Realism and Anti-Realism II

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1. Verification independent truth conditions. Are the truth values of the sentences about a domain (the 'disputed class' of sentences) independent of our cognitive access to them? Dummett identified those who answer 'yes' as *semantic realists*. He frames this position in terms of a commitment to bivalence. For example, take a statement about the past: "Caesar stepped into the Rubicon with his right foot first." According to the realist, this statement is true iff Caesar stepped into the Rubicon with his right foot first. Such a condition either obtained or did not obtain, it seems. Yet someone who grasps all this may still have no means of determining whether it obtains or not—whether the statement is true or not. So conceived, truth is a non-epistemic notion.

2. How to beat a realist? The semantic anti-realist maintains that truth is instead an epistemic notion: whether a statement is true or not depends on whether we can correctly assert it, which in turn presupposes that we have some means of determining whether its truth conditions obtain or. But note, the anti-realist argument against the realist cannot consist in showing that we should adopt their epistemic notion of truth. They must also argue that the realist anti-epistemic notion of truth is incoherent. This is because the two notions of truth are not obviously incompatible: we may simply adopt both.

3. Need for generality. We must also keep in mind that the realist need only make an existential, not a universal claim: at least for *some* domain the non-epistemic concept of truth applies. This suggests that instead of presenting a counter-example, the anti-realist must be looking for a general argument against the non-epistemic notion of truth.

4. Truth, meaning, and understanding. Dummett adopts a specific but independently motivated theory of meaning. The crucial thing about it: the meaning of a statement is tied both to truth and to understanding. The meaning of a sentence is given by giving the conditions under which the sentence is true. And to understand a sentence is to know its meaning. But what do we know when we know the meaning of a sentence? To avoid circularity or regress, we cannot answer this in terms of our understanding of another sentence. So Tarski's T-schema is useless as a theory of understanding. Dummett suggests that instead we must take knowledge of meaning to be a kind of practical knowledge. To know the meaning of 'S' is to have implicit knowledge: it is to know how to use the sentence, in particular to be able to distinguish situations in which a sentence can be correctly uttered from situations in which it cannot.

5. Acquisition argument. The first way the anti-realist can object to the semantic realist is to question whether we can even form a conception of a verification transcendent truth condition. Consider, a language must be learnable, i.e. it must be possible for someone to acquire knowledge of what its sentences mean. If meaning is use, then they must be able to acquire an ability to tell when the statement can be correctly asserted. The challenge to the realist is now to explain how a novice could learn what sentences in the disputed class mean, given that even a competent speaker may be ignorant of what accessible conditions suffice for affirming or denying the claim. If there is no communicable understanding of what it takes for certain assertions of sentences of the class to be correct, then it seems

impossible to learn their meaning. Dummett presents this argument most clearly in "The Reality of the Past" (1969).

6. Truth-value links. One realist response is to rely on our grasp of sentences which are unproblematic in order to explain our grasp of sentences which have problematic truth conditions. I can correctly utter 'Caesar stepped into the Rubicon with his right foot first' iff 'Caesar stepped into the Rubicon with his right foot first' could be correctly uttered by some Roman soldier at the time. John McDowell (1978) has objected to this strategy. He doesn't deny there could be such links. But using them to explain what we know when we understand one sentence with verification-transcendent truth conditions would presuppose that we understand some other sentence (i.e. the one uttered by the soldier) with verification-transcendent truth conditions.

7. Compositionality. A potentially better response is to exploit the compositionality of language. If we know the semantically significant parts of many sentences, and we know the syntax of the problematic sentence, we can grasp the problematic sentence's truth-conditions. In this way we can explain our understanding of the meaning of sentences that we cannot determine the truth of in terms our understanding of the semantic parts and syntactic structure of sentences that we are able to recognise as true or false. So if compositional semantics is acceptable, then this suggestion undermines the acquisition argument against realism.

8. Manifestation argument. Let's suppose that we are able to acquire knowledge of what sentences with verification-transcendent truth conditions mean. Dummett has a second argument against the realist. Recall, knowledge of meaning is fundamentally a practical ability to decide the truth-value of the sentence. So we should be able to manifest that knowledge in actual linguistic practice. For example, your knowledge of what 'It is raining' means can manifest itself in asserting it in the appropriate conditions, and refraining from doing so when it doesn't rain. Accordingly, if we indeed know the truth-conditions of the sentences of a disputed class, then we must be able to manifest this knowledge in our use of those sentences. Yet if the truth conditions of these sentences are verification-transcendent, then there may be no procedure (known to us) for deciding the truth-value of the sentence. Hence, it may be that we are not able to manifest a practical ability to decide the truth-value of the sentence. Therefore, we do not have knowledge of the meaning of verification-transcendent truth conditions after all.

9. A missing ability. What the realist seems to be lacking is "a practical ability which stands to understanding an evidence-transcendent truth condition as recognitional skills stand to decidable truth-conditions" (Wright, *Realism, Meaning and Truth*, p. 23) Indeed, we cannot simply recognise the truth value of certain statements if their truth conditions are verification-transcendent. But that doesn't show that there is no other ability that could do the job. P.F. Strawson (1976) suggests that an ability to verify a statement is just one way of manifesting understanding. An ability to recognise conditions that constitute evidence, more or less good, for or against the truth of the sentence, also manifests understanding of the sentence, even if such conditions are not its truth-conditions.