

Realism and Anti-Realism IV

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1. Manifestation and understanding. Recall, Dummett's first way of objecting to the semantic realist was to question whether we can acquire a conception of a verification-transcendent truth condition. He thought not. His second and more powerful objection was that we must also be able to manifest knowledge of truth conditions in our use of a sentence. The problem is that, if the truth conditions of a sentence are verification-transcendent, it may be that we are not able to manifest a practical ability to decide its truth-value. We may simply lack such an ability. A commitment to verification-transcendent truth conditions is what brings about this difficulty. So, an anti-realist must keep truth tied to verification, to the act of establishing the correctness of an assertion.

2. Realism and anti-realism. Where exactly do the two positions diverge? Imagine, a single die is placed in a black box which is then closed. We shake the box. Now I utter U: "Currently the upper face of the die shows 6 dots".

- Scenario 1: *Following U, the box is opened, and the die's upper face shows six dots*
- Scenario 2: *Following U, the box is left closed*

The realist explains the truth of the statement in both scenarios in terms of the (mind-independent) state of the die. The anti-realist explains the truth of the statement in Scenario 1 in terms of our ability to verify the sentence, i.e. recognise its correctness as an assertion or judgment. Can the anti-realist do the same in Scenario 2? Yes. But now consider

- Scenario 3: *Following U, all humans lose their capacity for visual and tactile sensations*

Here the realist and the anti-realist will diverge. The realist will still accept U as true. Yet the anti-realist seems to have clear grounds to consider U meaningless in Scenario 3: in that scenario the sentence is not just not verified, it is no longer verifiable.

3. Theory of meaning. The anti-realist theory of meaning is (broadly) verificationist. It is fine to understand meaning in terms of truth-conditions, as the realist does too. But we should not understand truth conditions in terms of truth (as the realist does), but in terms of the conditions under which a sentence would be verified, i.e. when we would correctly assert it (verificationism). Dummett emphasises that a theory of meaning is not only a theory of truth, but also a theory of understanding. This connection to understanding is captured by the connection with conditions for correct assertion. One understands a sentence iff one has a capacity to distinguish between conditions under which the sentence can be correctly used and conditions in which it would not be correctly used. Dummett assumes that to have such a capacity requires being able to manifest it.

4. A new logical landscape. A sentence is true iff it can be verified. Some sentences cannot be verified simply because they are false. A sentence is false iff we can falsify it (can recognise that its truth-conditions do *not* obtain). We all recognise that we cannot in Cambridge correctly say "we are in Oxford". Because we can falsify that sentence, we are not able to verify it. But notice, an inability to verify a sentence is not sufficient for the sentence to be falsifiable (or false). Some sentences may be both unverifiable and unfalsifiable. So for any sentence, it is either (i) verifiable, (ii) unverifiable, (iii) falsifiable, or (iv) unfalsifiable. We can now easily see how classical bivalence breaks down. Classically, S is not true iff S is false, and S is not false iff S is true. But the anti-realist accepts that S can be not verifiable (i.e. not true) and not falsifiable (i.e. not false).

5. External Realism? If we were to accept this kind of theory of meaning, what would this mean for external realism, i.e. Independence, Correspondence, Cartesianism? Should we now reject Independence? Not necessarily. C.S. Lewis asked us to consider a mass-extinction scenario: 'If all minds should disappear from the universe, the stars would still go on in their courses.' Is this verifiable? Well, based on what we know about the world, we should accept that this scenario is possible. If it is possible, then the stars exist independent of our mind and theory. Indeed, we know that human minds did not bring the stars or mountains into existence! But all this is unspectacular, because we are reading Independence *internally*: we are treating it as part of an empirical theory can safely construe its meaning in anti-realist terms. The same holds for Correspondence.

6. Brains in vats. The real culprit is Cartesianism: even an ideal theory can be false. (In more Dummettian terms: falsity is independent from our ability to falsify). If we accept this then 'external' versions of Independence and Correspondence roll out as philosophically substantive, metaphysical theses. The model theoretic argument aims to show that this generates semantic scepticism. Semantic scepticism is self-refuting. Putnam has a famous simple argument against Cartesianism: Brains in Vats (BIVs). If even our ideal theory can be false, then we must accept the following: we could in fact all be brains in vats. But we cannot accept that.

1. The BIV word 'brain' doesn't refer to brains
2. My word 'brain' refers to brains
3. I am not a BIV

The second premise is defended by *reductio* argument: assume it doesn't, then what does premise 1 mean? So we cannot accept Cartesianism.

7. Resisting Cartesianism. Putnam thinks we should become *internal realists*. But he has offered a number of distinct formulations of this positive theory. Tim Button distinguishes 'nonrealism' (1970s), 'justificationism' (1980s), and 'natural realism' (1990s). Natural realism is Putnam's most developed position. But in each, Putnam rejects Cartesianism by making truth dependent on our abilities to verify or falsify a theory.

8. Natural realism. Putnam's mature view assumes that the problems disappear once we have sorted out our philosophy of perception. How can our terms be about the mind-independent world? This is a problem only if we assume that our access to the world is purely theoretical or cognitive. That we are always piecing together a picture based on subjective evidence. But this can be resisted if we adopt a naïve realism. In experience the world presents itself to us immediately. Our word 'Felix' refers to Felix, and we have a grasp of this connection because we have a grasp of both 'Felix' *and* of Felix and know how to use the one to refer to the other. Putnam: "How could the question 'How does language hook on to the world?' even appear to pose a difficulty, unless the retort 'How can there be a problem about talking about, say, houses and trees when we *see* them all the time?' had not already been rejected in advance as question begging or 'hopelessly naïve'?" Putnam's natural realism holds on to the retort.

9. Button's objection. Tim Button (with Wright 2002) worries that this commitment to naïve realism is problematic. The naïve realist ties mind and world together metaphysically. That is fine. But the problem was epistemological: how can we *tell* our terms are about the world? Consider, a perception of a tree is indistinguishable from a corresponding hallucination of a tree. Descartes asked: can I really ever tell I am not dreaming? He thought not. In the worst case, even the naïve realist should accept that our ideal theory about the world can be radically mistaken. Cartesianism doesn't go away.