Loving the Truth

1. Introductory Remarks

Many philosophers have seen fit to speak of truth as the aim of belief.¹ This idea is controversial in part because some advance other candidates (like knowledge) for that position, in part because some doubt that belief has just one aim, and in part because some doubt that belief has any aim at all. I mention these controversies to set them aside, for what I would like to discuss here is yet another difficulty for this idea, one that has to do with whether truth could be the aim of anything at all, whether it be belief, inquiry, philosophy, or whatever you please. Davidson articulates this difficulty and his verdict about it quite nicely:

We know many things, and will learn more; what we will never know for certain is which of the things we believe are true. Since it is neither visible as a target, nor recognizable when achieved, there is no point in calling truth a goal. Truth is not a value, so the “pursuit of truth” is an empty enterprise unless it means only that it is often worthwhile to increase our confidence in our beliefs, by collecting further evidence or checking our calculations.²

Of course, not everyone will agree that truth is “neither visible as a target, nor recognizable when achieved.” What prompts Davidson to say this is his Tarski-derived affinity (which I share) for what are called “deflationary” accounts of truth. I will give more details later, but roughly, these accounts deny that truth has a nature that can be described. And the difficulty—which Davidson here says is insurmountable—lies in understanding how something that has no nature can supply the criteria necessary to underwrite the possibility of an intentional orientation.³ But although this question is pressing only for deflationists, I believe the perspective my solution affords on the nature of love and on the connection between love and philosophical agency is sufficiently attractive to incline anyone concerned with those matters to take seriously the idea that the concept of love and the concept of truth are not as separable as they may appear. For my solution will show that truth as deflationists conceive it is in a certain sense the implicit object of any loving orientation, and in that sense has a fundamentally ethical significance.

2. The Problem

In order to develop this solution, I will be working with the ancient idea that philosophy is supposed to involve a special sort of loving orientation toward truth. I do not say that philosophy is this orientation toward truth—my opinion on that point is that philosophy is most essentially characterized as the loving pursuit of understanding—but that a certain loving orientation toward truth is nonetheless characteristic of philosophy. At least one point Nietzsche

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¹ For a thorough discussion of this idea, see Wedgwood (2002).
² Davidson (2000: 67)
³ Throughout this essay, I use “intentional,” “intend,” and the like, not for any specifically agentive (practical rational) phenomenon, but for relations of aboutness as such.
probably meant to suggest by asking the rather odd question “Supposing truth is a woman—what then?” is that, since love is a determinable that comes in various determinations, we would do well to consider which of these determinations the love of truth characteristic of philosophy is. Perhaps unlike many other questions with which philosophers concern themselves, this question certainly has an importance for them that does not depend on how interesting they happen to find it. For just as an oenophile’s joyful love of wine may gradually degenerate into an unhealthy addiction to alcohol, so too can philosophical love gradually degenerate into various unhealthy orientations toward truth. That is one of the occupational hazards of philosophy, and inquiry into the nature of philosophical love should help us to avoid it if anything can. What I hope to show is that this occupational hazard can only be reliably avoided by recognizing that the sort of truth that we attribute to a sentence is but a special and oddly restricted case of a prior, more general, more fundamental, and more important thing to mean by “truth” that can characterize our loving engagements with any object to which we can relate, including sentences that are false.

The puzzle that drives this inquiry derives from the worry that this way of talking about truth as the object of love presupposes a kind of unity or uniformity in the concept of truth that certain current accounts of truth—in particular, deflationary or “redundancy” theories—would have us reject. We can bring out the idea that talk of love of truth presupposes a sort of unity or uniformity in the concept of truth by considering the parallel construction “love of beauty.” It seems natural to think, when we say that somebody loves beauty, that we mean that she loves whatever is beautiful because it is beautiful, so that the sense of this claim depends on there being a single property of being beautiful that various particular things can possess or participate in. Similarly, it seems natural to think, when we say that somebody loves truth, that she loves whatever is true because it is true, so that the sense of this claim depends on the existence of a single property (or a relation, or something like that) of being true that various particular sentences can possess or participate in. Insofar as we say that the philosopher loves whatever is true, and that she loves it because it is true—two of the essential marks of philosophical love—we seem to commit ourselves to the cogency of a unified and general concept of truth.

One way of putting this point is that love, like believing, wanting, and the like, seems to be an intentional orientation, so that some sort of concept is required to somehow supply criteria for identifying its objects. Every intentional orientation requires such a concept—one cannot believe or want without wanting something that there are somehow criteria for identifying, and the same seems to go for love. If that is right, then it will be quite difficult indeed to understand how the possibility of philosophical love is compatible with deflationism about its object, truth, since deflationism about this object will deprive us of any concept with which to supply these criteria. For a deflationary account of truth will deny that there is any such thing as a unified and general concept of truth; rather, there can only be this particular truth or that one. This is because according to these accounts the notion of truth is exhaustively explicated in (say) the grammatical fact that a well-formed expression of the form “x is true,” where x is or refers to a

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4 This is the first sentence of Nietzsche’s Preface to *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886).

5 I use the word “sentence” here for the sake of brevity, for I do not want to presuppose any particular view about the nature of (primary) truth-bearers. Therefore, please read the word “sentence” throughout this essay as if it were always followed by “or whatever the (primary) truth bearers may be.”
declarative, has exactly the same meaning (however the notion of meaning is to be understood) as that very declarative. If this is so, then truth cannot be a property, or a relation, or anything else at all, that supplies criteria for identifying what the philosopher loves. And the most substantial piece of metaphysical furniture left in the vicinity to unify all the true sentences is just the appropriateness of applying what Grover, Camp, and Belnap call a “prosentential” operator—very roughly, the form of words “… is true”\(^6\)—and that is surely not what any philosopher ever meant to profess a love for. The worry, then, is that a deflationary account of truth will deflate it so much that the philosopher will have nothing left to love. But my goal in this essay is to alleviate this worry, and to show how the deflationary philosopher can not only love whatever is true, but also love it because it is true, in spite of her deflationism.

Part of what is at stake here is how it can be possible to love something true in advance of knowing that it is true. We can bring out the importance of this question by considering some remarks of Socrates. In his confrontations with sophists and orators, Socrates sometimes emphasizes that his philosophical love for truth enables him to regard without fear the possibility that he will be refuted, since by being refuted he would rid himself of something evil and acquire the truth that he loves.\(^7\) I trust that the reader is familiar with the profound calm that accompanies this kind of attitude toward the possibility that one’s position will be refuted, a calm that one achieves only by loving as the philosopher loves and that is one of the chief joys of interpersonal philosophical engagement. But in order for philosophical love to confer this profound calm upon us in advance of our being refuted with respect to our position regarding the question whether \(p\), we must in some sense already love the true answer to the question whether \(p\), even in the case where we do not yet (and perhaps never will) know which answer is true. Now, one way to love an answer to a question whether \(p\) before knowing which answer is the one we love is as the sophist does: the sophist loves (say) whatever answer would have the property of supporting her position. The sophist can love the answer that has this property in advance of knowing which answer it is precisely because it is, at least, a property, so that she can use this property to construct the concept of whatever answer would support her position. A concept can in this way supply us with criteria that reach beyond and capture what is not already known to satisfy them. But if a deflationary account of truth is correct, then there is no property (or relation, or anything like that) of being true at all, so that in advance of her refutation there is no such concept that the philosopher can construct with the notion of truth. Whereas belief in a unified and general concept of truth would make it easy to understand how a philosopher can love something true before she knows that it is true, a deflationary account of truth makes this possibility appear problematic.

For analogous reasons, we cannot alleviate our worry at this point by characterizing philosophical love as a love for one or another way of doing something, rather than as a love for certain objects (the true ones). Often we do mean something like this when we seem to attribute

\(^6\) Grover, Camp, and Belnap (1975)
\(^7\) See, for example, Gorgias 458a: “And what kind of man am I? One of those who would be pleased to be refuted if I say anything untrue, and who would be pleased to refute anyone who says anything untrue; one who, however, wouldn’t be any less pleased to be refuted than to refute. For I count being refuted a greater good, insofar as it is a greater good for oneself to be delivered from the worst thing there is than to deliver someone else from it.” (Cooper (1997).)
love of an object to someone—we might mean, for example, that someone loves to play tennis when we say that she loves tennis. Here the claim that someone loves something is explicated in terms of a relevant doable-concept. But in order to explicate the relevant concept of something the philosopher can do, it seems that we would have to characterize it as (say) affirming or contemplating the sentences that are true. And it is plain that this doable-concept is no more a concept that we can construct than is the concept of whatever is true that we have already found problematic on deflationary grounds. Promising though this thought may seem, it cannot solve our present difficulty, so we shall continue to speak of the philosopher’s love as having true sentences as its objects. The two essential marks of this love are that it is a love for whatever is true, and that the philosopher who loves in this way loves what is true because it is true.

3. A Piecemeal Solution

Now, the upshot so far is that a deflationary philosopher’s love for truth cannot be saved if we persist in thinking of it as an intentional mental phenomenon, since then it would belong to every form of love to be directed toward its objects only because of some property that they all possess, some general criteria that they all satisfy. But perhaps we do not have to think of love in this way. Indeed, it is a perennial cliché in melodramas for one character to say of another that “she doesn’t really love me—she just loves me for my money” or “for my looks” or “for my apartment” or something like that, and this would not be a valid complaint if the possibility that “she really loves me” did not indicate a genuine alternative. And here Nietzsche’s odd question “Supposing truth is a woman—what then?” may prompt us to consider whether the love that a philosopher has for truth is indeed not more akin than we have yet considered possible to the somehow unintentional love one can have for another person, according to this recurring melodramatic trope.

Let us suppose, then, that the philosopher somehow loves each true sentence for itself, and not for the sake of some general property that it possesses in common with every other truth the philosopher loves. As Paul Horwich puts the suggestion in his treatment of the problem posed for deflationism by the desirability of truth, “What we endorse, fundamentally, are particular norms.” That is, each true sentence is loved not qua bearer of some general property of truth, but for its own particular sake. On Horwich’s account, then, we start out with a multitude of norms like this:

It is desirable that: one believe the proposition that \( e = mc^2 \) just in case \( e = mc^2 \)

which can be rephrased without violating deflationist scruples as:

It is desirable that: one believe the proposition that \( e = mc^2 \) just in case the proposition \( that \ e = mc^2 \) is true

and then helpfully brought together under the schema:

8 Horwich (2006: 356)
(x) (it is desirable that: one believe x just in case x is true)

thus vindicating the claim that someone—e.g. the philosopher—can love (“desire”) the truth by desiring each true sentence for itself.

What goes missing in this sequence of reformulations and substitutions is the role the concept of truth is supposed to play in explaining why each truth is one that it is desirable to believe. For the philosopher is not supposed merely to love (“desire”) to believe each sentence just in case it is true; she is supposed to love to believe each true sentence because it is true. And this explanatory element of the story we should try to tell about philosophical love goes missing in Horwich’s account.

It is true that Horwich gives arguments to the effect that “true belief has a non-instrumental value—a value for its own sake,” but his arguments are not such as to suggest answers to this question. For Horwich argues by way of citing various of our attitudes (valuing knowledge for its own sake), practices (e.g. ancient history), and ways of treating truths (in particular, our peculiarly direct responsiveness to truths in normative domains) that seem unintelligible if truth only has an instrumental value. These are arguments to the effect that we do in fact treat truths as valuable for their own sakes, from which it might be a good thing to infer that they are indeed valuable because they are true, but they leave it entirely mysterious how to understand the idea that they are valuable because they are true. And that is the heart of the difficulty posed for deflationists by the possibility of philosophical love for the truth.

Concerning this difficulty, it should be clear that there can be no satisfactory general answer, on a deflationary account of truth, to the question about how the philosopher can love truths because they are true. But it appears that there can be a satisfactory piecemeal answer: in each case, what accounts for the philosopher’s love for a true sentence is the specific reason or reasons she has for thinking it to be true (that is, for thinking it). On this piecemeal answer, then, the philosopher loves each truth for itself in the sense that she loves it in virtue of a constellation of considerations (reasons) that logically supports its affirmation.

It might be objected at this point that, rather than solving it, we have merely multiplied the loci of the problem with which we began. According to this objection, we still only have various forms of love—one for each distinct truth, let us say—each of which is directed toward its object only because of some general property that it possesses: for some particular constellation of considerations C, the property of being a sentence whose affirmation C logically supports. And so we have still not characterized the philosopher as bearing a loving relation to each truth “for itself,” but only via the mediation of a constellation of considerations.

Stated thus, we might say that this objection misses the point of our project. For our project was not explicitly to eliminate all mediation between philosophical love and its objects,

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9 Horwich (2006: 351)
10 Just as I wish here to maintain neutrality about the nature of (primary) truth-bearers, I wish to maintain neutrality on the nature of considerations and of logical support, so the reader should understand the notions of a consideration and of logical support deployed in this piecemeal account as black box notions onto which she is free to project whatever accounts of their nature—empiricist, rationalist, pragmatist, or perhaps something else—that she herself prefers.
but to eliminate the sort of mediation that a deflationary account of truth denies that there can be—mediation, that is, through a unified and general concept of truth. But there is a closely related point that does pose a genuine difficulty, which concerns why the philosopher is supposed to love what is true. Earlier we said that philosophical love has two essential marks: not only does the philosopher love whatever is true, but she also loves it because it is true. This latter point is crucial, since we can perhaps imagine a sophist with the good fortune to have adopted a position such that every true sentence would support it and every sentence that would support it is true, with the consequence that she would love whatever is true without loving it because it is true. (We say that she does not love any true sentence because it is true, because her love is an intentional mental phenomenon with criteria supplied by the concept whatever supports her position rather than by the concept whatever is true.) But the philosopher loves what she loves because it is true. And the difficulty is that while our piecemeal account may help us to see how the deflationist philosopher can love whatever is true, it does not help us to see that the philosopher loves it because it is true. For if the piecemeal account is correct, then it seems that the philosopher cannot love each truth because it is true, but only, as we have explicitly stated, because its affirmation is logically supported by some constellation of considerations C.

Now, I think that the only way to defend the piecemeal account against this objection is to deny the distinction on which it rests by positing a sort of identity between the constellation of considerations that logically supports affirming a truth and that truth. Here we may perhaps use the imagery of “logical space” derived from Wittgenstein in order to notice that in logical space there is kind of a collapse between the positions available in it and the sentences that occupy those positions: no one can love a sentence “for its location in logical space” in the ungenerous way in which one person might love another “for her apartment.” A person and her apartment are distinct items, but a truth and its position in logical space are not, for to articulate truth-relevant relations in which a sentence stands to others that are sufficient to logically support its affirmation is precisely to say which sentence it is. That is the point of calling it logical space: logical space is like a web—each location in the space is what it is because it is the complex vertex of many threads that connect it in logical relations to other vertices of the space. If a philosopher loves a truth for its position in logical space, therefore, she loves it for itself. And a philosopher who loves a truth because a constellation of considerations C warrants her in affirming that truth loves it for its position in logical space. So what she loves about this truth is not something distinct from it: she loves it for itself, from which it follows (on deflationist grounds) that she loves it because it is true.

If this is right, then this piecemeal account of philosophical love would therefore seem to solve our problem entirely, were it not for the important fact that the philosopher’s love extends, as we have seen from the example of Socrates, to sentences that the philosopher does not already (and perhaps never will) know to be true. The philosophical love of truth that we have explained how to understand is only comprehensible as an account of how the philosopher bears a loving orientation toward a truth that she already knows, or at least affirms, on the basis of considerations that logically support its affirmation. But the phenomenon of philosophical calm shows us that the philosopher already loves sentences that she does not already (and perhaps never will) know. So the question remains how this phenomenon can be possible when the
concept of truth has been deflated to the point where it cannot be used to construct any contentful concept of whatever is true.

4. Loving the Unknown

Answering this question requires us to rethink why we say that the philosopher loves truth. Up to this point, we have understood the point of this traditional conception of the philosopher to be that the philosopher somehow loves all and only the true sentences. And it should be clear that all of our difficulties hinge upon the requirement that the philosopher loves only the true sentences. For the idea that the philosopher’s love excludes some sentences is what obliged us to search for criteria that distinguish the sentences that are the objects of philosophical love from those that are not. That obligation is what caused all of our difficulties, since a deflationist account of truth entails that there cannot be criteria of the relevant sort that function in the mental economy of the philosopher in such a way as to make sense of the idea that she loves what she loves because it is true. So if we could make sense of the idea that the philosopher loves all, but not only, the true sentences, we would be on our way to an understanding of the phenomenon of philosophical calm.

Unfortunately, however, it seems crazy to suggest that the philosopher loves false sentences in addition to true ones. Even setting aside the fact that the philosopher does after all discriminate among sentences in seeking to deny the false sentences and to affirm those that are true, this suggestion seems to leave us no room for claiming that truth is anything special for the philosopher at all. To say that the philosopher loves false sentences in addition to true ones will (it seems) leave us no way of affirming the traditional conception of philosophy as a loving orientation toward truth in particular instead of toward, say, sentences in general. The prospects for this suggestion could not appear bleaker.

But we can clarify matters at this point by wondering why the philosopher seeks to affirm what is true. The obvious answer is that affirming just is what is to be done with what is true. For on a deflationist account, as we have seen, a true sentence has nothing in common with all the others other than the appropriateness of applying to it the prosentential operator “… is true,” whereby one means exactly what one would mean merely by affirming the sentence. Similarly, a false sentence has nothing in common with all the others other than the appropriateness of applying to it the prosentential operator “… is false,” whereby one means exactly what one would mean merely by denying the sentence. So denying just is what is to be done with what is false. And since the love that the philosopher bears toward various objects seeks to deny what is false no less than it seeks to affirm what is true—since it seeks to do whatever is to be done with each of them—it begins to seem as if the notion of loving a sentence has gotten conflated with the notion of affirming it. It is easy to see how these two notions may have gotten conflated, since affirming perhaps resembles a sort of affectionate behavior, but they are distinct. But what I suggest is that the philosopher does not merely love to affirm all and only the true sentences, but rather that the philosopher loves to relate to every sentence—those that are false no less than those that are true—as it (truly) is. This will entail that the philosopher seeks to relate to the truth in each true sentence—but she equally seeks to relate to the falsity in each false sentence. So the philosopher seeks to do with each sentence, whether it is true or false, whatever is appropriate to
it as the sentence that it is. In this way we can make sense of the idea that the philosopher loves false sentences, and even the idea that she loves them for themselves, since love for a false sentence as what it truly is (namely: false) manifests itself in denial.

The structure of this conception of philosophical love extends to how the philosopher relates to anything at all. The philosopher loves each object of philosophical love, whatever it may be, for itself, for she seeks to come into a relation with it in which she treats it in a way appropriate to how or what it truly is. This is how Socrates can love the truth in advance of knowing it and thereby enjoy philosophical calm. Philosophical calm is possible for him not because he loves only the true sentences in advance, but because he loves everything in advance and seeks to relate to it as it truly is. To be refuted is to come into a better position from which to relate to each sentence as it truly is, and thereby come closer to the goal of philosophical love, which is to relate to each of its objects as what it (truly) is. The notion of “truth” as it figures in the claim that the philosopher loves truth is therefore best understood not as indicating some modification of the objects of philosophical love, but as indicating the absence of any modification whatsoever—the absence of any special demand that each object of philosophical love be one way or another before we can love it. The redundancy of the word “true” therefore asserts itself even here, since what the philosopher seeks in seeking to relate to each object of her love as it truly is nothing more than simply to relate to it as it is.

Since the function of the word “truth” in the traditional claim that the philosopher loves truth therefore does not indicate any substantive criterion for identifying the objects to which her love relates her, it indicates instead the way—or more precisely, the absence of any general and uniform way—in which she seeks to relate to each of its objects. For it indicates that she seeks to relate to every object of philosophical love as it (truly) is, without demanding that it perform any function or meet any criteria extraneous to what it already is. This is how she differs from the sophist, who demands of sentences that they serve her purpose and is interested in them only insofar as they do so rather than insofar as they are what they (truly) are. So the philosopher refrains from imposing upon each object of philosophical love any way for it to be in relation to her, and seeks to allow it in its relation to her to be exactly what it (truly) is.

The goal of this inquiry was to understand how there can be philosophical love for truth, with its two essential marks, that is consistent with a deflationary account of truth. We could have achieved this goal merely with the piecemeal account—which correctly accounts for the philosophical love of sentences already known—if it were not for the fact exemplified by the case of Socrates that philosophical love extends to sentences not yet (and perhaps never) known and thus not within the scope of the piecemeal account. This fact about philosophical love is what forces us to abandon a conception of it according to which it is to be distinguished from other determinations of love by reference to its objects in favor of a conception according to which it is distinguished by the way in which it seeks to relate to objects—namely, to each as it (truly) is. Philosophical love is contentless, then, in the sense that it has no particular object or concept that it is trying to seek in the various relations (affirming, denying, or whatever) to objects into which it brings its subjects. This is something that can be meant by saying that the philosopher loves truth, since truth is no particular object or concept either. And since it has no particular object, the most essential characteristic of philosophical love is openness. For in loving philosophically, what one seeks is to enter into a relation to each object as it is—and so one is
open to whatever each object truly is, and to the world composed of all the objects that there are. Openness to the world is the core of the philosophical orientation.

It is perhaps an open question whether any other orientation toward an object or toward the world deserves to be called love at all. It is at least clear that love whose object is a person can take the form of seeking to relate to that person as the person that she truly is. So what sets philosophical love apart from other forms of love is not merely that it seeks to relate to its objects as what it truly is, but rather that there is no limit to the class of objects to which it seeks to relate its subject.11 We therefore close our discussion of philosophical love by remarking that it forces us to recognize a distinction between a notion of truth that applies specifically to sentences and a more general notion of truth that applies to all sentences, and indeed to all of the objects to which it is possible to be related. We might say that a sentence is said to be true in a merely "declarative" sense if asserting it is what it consists in to relate to it as the sentence that it truly is. But philosophical love seeks to relate its subjects also to false sentences as what they truly are in the relationship of denial, and indeed it seeks to relate its subjects to other people as what they truly are, by treating them with justice, concern, respect and all of the other interpersonal virtues. So it is clear that we avert our attention from many of the objects of philosophical love if we understand this word "truth" in its merely declarative sense when we say that philosophers love truth. That is one of the occupational hazards of philosophy, one of the most subtle and difficult to guard against, whereby we come to replace the openness to the world in which philosophical love consists with an exclusive love for what we might see fit to affirm.

11 Here we may appreciatively recall Sellars’ famous characterization of the project of philosophy as “to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term.” (1962: 369)


Nietzsche, F. (1886) Beyond Good and Evil, tr. Walter Kaufmann. Vintage
