to factualness. Some authors, however, think that Quine’s criterion can be challenged; that even in a regimented discourse, even when sentences appear prefixed by existential quantifiers with objectual semantics, no ontological commitments need arise.14 Similarly, some authors (the same ones, in some cases) can argue that the mere assertion of (A or ¬A) should not, by itself, convey factuality; not even a claim that (A or ¬A) is true should be allowed to do that. The mere admittance of a predicate into our language should not thereby commit us to facts of the matter regarding that predicate. Why? Because “truth” is deflationist, and in attributing truth to a sentence one isn’t doing anything so strong as claiming there is a fact corresponding to the sentence, or for that matter,
claiming that there is anything corresponding to the sentence. One is only using a device that enables one to commit oneself to the sentence, a device that’s dispensable if the sentence itself can be exhibited directly, but otherwise not.\textsuperscript{15} How does one, under such circumstances, express the non-factual nature of ($A$ or $\neg A$), despite its truth? This way (and this is our promised second strategy): one says: Either $A$ or $\neg A$ is true—no problem there, but it’s arbitrary which it is because there’s no fact of the matter. So pick either $A$ or $\neg A$ to be true—it’s your choice.\textsuperscript{16}

Notice that the non-factualist claim is not to be indicated by an unusual use of the truth idiom or by an unusual use of assertion, or anything inelegant like that. It’s marked out solely by the fact that we treat the attribution of truth (or falsity) in such a case as arbitrary, and that we recognize that we are doing so. Arbitrariness in the designation of a truth value is not part of the theory of truth proper, of course. It’s only an observation about how a truth value for a particular sentence is to be established.

This view of non-factuality isn’t open to Quine, of course. Not because of his views about truth—these are perfectly deflationist as far as we can tell. The option isn’t available to Quine only because he has agreed with Dummett on treating sheer bivalence as the “hallmark of realism.” That is, he has committed himself to the claim that the mere expressibility of a sentence in a logically classical language is a commitment on that basis alone to that sentence or its negation expressing a fact of the matter. Nevertheless, we’ve argued that we’ve sketched another strategy for claiming non-factuality within logically classical contexts, one different from paraphrase.

The proponent of Quine’s view might think otherwise. He might claim that the arbitrariness just described is precisely what the Quinean paraphrase is supposed to capture. What “gavagai” means in English, to revert to our on-going illustration, is arbitrary on the Quinean view, and we code that arbitrariness, make it explicit, by relativizing its truth to translation schemes, by, that is, replacing “‘gavagai’ is translated by $x$” with “‘gavagai’ is translated by $x$ with respect to $z$. How arbitrary the translations of “gavagai” are is now explicitly recognized: they’re as arbitrary as the range of the variable “$z$.”

We think we have something else in mind, though. Our thought is that a denial of Quine’s criterion for what a discourse is committed to can fit comfortably with a denial of his criterion for factuality. Imagine, as is claimed in Azzouni 2004, that “There are infinitely many primes,” when regimented, can be regarded both as true, and as committing us to no objects whatsoever.\textsuperscript{17} The companion non-factuality claim would be that in choosing it to be true, we recognize our choice as arbitrary—in the sense that there are no objects referred to by terms in the sentence that dictate the latter’s truth value. We do not replace the language of this sentence, the predicates within it, with anything else. We recognize a sentence’s non-factuality by virtue of the ontological emptiness of the terms appearing within it.
This last consideration is helpful in generalizing the second strategy. For it treats arbitrariness of truth value as a symptom of something metaphysically more significant: the ontological emptiness of certain terms appearing within the sentence. This is useful because in certain cases, one may want to argue that arbitrariness of truth value is not to be had although the terms of the sentence are ontologically empty nevertheless. For example, nominalists may argue that “2 + 2 = 4” is just such a sentence. It isn’t arbitrary what truth value to assign to such a sentence because of the needs (of applications to counting, for example) that such a sentence satisfies; but it is due to these needs that we find ourselves asserting “2 + 2 = 4” to be true, and not because there are numerical objects with certain properties. Thus the non-factualism of the (true) sentence is to be grounded in certain antecedently established ontological claims.

For our present purposes, there’s no need to go further into the details of such views. The point of this paper is that one has at best two strategies—within the classical context—for making non-factualist claims. And if the reader thinks the second strategy won’t work, then that reader should conclude that there is at best only one strategy—within the classical context—for making non-factualist claims.\(^{18}\)

IV

Balaguer (1998) seems to offer a third strategy. On one interpretation of what he is doing, he is marking out a non-factualist claim via the truth idiom. This is a strategy that may have occurred to the reader—a strategy, that is, that’s supposed to be compatible with remaining within the classical context. So it is profitable to show why Balaguer’s strategy won’t work.

Balaguer (1998, chapter 3, section 3) attempts to show that there is no fact of the matter regarding

\[(\ast) \text{There exist abstract objects; that is, there are objects that exist outside of spacetime (or more precisely, that do not exist in spacetime).}\]

And to do that he expressly distinguishes two notions of truth. He grants that as far as the disquotational notion of truth conditions is concerned, “it is trivial that \((\ast)\) has disquotational truth conditions.”\(^{19} 20\) But there is a second notion of truth conditions, “possible-world-style truth conditions,” and \((\ast)\) has no truth conditions with respect to this notion of truth conditions.\(^{21}\)

Now, in order to get to the (illuminating) objection we want to raise against Balaguer’s move here, we’re going to set aside a number of other rather cogent objections that can easily be raised at this juncture (and that, no doubt, have occurred to the reader). For example—as already indicated—it can be wondered why it is that factuality should turn on the presence of what Balaguer calls “possible-world-style truth conditions,” rather than on disquotational truth conditions.\(^{22}\) A hint is offered by his use of the word
“trivial” (see footnote 20). Perhaps one’s factuality claims should not be so easily forthcoming from a language (they shouldn’t arise by sheer virtue of the meaningfulness of vocabulary items in one’s language). But, of course, the right to take a non-factualist attitude towards a sentence of one’s own language is no trivial matter—we’ve seen this already in Sections II and III—and so the right to non-factualism is not to be established by pointedly using the word “trivial.”

Tabling all this, what are possible-world-style truth conditions on Balaguer’s view? Well, we can only quote him (1998, 159): “... the possible-world-style truth conditions of a sentence are identified with the possible worlds in which the sentence is true.” This, perhaps, may irritate the less patient reader if only because of the annoying presence of the last word in the quotation. If we are to take Balaguer at his word, possible-world-style truth-conditions presuppose a(nother?) notion of truth at a world. But what notion, exactly, is that? Well, given his nod towards the standard possible-worlds truth-conditions literature, it must be some sort of generalized Tarskian notion (what else?). In this case, a (Tarskian-style) theory is given according to which a sentence is true at a world if and only if - - - - . And the conditions encapsulated in “- - - -” are ones relative to a world (“with respect to a given individual domain α,” to use the language of Tarski 1983, 239) in the, er, style of Tarski.

Well, if this is right, it’s rather bad news for Balaguer. For consider: Our world is one of those possible worlds. Indeed, it had better be, otherwise possible-world-style truth conditions are irrelevant to the question of whether there are abstracta or not, in our world (the world, that is, that we are interested in). But, in our world, disquotational truth conditions for our sentences are corollaries of possible-world-style truth conditions. Now, suppose Balaguer is right to argue that (*) has no possible-world-style truth conditions on the grounds that “... there is no fact of the matter as to which possible worlds count as worlds in which (*) is true” (Balaguer 1998, 165). But the same must hold of our world, and so (*) doesn’t have any disquotational truth-conditions either.

Perhaps we have been unfair to Balaguer (1998). By way of redress, we offer another interpretation of his view, and show how it too fails to escape the constraints on non-factualist claims that we have laid out in this paper.

As noted, Balaguer claims that there is no fact of the matter as to whether abstract objects exist. As part of his case, he develops two very different conceptions regarding the existence of a particular kind of abstract object, namely, mathematical objects. According to one of these conceptions (full-blooded platonism, or FBP, for short), all logically possible mathematical objects exist (Balaguer 1998, part I). According to the other conception (fictionalism), no mathematical objects exist (Balaguer 1998, part II). Balaguer then argues that FBP is the only viable formulation of platonism, since
it’s the only version of platonism that solves the epistemological problem of mathematics—explaining the possibility of mathematical knowledge—and that accommodates the existence of multiple reductions in mathematics (Balaguer 1998, chapters 3–4). Fictionalism, in turn, is the only viable formulation of anti-platonism, for it’s the only anti-platonist approach that explains the applicability of mathematics (Balaguer 1998, chapter 7).

Balaguer then argues that we could never settle the dispute between these two views (1998, 152–8). After all, the crucial difference between them is concerned with the existence of mathematical objects. But we have no access to the mathematical realm, and thus “we cannot know whether there are any mathematical objects” (1998, 155).

Hence, Balaguer’s final conclusion:

I am in agreement with almost everything that FBP-ists and fictionalists say about mathematical theory and practice, but I do not claim with FBP-ists that there exist mathematical objects (or that our mathematical theories are true), and I do not claim with fictionalists that there do not exist mathematical objects (or that our mathematical theories are not true). (Balaguer 1998, 179.)

Perhaps that’s how Balaguer goes non-factualist then: He doesn’t claim that mathematical objects exist, nor does he claim that such objects don’t exist—there’s simply no fact of the matter here. So, Balaguer could say: Pick either claim—that mathematical objects exist or that they don’t—it’s your choice. Isn’t this exactly the non-Quinean strategy we suggested above?

Not really. To run that strategy, Balaguer would have first to be in a position to assert that the statement “either there exist mathematical objects or such objects don’t exist” is true. He would then go on to maintain that the choice between the two alternatives is arbitrary, since there’s no fact of the matter. But what Balaguer wants to claim is something stronger. As we saw, to deny that there’s any fact of the matter here, he insists that sentences of the form

(A) There exist mathematical objects,

have no possible-world-style truth conditions. But, as we also saw, this entails that such sentences have no disquotational truth conditions, and so the disjunction of $A$ and $\neg A$ doesn’t have disquotational truth conditions either. Thus, Balaguer cannot assert that “either there exist mathematical objects or such objects don’t exist” is true, and so cannot go non-factualist in the coherent non-Quinean way we suggested above.

There is a general lesson to be drawn here, and it’s one that philosophers should take to heart (if they haven’t already). Suppose one accepts the idea
that there can be more than one notion of truth. Suppose also that (i) the conditions on the disquotational notion—i.e., the Tarski biconditionals—are presupposed by any such notion of truth, and that (ii) Tarski biconditionals can be stated by the language in question. Then (where classical logical principles are taken to be topic-neutral) disquotational truth and any other notion of truth (e.g., “possible-world-style truth conditions”—whatever those ultimately turn out to be) cannot come apart as needed to create the logical space for non-factualist claims. And this means (and here is the general lesson), if one remains within the classical context, that one can’t hope to generate a non-factualist description of (some) discourse via a notion of truth until (and unless) one has managed to establish that ordinary discourse (all on its own) can be taken to be non-factual at least some of the time. And this means that non-factualist claims in a classical context cannot be staked solely via a notion of truth at all, but only via some other means—that is, by one of the two strategies we have already discussed.

Let us take a moment to provide additional indications for why this is the case, especially since it is so common to try to utilize the truth idiom to establish the cogency of non-factualist claims. Consider a position—like that explored in Wright 1992—which hypothesizes that there can be multiple notions of truth, all of which contain, as their core, the disquotational one obeying the Tarski biconditionals. Such notions differ by the addition of differing constraints on the truth predicate. Given two such truth predicates, $T_1$ and $T_2$, it is an immediate corollary of the position that they cannot apply—by virtue of syntax—to the same sentences unless they agree on those sentences. Imagine, for example, that $T_1$ is to be a slender non-factualist notion of truth taken to hold, say, of fictional “truths,” e.g.,

(B) Sherlock Holmes is a fiendishly clever detective,

whereas $T_2$ is a richer correspondence notion taken to hold, say, of “truths” like

(C) Protons have mass.

If it’s grammatically open to $T_2$ to apply to (B), then because $T_2$ obeys the Tarski biconditionals, it will immediately follow that $T_2$ holds of (B). Thus Wrightish truth predicates can differ in the conditions they demand of the sentences they grammatically apply to—and consequently, differ on the sentences they hold of—only if the sentences they grammatically so apply to are themselves already isolated from one another in our web of beliefs. That is to say, if we are not allowed to pool such sentences together, and draw inferences from the group, and if we are not allowed to apply the same truth predicates to them.
In our view, the isolation strategy so hobbles the suggested approach that it's of little value for those interested in non-factualist doctrines. In the mathematical case, for example, the importance of mathematical discourse is precisely in how it is used in ways that intermingle mathematical terminology with empirical terminology. Indeed, so many statements of ordinary empirical science contain indispensable mathematical terminology that if we were to introduce a non-factualist T₁-predicate to apply to mathematical truths, and a factualist T₂-predicate to apply to empirical truths, there would be precious few truths left that we could apply the latter predicate to!

Perhaps the approach is still of value for those sorts of discourses—fictional discourse, for example—that already look relatively isolated from our otherwise more robust truths. We doubt it. Recollect the inference mentioned in footnote 17:

The ancient Greeks worshipped Zeus.
Zeus is a mythical character.
Mythical characters don’t exist.
Therefore, the ancient Greeks worshipped something that doesn’t exist.

Such inferences—invoking truths of such mixed character—suggest that any view that takes our overall discourse (web of belief) to be, in actuality, isolated islands of verbiage is one laboring under something of an illusion.

But the reader may protest at this point. Perhaps the isolating discourse/differing truth predicates approach has very little applicability. Even so, isn’t a Pyrrhic victory within reach: Isn’t it nevertheless a (perhaps not very useful) third strategy for making non-factualist claims?

Nope. Consider the non-factualist truth predicate T₁ again. We want to regard sentences that are T₁-true as nevertheless non-factual. To make a case for this, we must indicate what it is about the statements in question that makes assertions of them nonetheless non-factualist. This—all on its own—forces us to the second non-Quinean strategy indicated above. We must show that the T₁-values in question are arbitrary, or that the sentences in question have non-referring terms, or something like that. In other words, the T₁-predicate proves idle in providing the rationale for the non-factualist claim. (After all the hard work is done, we then apply the icing to the cake: the T₁-predicate.) And, in light of what we have just said about the unlikelihood of there being genuinely isolated discourses, this is a very good thing. The rationale for drawing a distinction between factual truths and non-factual truths can survive the death (by holism) of differently weighted truth predicates applying to sentences delineated as factual or non-factual. So, the cogency of a distinction between factual and non-factual truths should not be made to stand or fall on the cogency of differently weighted truth predicates.
What does it take for there to be no fact of the matter about something? As we saw, in the context of classical logic there are (at best) two ways to go non-factualist. (i) With Quine, we can paraphrase the claims in question, by (for example) replacing a two-place relation "x is translated by y" with the three-place relation "x is translated by y according to z," where z ranges over translation schemes. But, in some contexts, we may not want (or may not be able) to paraphrase the claims in question, and we may still want to (or have to) assert that such claims are true, despite the absence of a fact of the matter. As an alternative, we offered a non-Quinean strategy: (ii) We express the non-factual nature of (A or ¬A) by saying that “either A or ¬A” is true, but the choice between them is arbitrary (since there’s no fact of the matter). Thus, you can pick either A or ¬A to be true. It makes no difference. As suggested at the end of section IV, we considered generalizing this strategy by engaging in a more fine-tuned analysis of the composition of the sentence (e.g., determining that it contains non-denoting terms) in order to mount a justification of a non-factualist claim—despite (say) the truth (or falsity) of the statement.

But this generalization brings us to an important point. It may be that a concern with non-factuality doctrines is a concern at the wrong level of analysis. Let us take a moment to indicate what we mean. Those who like to make non-factual claims are focused on sentences, not the terms within those sentences—and this in turn makes it natural to try to frame non-factualist doctrines in terms of conditions on truth. The Quinean approach satisfies this concern, but it circumvents mutilation of the notion of truth by instead finding terms that need to be paraphrased away. The non-Quinean approach may accept the sentential approach to non-factuality, and try to satisfy it without a more fine-grained analysis of the sentences in question. For example, the establishing of the arbitrariness of the truth value of a sentence may not require an examination of the composition of that sentence.

However such an approach turns out, we still want to suggest that a concern for establishing the non-factuality of a class of sentences—but bypassing issues about their composition—is philosophically superficial. Although the foregoing discussion in this paper already hints that such a moral should be drawn, we would like to make the point official by concluding this paper with some explicit indications for why a focus on non-factuality may not cut deeply enough.

There are many possible motivations for going non-factualist on a class of statements. One is the arbitrary quality that some statements seem to have ("The entire universe could have been three feet to the left of where it is now," "That man is bald"). There seems to be nothing that could decide their truth value (even in principle). Another is the recognition that the statements in question—although their truth values don’t seem to be arbitrary—don’t get
their truth values straightforwardly from properties or relations held of the objects they are purportedly about ("Abe Lincoln was taller than George Washington," "Television characters play a more significant role in our culture than anyone real"). And still a third is a concern with the purported ontology of the subject matter of the statements in question ("The number of planets is nine," "Hubert Humphrey might have become president").

Our suggestion is that in each of these cases, concerns with non-factualism (and related concerns with what sort of truth, if any, such statements have) should be replaced with a deeper concern over the contents of the statements in question—with a focus on the terms, that is, that such sentences are composed of. Variants of the Quinean paraphrasing strategy, of course, will not always be available. What the paraphrase option, therefore, should be replaced with is a direct evaluation of the ontology the terms of the sentence presuppose, or an evaluation of how that sentence is directly or indirectly assigned a truth value on the basis of what it is about, or how it proves to be indispensable to us despite, say, the ontological emptiness of its terms. A non-factualist conclusion about that sentence may be available when such an analysis is complete. On the other hand, and much more likely—especially given how our truths are so often composed of terms of quite varying ontological flavors—we may be able to definitively say what factuality status the sentence as a whole should have only in extremely simple cases. Nevertheless, in all cases we will be able to say a great deal about how the truth values of such sentences arise from their terms, and from the ontological status those terms have.

Notes

1 Some caveats: One might be tempted to describe these translations as "equally good ones." But that's not quite correct. A translation is, as it were, a theory of the target language, and like all theories, it's amenable to theoretical virtues (Quine 1955, 247, lists five: simplicity, familiarity, scope, fecundity, and success in testing). Since one of these virtues is familiarity, it's possible for a particular translation to be singled out as superior to others solely because it happens to resemble other translations we've already adopted of other languages close enough (for purposes of translation) to the target language. Quine (1960) finesses this point by considering the situation of radical translation, one where there has been no previous contact with the target language, or with its speakers, and where, therefore, familiarity—as a theoretical tool—has no place. Quine is also willing to admit that some translations are better than others in point of simplicity. He understands "simplicity" here as something like "manageably systematic" (1960, 74). And perhaps that virtue could determine one translation's superiority to all its competitors. Nevertheless, because his example is meant to get a grip on how much empirical content constrains our "conceptual scheme" (Quine 1960, 26), how much, therefore, empirical content distinguishes among translation schemes, Quine leaves aside considerations of theoretical virtuousness entirely. In elucidating Quine's position on these points, we are not thereby endorsing any of them.

2 This is a controversial claim, of course. Quine, notoriously, treats physical science differently. On his view there is a fact of the matter about which physical theory is true despite underdetermination of (physical) theory by (all available and even possible) data, and even
despite underdetermination if that data is supplemented with “any ideal organon of scientific method” (Quine 1960, 22). His difference in attitude is seen by some as sheer prejudice against special sciences, in particular, against linguistics. This issue lies apart from the aims of this paper.

3 Quine 1981, 32.
4 Quine 1981, 32.
5 Quine 1981, 32. The reference is to Dummett 1963.
6 We’ve been speaking, along with Quine, of bivalence. But, actually, other principles, such as non-contradiction, can be at play instead. These principles, in the context of (certain) alternative logics, come apart. But in the classical case they of course don’t, and so we’ll continue to speak of a violation of bivalence when, in fact, the author in question has (unknowingly, say) embraced a contradiction, and so, strictly speaking, has not violated “bivalence,” but rather, the law of non-contradiction. Anti-realists, such as Dummett, will see important distinctions here. But, anti-realism, outside the classical context, is not the topic of this paper.

7 One of the authors, therefore, thinks: So much the better for alternative logics, paraconsistent logics, in particular, or suchlike. The other thinks: So much the worse for (sloppily stated) non-factualist claims. Since the authors are trying to write a paper together, they won’t discuss this issue any further—at least not now.

8 One of us is suspicious about both of these assumptions. But his reasons for suspicion are independent of the issue addressed in this paper, and so need not detain us here.

9 Another equally famous non-factualist claim, about what we mean by “plus,” can be found in Kripke (1982). Azzouni (1998) can be read as claiming that there is no fact of the matter about what the right criterion is for what a discourse is committed to. Azzouni thinks that this non-factualist claim won’t lead to the troubles that this paper warns against. If this view, however, can be recast as “there is no fact of the matter whether there are rocks or not,” then he is clearly wrong. But he thinks his view can’t (or shouldn’t) be recast this way. In any case, we won’t discuss what Azzouni thinks of his (1998) view any further now. No doubt the reader can think of many other non-factualist claims, since such claims are extremely popular among philosophers these days. One need only think, apart from the philosophers already mentioned, of Dennett, Field, Resnik, and Shapiro, to name just a few.

10 Some readers may think to fault the reasoning here at one or another point, deny a Tarski biconditional, say, or the univocality of truth. We discuss these moves in section V. For the time being, we’ll continue to help ourselves in what follows, without further comment, to simple inferences based on the distribution of the truth predicate over the connectives, and to the Tarski biconditionals.

11 But who on earth, the reader may wonder, would ever want to assert this? Fair enough—this is a mere illustration. In practice, philosophers have much more subtle ways of failing to make coherent non-factualist claims. See section IV.

12 Some may hear in the language of “paraphrase” a requirement of meaning preservation of some sort. This is not a requirement on Quine’s view of the practice. He allows paraphrases to differ in their ontology and, we argue, in their factuality. All that is required is that, broadly speaking, the “paraphrase” serves the same purposes as the original locution was supposed to.

13 Notice that in paraphrases what can happen, as we claim does happen in this case, is that a new predicate replaces an old predicate. We’ll return to this point shortly.

14 Azzouni claims this. See his (2004).

15 There are many deflationists about truth around these days. Arguably Quine (1970) is one of them, and one of the first. One of the authors of this paper likes the version of deflationism to be found in Azzouni (2001, 2006). The other author is sympathetic to the view developed there, but reserves judgment on this for the time being.

16 So, for example, does “gavagai” refer to rabbits or to rabbit fusion? It doesn’t matter: it’s your choice. Pick one and stick to it—there’s no fact of the matter. Note that the issue here doesn’t have anything directly to do with mind dependence (or idealism). Rather, the issue is how are we to acknowledge, in a cogent way, a non-factualist claim while still remaining in a classical context.
The key idea is to resist the temptation of reading the existential quantifier as ontologically committing. We often recognize that we (existentially) quantify over objects whose existence we have no reason to believe in, such as fictional entities. But just paraphrasing away talk of these entities often doesn’t work, for it may not preserve inferences we draw from this talk. Consider: “The ancient Greeks worshipped Zeus. Zeus is a mythical character. Mythical characters don’t exist. Therefore, the ancient Greeks worshipped something that doesn’t exist” (borrowed and modified from Zalta 2000, 134). It’s unclear how a paraphrase would preserve the validity of this inference. So we should take the language literally, and recognize we may (existentially) quantify over objects we don’t think exist. But when are we ontologically committed to something (committed to the existence of something)? In brief: when an existence predicate is satisfied. Here is one such candidate predicate: being ontologically independent of one’s linguistic practices and psychological processes. If something satisfies this predicate, we would have no qualms in claiming that it exists. But given that numbers don’t seem to satisfy that predicate, we are not committed to their existence—even though we (existentially) quantify over them (see Azzouni 2004 for further details).

As an exercise for the reader we recommend sorting through the various non-factualist claims in the literature (that presume topic-neutral classical principles) and determining which strategy, if any, the proponent of the claim utilizes. For example, it looks like Kripke (1982) relativizes claims about what someone means by “plus” to the community he or she is part of. On the other hand, there are passages in the book that suggest that he repudiates that particular gloss on his sketch of Wittgenstein’s solution to the rule-following paradox. We should add that if our analysis about non-factualist claims within a classical setting is right, a failure to use one of the appropriate strategies is probably rather widespread in the profession. We draw this conclusion on the basis of the melancholy fact that none of the discussions of Balaguer’s work, that we know of, point out that his position is problematical in the way we suggest in IV. Indeed, until we wrote this paper, neither of us drew attention to it either.

That is: “There are objects that exist outside of spacetime” is true iff there are objects that exist outside of spacetime.

We are puzzled by what he immediately writes after this passage (1998, 159): “But this is irrelevant here, because it doesn’t follow from this that there is a fact of the matter as to whether (*) is true, because it may be that there is no fact of the matter as to whether (*)’s disquotational truth condition obtains, that is, whether there are objects that exist outside of spacetime.” We are puzzled (and you should be too) because he hasn’t told us why there might not be any fact of the matter about whether there are objects that exist outside of spacetime. That’s precisely what the non-factualist is supposed to show. Within the context of classical logic, one can’t simply assume that there might not be a fact of the matter, especially in respect to a disquotational notion of truth. That’s a position one is supposed to argue for. We note in passing that one way of arguing for it, arguing that (*) is meaningless (which amounts, of course, to banning it from our language) is explicitly denied by Balaguer (1998, 159). Our most charitable interpretation is this: What Balaguer really means to be saying here is that, for some reason or other, the presence of disquotational truth conditions isn’t relevant to whether there’s a fact of the matter about a sentence’s truth or not. Of course, this needs an argument too, and near as we can see, Balaguer’s argument for the claim is encapsulated by him in his pregnant use of the single word “trivial.” See what follows.

A dedicated disquotationalist, such as Quine (1970), explicitly sees the truth predicate only as a disquotational device to be coupled with generalizing tools (such as quantifiers) for expressing commitment to sentences that cannot be exhibited explicitly. But such a disquotationalist cannot, of course, avail himself of the use of a truth predicate to mark out non-factualist claims because, for him, there is only one notion of truth. On such a view, therefore, whatever factuality occurs because of the mere presence of vocabulary in a language is inherited by all uses of the truth predicate in that language.

An astute reader might also wonder about the terminology employed here. Why “possible-world-style truth conditions”? As far as we can tell, this is because, although
Balaguer gestures towards the standard possible-worlds truth-conditions literature, he refuses to tell us exactly which one he's adopted, if any. One reason for this might be that such “styles” of semantics usually involve substantial commitments to abstracta—and when they don’t, they involve substantial strategies for retaining the cogency of such semantics without such commitments. Balaguer seems to think he can finesse all this by a studied attitude of noncommitance. We kind of doubt it, but we won’t say anything more about this now.

You may be puzzled: If we cannot know whether mathematical objects exist, how can Balaguer claim that FBP has solved the epistemological problem of mathematics? Because, Balaguer claims, these are different problems (1998, 204, note 9). The epistemological problem about mathematics assumes that mathematical objects exist, and asks how we can know what such objects are like. (FBP, Balaguer claims, has solved this problem.) But it’s a different problem, Balaguer insists, to ask how we can know whether there exist any mathematical objects. It is a different problem, indeed. But the latter is also a problem about the epistemology of mathematics. Here’s an analogy from traditional epistemology. There is the epistemological problem of whether there are any external objects. One may claim to have solved the epistemological problem of whether there are any external objects by showing that if there are such objects, then one can explain how we know about them. Of course, this latter strategy presupposes the existence of such objects (to be non-vacuous); and the other issue is shunted aside. This approach, common to some positions in naturalized epistemology does require, or so we (and many naturalized epistemologists) think, a showing that the original skeptical question is ill-posed, or illegitimate, or nonsensical, or something like that (see, e.g., Stroud 1981). So Balaguer (we think) still has work to do if he wants to adapt this strategy to the mathematical case. One grim prognosis about the possible success of doing so is that what may make the traditional skeptical question ill-posed is precisely its global quality. The epistemological problem of mathematical objects is much more local—and in this sense like other local claims about kinds of objects, e.g., supernatural beings.

Note that (A) is a particular case of (*) above.

In the course of this paper, we have accepted, without necessarily endorsing, the claim that disquotational (deflationist) truth is best described as constrained solely by a list of biconditionals—roughly put: “A” is true iff A, for every sentence A of a discourse.

Here we see exactly how Balaguer’s attempted use of two notions of truth failed. He did not isolate the discourses that the two sorts of predicates are to apply to from one another. But as the very next paragraph above makes clear, so isolating the discourses is of no use in the mathematical case.

Actually, the approach turns out to be a perverse variant of Quine’s strategy for nonfactualism. Quine’s strategy, recall from section II, is to bar the offending piece of vocabulary from the language, and replace it with something else. Here one—instead—attempts to divide the language into various subdiscourses that are to have nothing to do with one another.

There is another strategy we have not discussed: introducing a factualist “truth predicate,” that nevertheless doesn’t obey the Tarski biconditionals. For this “truth predicate” only the condition “‘A’ is true only if A” holds. This would circumvent the isolation problem that Wrightish truth predicates otherwise face. And it would prevent, rather directly, the inference from a statement to its (substantial) truth. This may be prove to be an appealing approach. But, again, to make a case for the non-factualism of the statements to which this notion of truth doesn’t apply, one would have to unearth aspects of the statements themselves that unfit them for factuality. And this would bring us straight back to the second strategy mentioned above. All this should suggest to the reader that an analysis of non-factualism via invocation of (some notion or other of) truth is perhaps methodologically misguided. See section VI.

In general we think many philosophers greatly over-rate how easy it is to find paraphrases for statements that we take to be true but that are otherwise problematical because of, e.g., ontological issues.
On What it Takes for There to Be No Fact of the Matter

References


