CHAPTER 21

REALISM AND ANTI-REALISM: DUMMETT’S CHALLENGE

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1. REALISM AND ANTI-REALISM

The past three decades have seen a renewed interest among analytic philosophers in the topic of realism, an interest that has given rise to a significant body of literature at the intersection of metaphysics and the philosophy of language. Michael Dummett’s contributions to this literature have been as influential as any. He first focused the attention of analytic philosophers on the topic in a series of papers in the late 1960s and early 1970s; and his continuing efforts to explore the issue of realism have shaped much of the discussion in the ensuing years.

Dummett’s earliest writings on realism have a straightforward aim. The datum is the existence of a variety of disputes in which one party is called a realist.¹ Thus, we

¹ It is interesting that Dummett takes the debate about what is most frequently called realism—realism about universals—to have a structure different from the debates he actually characterizes. See Dummett (1978c: 147).
have scientific realism and a range of opposing views including operationalism and instrumentalism; realism about the psychological and behaviourism; realism about material objects and phenomenalism; realism or Platonism about mathematical objects and intuitionism. The obvious question is whether the common use of the term 'realism' points to some general pattern structuring these different disputes. Dummett thinks it does, and his project is to delineate the pattern.

It is initially tempting to say that what ties all these disputes together is that each bears on the existence of a distinct category of entities; or moving to the formal mode, the claim would be that the disputes all bear on the referential force of certain expressions—the theoretical predicates of science, psychological expressions, and so on. Dummett, however, thinks that construing debates over realism in these terms has the consequence, first, that we overlook certain forms of realism (realism about the past or realism about the future, for example) where what divides realists from their opponents is not commitment to any distinctive class of entities and, secondly, that we misrepresent the debate over mathematical realism, where, following Kreisel, Dummett tells us the central issue is the objectivity of mathematical claims rather than the existence of a special category of abstract entities (Dummett 1978: 146).

What Dummett recommends is that we understand these debates between realists and their opponents (for whom Dummett coins the generic term 'anti-realists') as debates about a disputed body of statements—the theoretical statements of science, statements about the mental, statements about physical objects, mathematical statements, statements about the past, statements about the future. According to Dummett, the intuitive core of what, in each of these debates, is called realism is a pair of related themes: first, that statements in the disputed class are attempts to reflect or express a sector of a mind-independent world and, secondly, that whether those statements are true or false depends upon how that sector is; and, as Dummett sees it, this intuitive core gets expressed in the realist's claim that statements making up the disputed class are determinately either true or false and are such independently of whether it is possible for us to tell which they are. So the realist in any of these debates wants to say that statements in the disputed class have a determinate truth-value and that the concept of truth that applies to them is an epistemically unconstrained notion. As Dummett typically puts it, the realist construes the notion

\[2\] A difficulty in Dummett's terminology is presented by his use of the word 'statement'. There is an ambiguity here that can prove frustrating. Sometimes he uses the word as synonymous with 'assertoric sentence' (as when he speaks of the meaning of a statement); and sometimes he uses it to refer to what gets asserted by the use of such a sentence (as when he speaks of the assertion or denial of a statement). It is easy enough to disambiguate some of Dummett's uses of the term, but for others this is well nigh impossible. Where it is clear that 'statement' is being used as equivalent to 'assertoric sentence', I use some variant of the latter; and where 'statement' has its Strawsonian use as what is asserted by the utterance of a sentence, I use 'statement'. Where it is not clear how the term is being used, I typically use 'statement', thereby preserving Dummett's ambiguity. But I have allowed the demands of a free-flowing style to override these general rules. Where accuracy in the use of the term would result in jarring switches from 'sentence' to 'statement' in a single context, I typically stick with a single word, despite the risk of inaccuracy.
of truth applicable to statements in the disputed class as verification-transcendent: it is a property a statement can have even if it is in principle impossible for us to establish conclusively that the statement has it.

By contrast, the opponent of realism in each of these debates—the anti-realist—denies that the concept of truth which applies to statements in the disputed class is, in this sense, verification-transcendent. According to Dummett, the anti-realist insists that the concepts of truth and falsehood are epistemically constrained. For the anti-realist, truth is just warranted or justified assertability. The result is that only statements for which we can conclusively establish that their assertion (or denial) is warranted are true (or false). Given this characterization of the realist and anti-realist, it is no surprise that Dummett takes their opposition to focus on those statements in the relevant disputed class for which it is, in principle, impossible for us to have the warrant requisite for assertion or denial. These statements (the verification- or falsification-transcendent statements) Dummett calls undecidables; and he tells us that the realist in each of our debates insists that the relevant undecidables all have a determinate truth-value, whereas the anti-realist denies this. The upshot, Dummett claims, is that the principle of bivalence (the semantic principle that every statement is either true or false) provides a 'crucial test' (Dummett 1978: 155) for determining whether one endorses a realist or anti-realist account of a particular body of discourse. Provided the body includes statements that are undecidable, we can say that whereas a realist interpretation will insist that bivalence holds for the body of discourse, an anti-realist interpretation will deny this.

One is, however, likely to object that few of the historical debates Dummett seeks to characterize have gone the way he claims. The debate between Platonists and intuitionists may have taken the principle of bivalence or the related principle of the excluded middle (the non-semantic principle that either S or not-S) as its focus, but it is unique in this regard. We do not find scientific realists and operationalists debating bivalence for the theoretical statements of science; behaviourists typically do not question the assignment of truth-values to statements about the mental; nor do phenomenologists want to scuttle bivalence for statements about material objects. Dummett concedes that, in fact, the debates in question have not had the structure he outlines; but he insists that while the anti-realists in these debates have

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3 A frequently cited difficulty in interpreting Dummett bears on the status of the anti-realist's claim here. Is the anti-realist rejecting the notion of truth in favour of some substitute notion, or is it that the anti-realist means to be proposing an alternative analysis of the notion of truth? On the first reading, truth is what the realist says it is; the anti-realist finds this notion problematic and recommends that we invoke some other notion to play some of the roles that truth plays. On the second reading, there is a single pre-philosophical notion, and we have two different philosophical analyses of it—the realist analysis and the anti-realist analysis. Although it is possible to find texts that support both readings, Dummett's considered view is better captured by the second reading; or so it seems to me. Accordingly, throughout I interpret Dummett's anti-realist as someone giving an analysis of truth that is meant to be a competitor to the realist's analysis.

4 But Dummett is often more cautious here. See e.g. Dummett (1993a: 467). Some of the reasons for the caution are discussed in Sect. 4.
typically not questioned the applicability of the principle of bivalence to statements of the disputed class, they should have done so (Dummett 1993b: 467). As he sees it, they all occupied a theoretical position from which this principle should have been problematic; for the deep lying insights motivating the various forms of anti-realism in these debates imply scepticism about, if not outright rejection of, the principle of bivalence in the case of those statements from the disputed class that are undecidable.

What Dummett wants to claim is that, in each of our debates, the dispute is ultimately about the kind of meaning associated with statements in the disputed class (Dummett 1978c: 155). The realist in each debate holds that a statement from the disputed class gets its sense or meaning from being correlated with a state of affairs, one whose obtaining might well transcend our ability to detect or recognize it. That state of affairs is, of course, the one whose obtaining is both a necessary and sufficient condition for the truth of the correlated statement. The anti-realist rejects the realist's transcendent states of affairs and insists that we understand the statements in the disputed class in terms of the recognizable features of our experience that count as evidence for those statements. Thus, the behaviourist rejects the private mental states of the psychological realist and insists that the content of a psychological statement is given by way of the overt behaviour that justifies our making such a statement. In the same way, the phenomenalist rejects the unobservable material objects of the realist and parses claims about ordinary objects in terms of the sense data or sensory experiences that warrant those claims, and the operationalist tells us that the meaning of a theoretical statement consists not in some inaccessible state of affairs, but in the operations, tests, or measurements that constitute evidence for the assertion of the statement. Notoriously, these claims have all been made within the context of a reductionist account of statements from the various disputed classes; but Dummett insists that the reductionism is an unfortunate and irrelevant addendum to the deep-lying insight at work in the various forms of anti-realism—the idea that the meaning of a statement from the disputed class is given by identifying the evidential base that provides warrant for the assertion of that statement (Dummett 1993b: 470–1; 1978c: 157).

It is because they endorse this idea that the anti-realists in our debates reject the account of transcendent truth defended by their realist opponents. Anti-realists reject the realist's transcendent states of affairs and insist that the content of statements from the various disputed classes is exhausted by what constitutes the evidence warranting the assertion or denial of those statements; but, then, the only thing that could count as truth-makers for those statements are the recognizable situations that warrant their assertion. So, for the anti-realist, truth has to be something like warranted or justified assertability.

Now, what Dummett argues is that this account of truth involves a commitment that anti-realists in our debates have seldom, if ever, appreciated—a commitment to the view that the principle of bivalence fails for undecidables. Pretty clearly, a
statement can have a truth-value only if there is something that makes it true or false (Dummett 1978e: 14–17). As we have seen, the only thing that can play this role in the anti-realist’s account is the sort of recognizable item that provides warrant for the assertion or denial of the statement in question. But, then, when there is no such item, the condition required for the statement’s having a truth-value is missing. And, of course, there is no such item in the case of undecidable or verification-transcendent statements. Accordingly, what the anti-realists in our debates should have said is that the principle of bivalence fails for undecidables.

2. The Truth-Conditional Theory

It is, however, important to note how this line of response transforms Dummett’s original project. The original aim was to identify a pattern structuring certain historical debates; but what began life as characters in historical debates have come to float free of their historical anchors. The realist and the anti-realist have become something like philosophical archetypes whose views Dummett feels free to stipulate. Furthermore, whereas we began with a series of properly metaphysical disputes, what we now confront is an opposition within the philosophy of language. Debate over a mind-independent reality constraining our statements and beliefs has been displaced by debate over the proper account of the meaning of assertoric sentences. For Dummett, the generalized form of the latter debate comes to be identified with the debate over realism. And the project gets altered in a further way. The initial aim was simply a characterization of two philosophical perspectives; but what started out as a neutral characterization of realism and anti-realism comes to take on a progressively more partisan cast. Dummett tries to expose weaknesses in the ‘received view’—the realist’s account of meaning—and to explore the strategies required to displace that account with the sort of theory of meaning proposed by the anti-realist. So we leave the historical debates behind; we move from metaphysics to the philosophy of language; and we become something like apologists for an anti-realist theory of meaning.

Realism, we have said, is at bottom the view that an assertoric sentence gets its meaning from being correlated with a certain state of affairs, the state of affairs

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5 For the idea that the realist’s account of meaning is the ‘received view’, see Dummett (1993f: 34). Although it is difficult not to see Dummett as something like an apologist for an anti-realist theory of meaning, he is himself more cautious in his characterization of his ‘research programme’. See e.g. Dummett (1993b: 463–4).
that obtains just in case the sentence is true. Dummett calls the view the truth-conditional theory of meaning. On this view, to understand an assertoric statement, \( S \), is to grasp the truth-condition for \( S \); it is to know how the world must be for \( S \) to be true; and to assert a statement is to assert that its truth-condition obtains. This view, we have said, is the 'received view,' and Dummett thinks there are good reasons for its having that status. The view has deep intuitive appeal. We take it that, for any assertoric statement, \( S \), '\( S \) is equivalent in content to 'It is true that \( S \)''; and, as Dummett puts it, that equivalence suggests that truth is precisely the notion to play the central role in the theory of meaning (Dummett 1993f: 42).

Now, according to Dummett, a theory of meaning for a language, \( L \), is supposed to provide a theoretical representation of what a speaker of \( L \) knows in virtue of understanding the sentences of \( L \)—what Dummett calls a 'model of meaning' (Dummett 1978a: 217). For 'the received view'—truth-conditional semantics—the relevant model is provided by the sort of Tarskian theory of truth we meet in the work of Donald Davidson; and, as Dummett sees it, what the truth-conditional theory is recommending is that knowledge of something like that theory for language, \( L \), be ascribed to a speaker of \( L \). 

But in what sense is it that a speaker of a language knows the theory of truth for that language? If there is knowledge here, it cannot be propositional knowledge of an explicit or verbalizable sort. The idea that more than a handful of speakers of English could actually formulate anything remotely resembling a Tarskian theory for even a modest fragment of English is preposterous. But apart from that, the claim that an English speaker's knowledge of the truth-conditions for all the English sentences he or she understands is explicit or verbalizable seems to involve either circularity or a regress (Dummett 1993f: 45; 1978a: 217). Take any sentence, '\( S \)', whose meaning our speaker grasps. Since the truth-conditional theorist is supposing that the speaker's knowledge of its meaning is explicit, the theorist is committed to the idea that the speaker could display his or her understanding by actually stating the truth-condition for '\( S \)'. But how will our speaker do that? Either by using '\( S \)' itself or by using some other sentence/s. If the former, then the truth-conditional theorist can be sure that we have the required display only if the theorist assumes in advance what needs to be shown—that our speaker's use of '\( S \)' involves a knowledge of its meaning (that is, its truth-condition). If the latter, then the theorist can be sure that we have a display of the speaker's knowledge of the truth-condition of '\( S \)' only if the theorist can be sure that our speaker knows the meaning (that is, the truth-condition) of the sentence/s used in the explanation of the truth-condition of '\( S \)'. But, then, the same problem arises in the case of that sentence (or those sentences), and the truth-conditional theorist faces once again a choice between circularity and regress.

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6 But the assumption has a peculiar status. It is not to be understood as a psychological hypothesis, but as a 'an analysis of the complex skill which constitutes mastery of a language' (Dummett 1993c: 37).
So defenders of the truth-conditional theory will need to deny that speakers of a language have explicit or verbalizable knowledge of the truth-conditions of all the sentences of the language. They will need to hold that, for at least some sentences (presumably, the sentences comprising the most primitive parts of the language), speakers have only an implicit knowledge of their meaning and, hence, their truth-conditions. Dummett, however, thinks that truth-conditional theorists face difficulties in their attempt to make sense of this attribution of implicit knowledge, difficulties so serious as to call into question the whole truth-conditional approach to meaning.

The truth-conditional theorist tells us that there are sentences whose truth-conditions speakers are unable to formulate explicitly, but know, nonetheless. The claim is that they know the truth-conditions of those sentences implicitly. Dummett's question is: what is it to grasp a truth-condition implicitly? The talk of knowledge suggests that the truth-conditional theorist is ascribing to speakers a state that is properly epistemic, but is, nonetheless ineffable; and that, in turn, suggests that, for the truth-conditional theorist, something like a private language underlies our understanding of public language. Dummett takes the notion of a private epistemic state to be incoherent; and he insists that if truth-conditional theorists are to avoid commitment to such states, they need to construe a speaker's implicit knowledge of a truth-condition as something like a practical skill or ability that gets manifested or displayed in a publicly accessible pattern of behaviour. Indeed, he tells us that if there is to be any content or meaning at all to the truth-conditional theorist's attribution of implicit knowledge, there must be some observable pattern of behaviour that could count as a manifestation of that knowledge (Dummett 1978a: 217).

Now, Dummett concedes that for any statement, S, such that it is impossible for its truth-condition to obtain without a speaker's recognition of that fact, it is easy to identify something that counts as a manifestation of the speaker's implicit knowledge of the truth-condition for S. The speaker's assent to S in the presence of the relevant truth-condition is sufficient manifestation to give content to the attribution of implicit knowledge. Unfortunately, there are very few statements whose truth-conditions cannot obtain without a speaker's recognizing that fact. 'I have a headache' and 'I am thinking' are, perhaps, like that; but the vast majority of sentences coming out of a speaker's mouth are such that their truth-conditions can obtain without the speaker's recognizing that fact. For many such sentences, however, there exists an effective procedure for verifying the sentence, a procedure following which a speaker is in a position to recognize the obtaining of the sentence's truth-condition whenever it obtains. 'It is snowing' and 'The grass is green' are, for most speakers at least, like this; and for a sentence like either of these, Dummett concedes, a speaker's ability to employ the relevant procedure to arrive at a verdict on the sentence is sufficient behavioural manifestation to give content to an ascription to the speaker of implicit knowledge of the sentence's truth-condition. For other
sentences, there may now be no such effective decision procedure; but it is at least possible that there be one. A sentence like ‘There is water 50 miles beneath the Martian equator’ is, perhaps, an example. As things stand, there is nothing that counts as a behavioural manifestation of a speaker’s grasp of the truth-condition for a sentence like this; but it is at least in principle possible that there be such a manifestation; and that, Dummett would allow, is sufficient to give meaning or content to an attribution of implicit knowledge of truth-conditions (see Dummett 1993f: 45–6).7

But, as Dummett points out, there are many sentences for which not even this sort of in principle possibility of effective decision procedure exists. He routinely lists three different operations that can generate such sentences: the use of the subjunctive conditional, reference to remote regions of time and space, and quantification over infinite or unsurveyable totalities. These operations generate sentences like ‘If Clinton had been born in New York, he would never have become president’, ‘The triangle was Hannibal’s favourite figure’, and ‘A city will never be built on this spot’, all of which Dummett takes to be undecidable. He denies that it is even in principle possible that there be a generally effective decision procedure for any of them, a procedure following which we could conclusively establish or verify the sentence in any situation where it is true. But, then, there is no practical ability mastery of which constitutes a behavioural manifestation of the implicit knowledge of the truth-condition that is to be identified with understanding the meaning of the sentence, and that means that any ascription of such knowledge is without content or meaning. The upshot is that the truth-conditional theorist posits epistemic conditions for understanding sentences such that it is not even meaningful to suppose that they obtain.

For obvious reasons, this line of criticism has come to be known as the ‘manifestation argument.’ Dummett frequently supplements this argument with a related line of reasoning that has come to be known as the ‘acquisition argument.’ The argument seeks to show that if the truth-conditional theory were true, no speaker could ever learn the meaning of an undecidable or verification-transcendent sentence (Dummett 1978a: 217–18). According to Dummett, we learn a language by being trained to assent to sentences in certain situations and to deny them in others; but the situations in question need to be ones that a language-learner can recognize as obtaining whenever they obtain. This requirement presents no problems for the truth-conditional theorist’s account of a decidable sentence; for, in its case, the truth-condition the theorist will insist a language-learner needs to grasp in order to learn its meaning is a state of affairs for which there exists an effective procedure enabling the learner to put himself or herself in a position to recognize its obtaining whenever it obtains; but with an undecidable sentence it is otherwise. The state

7 Crispin Wright gives a more detailed account of in principle decidability than any we find in Dummet. See Wright (1987d: 30–2; 1987b: 180–3).
of affairs the truth-conditional theorist tells us we need to grasp if we are to learn the meaning of an undecidable sentence is not one whose obtaining the language-learner can be brought to recognize or detect whenever it obtains. But, then, if the truth-conditional theory is true, none of us could ever have done what we all have, in fact, done—learned the meaning of verification-transcendent sentences, and proof that we do grasp their meaning is just that we recognize them to be verification-transcendent.

The two arguments are closely related. The manifestation argument contends that nothing in a language-user’s behaviour can ever show that he or she had an apprehension of a transcendent truth-condition; and the acquisition argument contends that there is no way a language-learner could ever have come by such an apprehension; and both arguments seek to undermine the truth-conditional theory by pointing out that these facts entail things that are pretty clearly not the case—that we never learn the meanings of verification-transcendent sentences and that we can never display our mastery of such sentences in our linguistic behaviour.

Both arguments rely on a cluster of related themes from the work of the later Wittgenstein—that meaning is use, that there can be no private language, that linguistic understanding is always a practical skill. What Dummett’s arguments seek to show is that when truth-conditional theorists confront undecidable sentences, they are forced to repudiate these themes. Thus, Dummett explains the Wittgensteinian claim that meaning is use by telling us that ‘the meaning of a . . . statement determines and is exhaustively determined by its use. The meaning of such a statement cannot be or contain as an ingredient anything which is not manifest in the use made of it, lying solely in the mind of the individual who apprehends the meaning’ (1978a: 216). But if Dummett’s arguments are on target, the truth-conditional theorist must reject this sort of Wittgensteinian account of a speaker’s understanding of a verification-transcendent sentence and endorse instead a Cartesian model for characterizing our understanding of undecidables, where that understanding turns out to be a private state, the acquisition of which is a complete mystery and the subsequent possession of which there can be no manifestation in overt linguistic behaviour.

3. Dummett’s Positive Programme

Dummett assumes that the spectre of these Cartesian commitments will motivate us to search for an alternative to the truth-conditional theory; and if the relevant Wittgensteinian themes are to provide constraints, the alternative theory of meaning will be one that construes linguistic understanding as a properly practical skill—more precisely, as a discriminatory or recognitional ability. On this
sort of view, to understand a statement is to know how to use it properly; and to know that is to have the ability to recognize when the assertion of that statement would be correct. Dummett encapsulates this insight in the proposal that we replace the concept of truth-conditions with that of assertability conditions. To know the meaning of a statement is to know (in the sense of 'to be able to recognize') the conditions under which a speaker would be conclusively justified or warranted in asserting the statement; and to assert a statement is to assert that the conditions required for the statement to have conclusive warrant obtain. Such conditions are those in which the statement is verified. Accordingly, Dummett frequently calls his proposed alternative to the truth-conditional theory verificationist semantics.8

So the notion of an assertability condition is to be the central concept in our semantical theory. That concept, however, needs clarification. When the focus is the correctness or appropriateness of an assertion, we need to distinguish the demands of conversational etiquette and its social graces from the properly epistemic demands placed on assertion. It is only the latter that Dummett has in mind when he speaks of assertability conditions. But even when we keep this distinction in mind, there is an ambiguity in talk of assertability conditions. Talk of the epistemic conditions justifying assertion can be a reference to the situations or states of affairs in the world to which a speaker responds in assertion or to the states of response to such situations or states of affairs on the part of the speaker doing the asserting. For some statements, to be sure, there is no such distinction: the relevant states of affairs just are states of the speaker. First-person psychological statements are the obvious case; but the case is exceptional. More typical is the case where we can distinguish between what a speaker responds to and the state of the speaker doing the responding. Unfortunately, Dummett is not clear just which he has in mind when he speaks of conditions justifying assertion. Nor is there agreement among those who are sympathetic with Dummett's proposal of an assertability-conditional account of meaning. Thus, Crispin Wright seems to endorse an objectivist reading when, following a suggestion of Dummett's, he tells us that, for decidable statements, the truth-conditions of the 'received view' constitute a subspecies of assertability conditions (Wright 1987d: 242); whereas, John Skorupski seems to be proposing a subjectivist account when he tells us that we can understand assertability conditions as states of information, where these are states of the speaker doing the asserting (Skorupski 1988: 513; 1997: 41). Just as Wright's reading can find its inspiration in

8 The most extended discussion of the topic is found in Dummett (1993f: 62 ff). As examples of what we might call evidentiary theories of meaning (or, following Skorupski 1988, 1993, epistemic theories of meaning), Dummett mentions both verificationism and falsificationism, where the latter tells us that to know the meaning is to know (in the sense, again, of 'to be able to recognize') what would falsify it. But while he even occasionally suggests a preference for a falsificationist theory (see Dummett 1993f: 93), he typically pits the truth-conditional theory against verificationism and talks as though a verificationist theory is the theory that most naturally expresses the Wittgensteinian themes just mentioned.
Dummett, Skorupski's understanding of assertability conditions seems to be what Dummett has in mind when he tells us that, for an observation statement, the conditions warranting assertion are the appropriate sense experiences on the part of the speaker.

But whichever interpretation is endorsed, the resulting conception of an assertability condition precludes the possibility that the meaning of a statement might involve some factor that transcends the 'detective' powers of someone who understands the statement. According to Dummett, whether or not a statement is one whose assertion has conclusive warrant or justification is something that, by the very nature of the case, is in principle detectable by a speaker. Contemporary epistemologists sometimes associate different senses with the terms 'warrant' and 'justification'. (See, for example, Plantinga 1993: 43–6.) They tell us that whereas the fact that an individual has justification for a particular belief or statement is, in principle, transparent to the individual, this is not so with warrant. Dummett, by contrast, uses the two terms interchangeably and so construes them that it is impossible for there to be conclusive warrant or justification for the assertion of a statement unless that fact is one that can be recognized by those speaking the language. A consequence, Dummett thinks, is that the assertability theorist has no difficulty handling the statements that are problematic for the truth-conditional view—the verification-transcendent or undecidable statements. One might suppose that this is not so, arguing that since there may be no conditions under which we are warranted in asserting these statements (they are, after all, verification-transcendent), the verificationist is no better off in giving an account of our grasp of their meaning than the truth-conditional theorist. But, according to Dummett, there is a confusion here. Knowing the meaning of a statement, he tells us, is a matter not of actually having the justification requisite for correct assertion, but rather of having an ability, the ability to recognize, if presented with it, the condition that would conclusively warrant the assertion of the statement; and that, Dummett wants to claim, is something one can have even in the absence of a grasp of the statement's truth-condition (Dummett 1993f: 70).

But Dummett thinks that if we are going to reject the truth-conditional theory of meaning in favour of an assertability-conditional approach, we will want to reject as well the theory of truth associated with that problematic theory of meaning. Dummett does not give us much argument to support this view. Indeed, it often seems that he takes the truth-conditional theory of meaning and the associated theory of truth to constitute a single package, neither component of which survives the demise of the other (see, for example, Dummett 1978c: 146, 155). But if pressed for argument, Dummett would likely claim that it is only because truth-conditional theorists subscribe to an account which makes truth epistemically unconstrained that they run into the problems Dummett delineates; for, Dummett would argue, it is only when they conjoin the truth-conditional theory with that sort of account of truth that those theorists find themselves forced to suppose that speakers have the
problematic idea of verification-transcendent truth-conditions. Truth, Dummett concludes, cannot be a property that is capable of eluding our power to detect it.\textsuperscript{9} It must be a property such that it is at least in principle possible for us to determine whether or not a statement has it. Having conclusive warrant or justification is just such a property, so Dummett concludes that truth is something like warranted or justified assertability.

An important consequence of Dummett’s epistemic account of truth and the associated evidentiary conception of meaning is epistemological. It provides Dummett with a response to the stock arguments of the sceptic.\textsuperscript{10} The sceptic calls into question our claim to have knowledge by arguing that it is possible that most of our familiar beliefs are false. The arguments have a standard form. The sceptic takes some familiar statement, $S$, and argues that the best evidence we could have for asserting $S$ is compatible with the falsehood of $S$. Arguments of this form, however, just assume something like the ‘received view’ of meaning and truth. The sceptic needs to assume that the meaning of $S$ is given by a verification-transcendent state of affairs and that warranted assertability and truth can come apart; but if Dummett is right, both claims are false. We can have no conception of the sceptic’s verification-transcendent state of affairs; and if our evidence is sufficient to warrant the assertion of a statement, that statement is \textit{eo ipso} true.

In any case, we have an epistemic theory of truth; and we are now back where we began our discussion of realism and anti-realism. If truth is epistemically constrained, then it is not clear that the principle of bivalence will hold across the board. If there are verification-transcendent or undecidable statements, then neither their assertion nor their denial will be warranted; and given an epistemically constrained notion of truth and falsehood, that means that there are statements which have no truth-value at all. Of course, the defender of the ‘received view’ will want to insist that the principle of bivalence holds across the board. So we have our original opposition. The realist—now construed as the defender of a truth-conditional theory of meaning and an epistemically unconstrained conception of truth—endorses the principle of bivalence for undecidables; and the anti-realist—now depicted as the proponent of verificationist semantics and an epistemically constrained conception of truth—denies that verification-transcendent statements have a determinate truth-value.

So Dummett’s anti-realist rejects the principle of bivalence, the semantic principle that for any statement, $S$, either $S$ is true or $S$ is false; but Dummett denies that bivalence is the only classical logical principle his anti-realist is committed

\textsuperscript{9} The general structure of argument in Dummett (1993f) confirms this reading of Dummett’s intentions here.

\textsuperscript{10} This feature of an epistemically constrained conception of truth is pressed in Putnam (1981, ch. 2); but Dummett is fully aware of the idea as well. See Dummett (1978c: 153). I am indebted here and elsewhere to Marian David, who helped me with the epistemological dimensions of the realism–anti-realism debate.
to rejecting. He thinks that a repudiation of the principle of the excluded middle (the non-semantic principle that $S$ or not-$S$) is likewise implicit in the anti-realist’s assertability-conditional semantics (see, for example, Dummett 1978e: 17–18; 1993f: 69–70).

The truth-conditional account explains the connectives by showing the truth-values of the complex sentences formed by the use of the connectives to be a function of the truth-values of the sentences that are their constituents. The assertability theorist, however, insists that the realist’s notion of truth is to be replaced by the notion of assertability. Accordingly, Dummett tells us, the explanation of the connectives will proceed by construing the complex sentences into which they enter as having assertability conditions that are a function of the assertability conditions of their constituent sentences. Thus, the assertability theorist will explain the connective ‘or’ by saying something like the following: we have conclusive warrant for asserting a statement of the form ‘$A$ or $B$’ just in case we have conclusive warrant for asserting $A$ or we have conclusive warrant for asserting $B$. The upshot is that where ‘$A$’ is an undecidable statement, the classical principle ‘$A$ or not-$A$’ fails; if ‘$A$’ is effectively undecidable, then we have conclusive warrant for asserting neither ‘$A$’ nor its negation, so we lack the warrant requisite for asserting the disjunction ‘$A$ or not-$A$’. What the verificationist theory delivers is an account of the connectives of the sort at work in intuitionist theories, where truth gets replaced by provability, itself a species of warranted assertability—the sort of warranted assertability associated with the statements of mathematics. And Dummett makes much of the connection between intuitionism and verificationist semantics. The latter, he suggests, can be understood as a generalization of the sort of theory of meaning the intuitionist provides for mathematical statements (see, for example, Dummett 1993f: 70).

4. PROBLEMS WITH DUMMETT’S ACCOUNT OF REALISM

To review: I began with Dummett’s early claim that, in the disputes he addresses, what separates realist from anti-realist is the former’s endorsement of the principle of bivalence for verification-transcendent or undecidable statements. That separation, we saw, is supposed to rest on a prior contrast in the theory of meaning—the contrast between a truth-conditional theory and an assertability-conditional theory. That contrast, we have seen, becomes the focus of Dummett’s overarching research

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11 And there will be familiar differences as well in the assertability theorist’s introduction of the quantifiers. See e.g. Dummett (1978f: 231).
programme in the philosophy of language. The programme has both a negative and positive side. On the negative side Dummett seeks to undermine the truth-conditional theory by invoking the Wittgensteinian insights expressed in the manifestation and acquisition arguments. On the positive side he is anxious to display verificationist semantics as a genuine alternative to the 'received view'. According to Dummett, the verificationist approach to meaning commits us to a rejection of the realist's conception of truth in favour of an epistemically constrained notion of truth that makes it something like justified or warranted assertion. We get the result that the anti-realist rejects the principle of bivalence in just the way Dummett's early analysis had claimed; and as we have just seen, we get as well the result that the connectives (and the quantifiers) are to be understood in intuitionist terms, so that classical principles like excluded middle fail.

Virtually every step in this complicated analysis has been challenged. Focusing first on Dummett's early attempt to characterize the opposition between realists and anti-realists, we meet with widespread scepticism about Dummett's claims to have identified the core intuition of realism in the idea that the principle of bivalence holds for undecidables. Some critics challenge the claim that acceptance of bivalence is a necessary condition for realism. They point out that there are grounds for denying bivalence that do not imply a move away from realism. One might, for example, question bivalence because one follows Frege and Strawson in denying truth-values to statements made by way of non-referring singular terms; but endorsing that analysis hardly makes one an anti-realist. Likewise, one might deny truth-value to some statements involving the use of vague terms; but that strategy would not seem to preclude a realist account of the subject matter of vague discourse (see Vision 1988: 180; Wright 1987d: 4. For Dummett's response, see Dummett 1993b: 468). And there are the semantic paradoxes, where, whatever their metaphysical orientation, semantic theorists seem to have no alternative but to deny a truth-value (see, for example, Vision 1988: 181).

But as the critics themselves concede, these objections to Dummett's analysis do not undermine the fundamental insights at work in Dummett's analysis; they merely point to the need for suitable qualifications in its formulation. More serious are concerns about Dummett's emphasis on the role of verification-transcendent statements in debates between realists and anti-realists. As we have seen, Dummett takes it to be constitutive of the realist outlook to insist on truth-values for effectively undecidable statements; but, as Crispin Wright points out, that stipulation has the consequence that it is impossible to be a genuine realist about bodies of discourse that include no verification-transcendent statements. Thus, there couldn't be

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12 Dummett himself deals with these problems in Dummett (1978b).

13 And, in fairness to Dummett, his attribution of the principle of bivalence and the principle of excluded middle to the realist was almost always formulated cautiously. See Dummett (1978c: 155) and the detailed discussions in Dummett (1953a,c).
such a thing as realism about effectively decidable mathematical statements, moral
discourse, or, more generally, any ‘domain of states of affairs over which human
cognitive powers are sovereign’ (Wright 1987d: 3). But, as Wright goes on to argue,
any such domain is one where realism ‘ought to seem least problematic and it is
where Dummett’s anti-realist, at least, proposes to leave it alone’ (1987d: 3).

So there can be forms of realism that do not bear on verification-transcendent
statements. Following Wright, I mentioned moral realism as an example. Wright
suggests that there is another way in which the debate over moral realism consti-
tutes a counter-example to Dummett’s account of disputes between realists and
anti-realists. According to Dummett, the disagreement about bivalence for unde-
cidables hinges on a more fundamental disagreement about the nature of truth;
the anti-realist rejects the realist’s idea that truth is epistemically unconstrained
and identifies truth with something like warranted assertability. But, as Wright
notes, nothing like this happens in the confrontation between moral realists and
anti-realists. Instead, we have one of two quite different patterns (Wright 1992:
9–10). Some moral anti-realists—those who are called ‘error theorists’—concede
the applicability of realist truth-values to moral statements, but insist that since
there are no genuinely ethical facts to make those statements true, moral statements
are one and all false. By contrast, other moral anti-realists—emotivists, expressivists,
projectionists—simply deny that moral sentences are statemental and so deny that
any notion of truth-value, whether realist or not, applies to them.

Dummett himself concedes that his characterization of disputes between realists
and anti-realists does not help us understand the case of ethics (Dummett 1993b:
466); but he insists that it holds for the cases he originally sought to capture (1993b:
468–71). However, critics have found even this claim problematic (see Devitt 1984:
261–7; Hale 1997: 284–5; Alston 1996: 130–1). Their difficulty with Dummett’s analysis
is one of principle rather than detail. What Dummett proposes is that we understand
disputes between realists and anti-realists as disputes about language, truth, and
meaning. The philosophers involved in the debates that interest Dummett, however,
would almost certainly reject this linguistic reading of their views in favour of a more
explicitly metaphysical characterization. And it surely seems natural to interpret
the debates as the actual parties to those debates would themselves understand
them. Scientific realists and operationalists, it seems, were arguing about whether
there really are things like electrons, protons, and quarks. Phenomenalists were
denying the existence of matter and material objects; and psychological realists and
behaviourists were debating the reality of private, intrinsically mental states and
episodes.

Dummett recognizes that his account of the realism issue is likely to evince
this sort of response; he appreciates that he will be charged with changing the
subject. What he wants to claim, however, is that unless the traditional debates
are understood as he proposes, there will not be any propositional claims for the
traditional realist and anti-realist to be disagreeing about. As Dummett sees it,
when they are understood in the traditional metaphysical idiom, the various forms of realism and anti-realism are no better than metaphors or pictures (Dummett 1978f, p. xl; 1978a: 228–9; 1993b: 465). He takes his linguistic reading of the relevant views to transform poetic images into literal claims that can submit to argument and counter-argument. His view of metaphysical sentences is not much different from that of the old-line positivists: taken at face value, metaphysical sentences cannot be assertoric. The positivists had argued that since they are either assertoric or meaningless, metaphysical sentences turn out to be nonsense. Dummett parts company with the positivists at this point. Conceding that metaphysical sentences cannot have the literal force they seem to have, Dummett refuses to deny them cognitive content. He recommends instead that we construe them as disguised semantic claims. So it is because he is an anti-realist (or, perhaps, an irrealist) about metaphysical claims as traditionally understood that Dummett gives his own linguistic reading of disputes between realists and anti-realists.

And this anti-realism about ontological claims comes out in Dummett’s response to questions about the metaphysical force of the anti-realist semantics he seeks to develop. He implies that such questions call not for an answer but for a further picture or image. He tells us that the picture need not be that of the subjective idealist who pictures the world as something we make. We can instead picture to ourselves a world that is not of our making, but that somehow springs into existence as we investigate it (Dummett 1978e: 18–19). Here, it is tempting to side with Crispin Wright, who associates with the anti-realist theory of meaning the more restrained picture of a world which exists independently of our investigatory efforts, but which is constituted by properties whose instantiation is, in principle at least, necessarily detectable by us or by beings whose conceptual abilities would represent a finite extension of our own (Wright 1987b: 181). But if we prefer the less colourful story Wright tells, we need to understand that, as Dummett sees it, our preference is merely a preference for a picture, image, or metaphor. The disagreement is not a factual disagreement. There are no properly metaphysical facts to disagree about. From the assertoric or propositional perspective, the anti-realist semantics is the bottom line; it does not have any metaphysical underpinnings because there are no such things.

5. Problems with the Negative Programme

Dummett’s negative programme challenges defenders of truth-conditional semantics to show how a speaker could acquire and display a knowledge of transcendent
truth-conditions. Rather than meet them head on, some critics have tried to show that Dummett’s challenges rest on problematic assumptions. We have already noted, for example, that both the acquisition argument and the manifestation argument take as their backdrop a package of related Wittgensteinian themes—the use theory of meaning, the rejection of private mental states, the interpretation of linguistic understanding as a practical, discriminatory ability. Dummett provides nothing like a general defence of this package. Telling us that he finds Wittgenstein’s attack on privacy ‘incontrovertible’ (Dummett 1978f: p. xxxiii), he merely reiterates the claim that since they are communicable, meanings must be public. Critics have seized on this lacuna in the argument. What the Wittgensteinian view assumes is that successful communication is possible only if one speaker knows what another means to communicate. It is because knowledge is thought to be required that we are admonished to dispense with private meanings in favour of items on public display. As Dummett puts it, we can communicate only what we can be observed to communicate (Dummett 1978a: 216). Critics have challenged the demand for knowledge here. They argue that successful communication requires only the weaker condition that speakers have true beliefs about each other. That condition would, however, be satisfied in a world where meanings are private, but we all operate with a very general, yet true, hypothesis about the similarity of human beings—the hypothesis that we are so constituted that, by and large, we have similar experiences in similar circumstances and react in similar ways when presented with similar experiences (Craig 1982: 552 ff; Strawson 1977: 19). As we have seen, Dummett’s arguments seek to show that the only model for understanding a speaker’s grasp of transcendent truth-conditions is one where meanings are private; but, then, if the critic is right that the relevant privacy is compatible with successful communication, Dummett’s case against truth-conditional semantics breaks down.

Another problematic assumption of Dummett’s negative programme is the idea that a speaker’s apprehension of a truth-condition must be a state that gets manifested in a single way—in the speaker’s recognition that the truth-condition obtains whenever it does. Defenders of holist and functionalist interpretations of mental states have objected to the idea that grasping a truth-condition is a state with a single canonical form of manifestation that can be identified independently of any reference to other mental states (McGinn 1980: 30–2; Skorupski 1988: 509–13). The objection is rooted in the familiar idea that the identity of a mental state involves more than behavioural outputs; it hinges as well on the place the mental state occupies in a network of related mental states. The claim is that the different items involved in the identification of a mental state interact organically, so that there is no such thing as the behavioural manifestation of a mental state. How, on any occasion, a mental state gets expressed depends upon the other mental states an individual happens to be in on that occasion. Grasping a truth-condition, then, is not simply a matter of behavioural response; and, in any case, there is no single pattern of response, whether narrowly recognitional or not, that
counts as the manifestation of a speaker’s apprehension of the truth-condition of a statement.

And there is a related assumption about linguistic understanding that critics have found problematic. Dummett seems to suppose that linguistic understanding is simply a matter of pairing sentences, one by one, with observable situations. Thus, his acquisition argument assumes that learning the meaning of a sentence is learning to correlate it with the appropriate observable state of affairs. Critics, however, argue that we learn the meanings of very few sentences in the way Dummett suggests. Were that not so, they claim, there would be no accounting for the fact that speakers of a language grasp the meanings of an infinity of different sentences. The claim is that we learn the meanings of most sentences by learning the meanings of their constituent terms and by learning the modes of composition or combination that tie those terms together (Hale 1997: 279–280; Alston 1996: 113–14); and critics of the acquisition argument insist that this is true for undecidable sentences no less than decidables. But, then, unless it is just stipulated that grasping the meaning of a sentence is not a matter of grasping its truth-condition, there is no reason to think that there is any special problem about acquiring a grasp of the truth-condition of a verification-transcendent sentence.

And similar remarks hold about the manifestation of linguistic understanding. Dummett assumes that the only way we can display our understanding of a statement is by expressing assent when presented with the evidentially appropriate state of affairs; but while critics concede that is one way to display understanding of the meaning of a statement, they insist it is not the only way. We can also display our understanding of a statement simply by displaying our mastery of the linguistic skills ingredient in making the statement. And this is true both for decidables and for undecidables. Thus, Anthony Appiah suggests that it counts as evidence that speakers understand the verification-transcendent statement that it rained on the earth 1 million years ago ‘that they use “rain” properly in sentences about present rain, that they can count to a million, know how long a year is, and display a grasp of the past tense in relation to the recent past’ (Appiah 1986: 80). But if this is right, then, again, it is only if we stipulate that knowing the meaning of a statement is not a matter of grasping its truth-condition that we have any reason to suppose that we cannot grasp the truth-condition of a verification-transcendent sentence.14

A rather different response to Dummett’s negative programme is to attempt to show that the truth-conditional theorist has the resources to meet the challenges implicit in the manifestation and acquisition arguments. Thus, conceding that linguistic understanding needs to be a recognitional ability, one might argue that this reading of linguistic understanding is compatible with the idea that grasping the meaning of a sentence is grasping its truth-condition (Appiah 1986: 23–4 and

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passim). On this view, the claim that understanding is a recognitional ability does not entail that understanding a sentence is the ability to recognize its truth-condition. The claim will be that it can be that—as it is in the case of decidables; but while conceding that our understanding of a verification-transcendent statement cannot consist in the ability to recognize its truth-condition, the proponent of this response will deny that this fact precludes understanding's being recognitional. The claim will be, first, that grasping a truth-condition enables one to do precisely the things the assertability theorist talks about—to recognize what counts as evidence for the relevant statement and to recognize the epistemic relations between the statement and other statements15 and, secondly, that evidence that we can do these things is evidence that we grasp the appropriate truth-condition.

In the same way, we find defenders of truth-conditional semantics responding to the acquisition argument by trying to construct accounts that show how we might come to possess a conception of verification-transcendent states of affairs. One strategy here is to look to familiar cases where we arrive at conceptions that take us beyond the observable (see, for example, Vision 1988: 206–11; McGinn 1980: 27–9). There are, for example, the ideas at work in theoretical science (like that of a muon or quark) and concepts involving idealization (like that of a perfectly straight line). The claim will be that our acquisition of concepts like these rests on a whole battery of perfectly acceptable conceptual moves including extrapolation, hypothetical inference, the appeal to analogy, and explanation by way of postulation. Those same moves, the claim will be, are sufficient to legitimize our ideas of other minds, inaccessible regions of space and time, infinite totalities, and so on. The response, of course, will be that the examples the realist appeals to include conceptions of precisely the sorts the anti-realist insists are open to question. In turn, the realist can reply that the anti-realist has cast the net too broadly. The claim will be that if we call into question the sorts of examples the realist invokes, few of our ongoing intellectual enterprises will remain untouched. What we face in this interchange is one of those burden of proof impasses that can be difficult to adjudicate, so even if the realist is satisfied with his line of response to the acquisition argument, the anti-realist will remain unconvinced that the challenge implicit in the argument has been met.

15 Wright objects to this strategy for responding to the manifestation argument on the grounds that it involves postulating a grasp of truth-conditions to explain our ability to recognize evidence and inferential connections. He claims that the realist's account has no explanatory power whatsoever and that for verification-transcendent claims, we should dispense with an apprehension of truth-conditions and identify understanding directly with the recognitional abilities. See Wright (1987c: 241–2). Some realists (e.g. Vision 1988) may appeal to our grasp of truth-conditions to explain these recognitional abilities; but the realist need not be doing that. The realist I am thinking of is one who, like Appiah, endorses the truth-conditional theory because of its intuitive roots and then tries to meet the anti-realist's challenge of showing that our grasp of verification-transcendent truth-conditions has a recognitional manifestation.
To satisfy the anti-realist, the realist needs to construct a story that invokes no assumptions the anti-realist will question and shows how we could move from the evidential base the anti-realist insists on by way of principles the anti-realist would accept to a conception of a verification-transcendent state of affairs. One such story appeals to the fact that in learning a language we learn that the truth-values of some statements are systematically correlated with the truth-values of other statements. Consider the case of statements in the past-tense. Many such statements are in principle undecided, so there ought to be a problem about the acquisition of the conception of such a claim's being true. Dummett, however, suggests a strategy the realist might invoke in dealing with this problem (Dummett 1978d: 363 ff). The realist can appeal to what Dummett calls the truth-value link between present-tense and past-tense statements. The idea is just that a past-tense statement of the form 'It was the case that p' is now true just in case the present-tense statement 'It is now the case that p' was true at the relevant time in the past. Now, grasping the idea at work in this principle is presumably something that non-problematically accompanies the learning of tensed language; but given that idea, all that we need if we are to acquire the idea of the present truth of a past-tense statement is the idea of the corresponding present-tense statement's being true. The idea of the obtaining of the truth-condition of a present-tense statement is, however, obviously one we can and do acquire. Accordingly, there should be no problem about our coming to grasp the truth-condition for a past-tense statement: we acquire that idea from our apprehension of the idea of a present-tense statement's being true together with our understanding of the truth-value link between present- and past-tense statements.

Now, if this suggestion works for the case of statements about the distant past, the appeal to the idea of a truth-value link holds out promise for dealing with other verification-transcendent claims (see McDowell 1978: 129–31). The suggestion generalizes to handle future-tense undecidables, and a similar strategy would seem to work for second- and third-person psychological statements. In the latter case, we have non-problematic self-ascriptions of psychological states and the principle that an ascription of a psychological state to another individual is true just in case that individual's self-ascription of the psychological state is or would have been true. So it seems that the acquisition of the idea of a second- or third-person psychological statement's being true is simply a matter of connecting the conception of a self-ascription's being true with the relevant principle.

One difficulty is that the truth-value link strategy is not applicable to all classes of undecidable statements. It does not, for example, work for the case of quantification over infinite domains (Wright 1987e: 89–90). Still, the cases it claims to handle are important; and if it is successful in those cases, the realist can claim genuine progress in explaining our acquisition of the idea of a transcendent truth-condition. Unfortunately, there are grounds for doubting the success of the strategy. The claim is that we come to grasp, for example, the truth-value link between past-tense and
present-tense statements in the normal course of learning tensed language. But if
that is so, then the normal course of learning tensed language seems to be open
to the very challenge the appeal to the truth-value link was meant to answer. The
aim is to show how we might have acquired the idea of a past-tense statement's
being true. Towards realizing the aim, we say that a past-tense statement is now true
just in case a present-tense statement was true; but if there was a general problem
about our acquisition of the idea of a past-tense statement, we hardly answer it by
appeal to that principle since it presupposes that we already have a conception of
the past-tense. The same sort of difficulty arises for the case of second- and third-
person psychological claims. The problem is one of coming to understand what
it is for another person to be in a psychological state; the solution is to appeal to
self-ascriptions and the principle that the ascription of a psychological state to a
person, P, is true just in case P's self-ascription of that state is or would have been
true. But the principle makes reference to a psychological activity—self-ascription.
How did we come by an understanding of another individual's engaging in that
activity? (See McDowell 1978: 132-3; Wright 1987e: 91-3.)

The realist who appeals to truth-value links to answer the challenge set by the
acquisition argument concedes that we never have immediate access to the states of
affairs expressed by undecidable statements, but not all realists make that concession.
John McDowell, for example, argues that there are occasions where we are directly
confronted with the truth-condition for a second- or third-person psychological
statement. These are situations where 'one can literally perceive, in another's facial
expression or his behaviour, that he is in pain and not just infer that he is in pain from
what one perceives' (McDowell 1978: 136). And McDowell thinks that something
analogous holds for the past. On some occasions, McDowell claims, our knowledge
of a past event is non-inferential. These are occasions when the perceptual impacts
of a very recent event persist or, better, leave traces—immediate memory traces—of
the event in the nervous system (1978: 136-7). Now, what McDowell argues is that
these two sorts of situation are precisely those in which we get trained, respectively,
to ascribe psychological states to others and to use the past-tense; and he insists
that such situations provide a base that enables us to use these forms of language
beyond the case where we are immediately presented with the truth-conditions for
psychological claims and past-tense statements. We grasp that situations of the same
kind as those that provide the materials for learning the ascription of psychological
states or the past-tense can occur undetectably, so that the idea of a verification-
transcendent psychological claim or an undecidable past-tense claim is just the idea
of a statement whose truth-condition is a situation of the same sort or same kind
as those involved in our training in psychological attributions or the use of the
past-tense, but which obtains undetectably.

Critics have suggested that McDowell's use of the idea of 'the same kind' here is problematic. The claim seems to be that the property of undetectability imports a kind all its own, with the result that the suggestion that truth-conditions
remain the same in kind while acquiring the property of undetectability is problematic (Hale 1997: 278). The notion of ‘being the same in kind’ is notoriously elusive, so it is difficult to know what to make of this criticism. If there is a problem for McDowell, it is the one pressed by Wright (Wright 1987e: 100–6). Wright is not convinced that the anti-realist needs to concede that, in the cases McDowell discusses, we actually have immediate or non-inferential access to the problematic truth-conditions. He points out that, in the psychological case, the relevant facial expressions and behaviour can occur without the corresponding psychological state. No matter how convincing an individual’s expression or behaviour, it remains a possibility that the individual is deceiving us; and analogous claims hold for the case of our memory traces of the immediate past. Wright’s point is just that if these allegedly privileged situations are not immune from familiar sceptical challenges, there is reason to doubt that they present us with cases where we are in immediate epistemic rapport with the problematic truth-conditions.

Before we conclude our discussion of Dummett’s negative programme, we should note a potential problem that has not been discussed in the literature. Dummett’s arguments are supposed to be perfectly general: their upshot is supposed to be that the idea of a state of affairs whose obtaining is verification-transcendent is unintelligible simpliciter: in no area of discourse can we make sense of the idea of a state of affairs that obtains undetectably. The difficulty is that Dummett tells us this sort of global anti-realism is likely incoherent (Dummett 1978d: 367–8). He tells us, for example, that one cannot be both a behaviourist and a phenomenalist. That is, one cannot coherently hold both that there are no transcendent mental states of affairs and that there are no transcendent physical or material states of affairs. The cost of being a phenomenalist is that one reject behaviourism; and vice versa. But if Dummett’s arguments for anti-realism are so construed that if they hold at all, they hold across the board, then the fact that, by Dummett’s own admission, they cannot have that kind of generality seems to entail that there is something wrong with those arguments.

6. Problems with the Positive Programme

Much in Dummett’s positive programme is reminiscent of developments in old-line positivism. This is especially true of his theory of meaning, so it is no surprise that many of the criticisms of Dummett’s verificationist semantics are familiar from the
debates over positivist approaches to meaning.\textsuperscript{16} Thus, Dummett’s claim that each statement has an isolable set of verification conditions is met with the Quinean reply that ‘our statements . . . face the tribunal of . . . experience not individually, but only as a corporate body’ (Quine 1953: 40–1); and the upshot is supposed to be that the idea of a semantical theory that systematically identifies the verification conditions for statements taken individually represents a hopeless project.

Again, the suggestion that to understand the meaning of a statement is to grasp its verification conditions is countered by the claim that since we can determine which situations provide conclusive warrant for the assertion of a statement only if we know in advance what the statement says, the meaning of a statement must be something different from and epistemically prior to its verification conditions. The objection is meant to express some deep-lying, yet obvious intuitions about meaning. Closely related intuitions get expressed in the objection that if the assertability-conditional account of meaning is correct, we never manage to say what we want to say. Dummett’s line is that the meaning of a sentence consists in its verification conditions; and Dummett explicitly tells us that to assert that \( p \) is to assert that \( p \) is capable of being conclusively established (Dummett 1993f: 76). But if that is right, then it turns out that to assert that \( p \) is to assert that one can conclusively establish that one can conclusively establish that \( p \). Nor is this latter claim what it initially appears to be; for to assert it is to make some still more complicated claim involving a further iteration of the predicate ‘is capable of being conclusively established’; and the same difficulty will arise for this new claim.\textsuperscript{17} The content of our assertions seems to be perpetually elusive; and what is worse, no claim ever manages to be about what we intended it to be about. Suppose our original ‘\( p \)’ was the statement that grass is green. That statement would seem to be about grass; but it turns out that it is not; it is rather about what we are capable of conclusively establishing.\textsuperscript{18}

The intuition underlying these objections—that meaning is something different from verification conditions—comes out in a still different way in a criticism of Strawson’s. Strawson argues that statemental meaning cannot be identified with the conditions that warrant assertion since the latter can vary while meaning remains constant (Strawson 1977: 19–20). Strawson’s example is the sentence ‘Charles Stuart walked bareheaded to his place of execution’. He argues that despite the fact that the assertability conditions underlying the utterance of the sentence are very different

\textsuperscript{16} For a number of such objections, see Alston (1996: 111 ff). The reference to Quine is found on p. 112.

\textsuperscript{17} Alston denies that a related objection holds against Dummett (Alston 1996: 216–17); but it is less clear that the objection I state fails. Dummett does say that to assert that \( p \) is to assert that \( p \) is capable of being conclusively established. If we take the second phrase to be an analysis of the first, then we have a regress that is genuinely problematic. If, however, the equivalence is not meant to provide an analysis of asserting that \( p \), then the regress is benign.

\textsuperscript{18} See Johnston (1993) for a detailed discussion of this line of objection against verificationism.
for a witness to the execution and for someone in our day, the sentence means the same thing for both and its assertoric utterance by both involves the assertion of a single statement.

Although formulated as objections against verificationist semantics, the objections I have been considering apply to any account that identifies meaning with conditions of assertability; but Dummett's more particular claim that the assertability theorist should trade in verification conditions (that is, conditions that conclusively justify assertion) must face the objection that the resulting theory of meaning has precisely the difficulties Dummett takes to be the undoing of the truth-conditional theory. The claim is that to know the meaning of a statement is to know what would conclusively warrant its assertion; but statements that are in principle undecidable are such that there neither is nor can be anything that would conclusively justify their assertion or their denial. But, then, where is the strategic advantage of the assertability-conditional theory? As we have seen, Dummett tries to forestall this objection by identifying the apparently epistemic state with a practical, discriminatory ability—the ability to recognize, if presented with it, a condition which would justify assertion. But, of course, that is an ability that is in principle incapable of being exercised. And how is the attribution of that sort of ability any improvement on the truth-conditional theorist's attribution of epistemic states that can never get manifested?

But the verificationist's difficulties are not limited to the case of undecidables. Anyone who insists on verification conditions has to face the objection that very few empirical statements can be conclusively established or verified (see Appiah 1986: 35–53; Vision 1988: 183–9; Wright 1987c: 255 ff.). The evidence that grounds assertion is almost always defeasible. Now, it might seem that the moral of these two objections is that the assertability theorist has to give up talk of verification (and falsification) and replace it with talk of confirmation (and disconfirmation), so that what results is the view that to know the meaning of a statement is to be able to recognize the sorts of things that count as evidence confirming (disconfirming) the statement. Provided the assertability theorist is willing to supplement this talk of evidence with a reference to the full panoply of epistemic liaisons into which a statement enters, the resulting theory of meaning might have the resources for dealing with the first of our two objections—that bearing on undecidables. But the defeasibility of empirical claims continues to present problems, problems that cut in precisely the opposite direction from those associated with the first objection. The problems in question bear on Dummett's overarching project; for the fact that any piece of evidence for the assertion of an empirical statement is defeasible has

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19 I am assuming, first, that there can be broadly evidentiary conditions for and against undecidables and, secondly, that grasping those conditions together with the epistemic liaisons of an undecidable will provide a speaker with a sufficiently fine-grained understanding of the undecidable. For a discussion of these issues, see Wright (1987c: 241–3).
the consequence that, in the strict sense, that statement is verification-transcendent; and initially at least, that seems to be bad news for anyone who wants to endorse Dummett’s anti-realist programme. The line, recall, is that there are serious difficulties in seeing how we could acquire and manifest a grasp of the truth-conditions for undecidable statements. The anti-realist, however, wants to concede that there is no difficulty understanding how we could come to possess and display an apprehension of the truth-conditions for ordinary empirical statements like ‘It is raining out’ and ‘Grass is green’. But now these statements turn out to be verification-transcendent themselves; and that seems to imply that we can, after all, grasp the truth-conditions for verification-transcendent statements. So Dummett’s concerns about statements involving the subjective conditional, quantification over infinite or unsurveyable totalities, or reference to remote regions of space and time begin to seem to have less urgency than we originally might have thought.

Dummett himself answers the objection that verification conditions cannot be assigned to statements taken one by one (Dummett 1991, ch. 10). He seems to concede that the understanding of verification conditions for any one statement might require a reference to the verification conditions for other statements in the same region of the language; but he claims that the criticism points to an in principle difficulty for verificationist semantics only if it is coupled with an extreme holism that makes it impossible to understand any one statement in a language without understanding all the others. But a holism that extreme, Dummett suggests, represents a threat not merely to verificationist semantics, but to every attempt to provide a systematic representation of what it is that a speaker understands in grasping the meaning of the statements of a language.

Crispin Wright addresses the sorts of objections that rest on the intuition that meaning and assertability conditions are different. He implies that the assertability theorist must reject Dummett’s equation of the content of a statement with the content of the statement that its assertability conditions obtain. Wright tells us that a statement, S, and the statement that S is assertable differ in meaning. What the assertability theorist should say is that ‘any situation which justifies assertion of S, even if defeasibly so, realizes the truth-conditions of “It is assertible that S” and hence provides a justification of the latter which is indefeasible’ (Wright 1987d: 38). And Wright argues against Strawson that the fact that a statement’s assertability conditions vary over time hardly shows that its meaning varies; for to know the meaning of a past-tense statement just is to know how the conditions of assertion are affected by the passage of time. As Wright puts it, ‘grasping the meaning of past-tense statements involves grasping how their conditions of warranted assertion shift as one’s temporal location shifts’ (Wright 1987f: 78).

Dummett seems to recognize that the verificationist owes us an account of defeasibility, but he never provides the account. Again, we need to turn to Wright, who has much to say on the topic. The difficulty is that defeasibility seems to transform nearly every empirical statement into a verification-transcendent claim; and that
calls into question the idea that Dummett's standard examples of undecidables should present any really interesting problems for the truth-conditional theorist. Wright, however, reads a quite different moral into the phenomenon of defeasibility (Wright 1987f: 264). We get a problem for Dummett only if we assume with him that, for the case of ordinary empirical claims, the notion of a truth-condition non-problematically applies. But Wright sees the near universality of defeasibility as showing that it is almost never right to understand assertoric sentences in truth-conditional terms. We need instead to suppose, first, that grasping the meaning of a statement is not a matter of grasping the conditions conclusively warranting its assertion, but is rather a matter of being able to recognize the sorts of things that count as defeasible evidence for the statement and, secondly, that in virtually no cases is that ability to be identified with an apprehension of truth-conditions.\(^{20}\)

As we have seen, Dummett takes the assertability-conditional theorist to be committed to endorsing an epistemically constrained notion of truth; and Wright seems to agree. Like the associated theory of meaning, Dummett's account of truth has faced familiar objections. One such objection argues that the very notions that the anti-realist invokes in giving an account of truth as epistemically constrained are concepts that can be understood only in terms of realist truth (Vision 1988: 20–1, 97–101, 189–96).\(^{21}\) The anti-realist speaks of evidence, justification, warrant, and the like in trying to provide an account of anti-realist truth; but while what counts as evidence for a statement may serve to underwrite the assertion of that statement, what makes it evidence is that it points to the truth of that statement. Likewise, the situations that confer justification or warrant on a statement may serve to justify or warrant the assertion of the statement; but they would not count as justification or warrant unless they increased the probability that the statement is true. The notion of truth at work here, the objection insists, cannot without circularity be the epistemic notion these concepts are being used to define. And a related objection seeks to show that no property like warranted assertibility can be truth by pointing out that while the former is a property that a statement can lose or gain as our body of evidence alters, the latter is a permanent or abiding property of a statement. This second objection has, of course, been significant in traditional debates between realists and their opponents. It has traditionally been taken to show the need for refinements in the anti-realist's account of truth. Thus, it led Peirce to explain truth in terms of justification in the long run and Putnam to define truth as justification in epistemically ideal circumstances. More recently, it has led Crispin Wright to explain truth in terms of what he calls superassertibility, where a statement is

\(^{20}\) But Wright concedes that this move takes the anti-realist perilously close to idealism. See Wright (1987c: 264).

\(^{21}\) Dummett thinks that the concept of correct assertion is prior to that of truth, and he wants to parse the concepts in question in terms of the former concept. See Dummett (1993d).
superassertable just in case its assertability has current warrant and will continue to have warrant no matter how our state of information gets improved.\(^\text{22}\)

But not all those who defend an assertability approach to meaning agree that that sort of semantic account commits one to an anti-realist conception of truth as epistemically constrained. John Skorupski, for example, denies that assertability conditional semantics precludes the view that statements can be undetectably true or false (Skorupski 1988: 516 ff.). He thinks that what he calls the epistemic conception of meaning (the idea that grasping meaning is having the ability to recognize assertability conditions) and the epistemic conception of truth can be separated. Dummett fails to recognize this, Skorupski thinks, because his case for the epistemic theory of meaning hinges on his arguments to show that we could have no idea of undetectable truth or falsehood. But, Skorupski thinks those arguments fail since they presuppose a faulty conception of grasping a truth-condition as a ‘single track ability to recognize the state of affairs when presented with it’ (1988: 511). Skorupski, nonetheless, endorses the assertability approach and thinks we can derive it directly from the Wittgensteinian insight that understanding is a practical skill. That insight forces us to construe understanding in just the way the assertability theorist suggests, as a discriminatory ability. But, according to Skorupski, once we dissociate the epistemic theory of meaning from the manifestation and acquisition arguments, we have a theory of meaning that is neutral with regard to truth; it remains an open question whether there can be undetectably true or false statements.

Wright, I mentioned, disagrees and endorses both an epistemic theory of meaning and an epistemic theory of truth; but, unlike Dummett, Wright does not think that we are, thereby, committed to a rejection of classical logical principles. Dummett’s argument that we must reject the principle of excluded middle is that we must give an assertability-functional account of the connectives. As we have seen, on such an account, we explain the connective ‘or’ by saying that a statement of the form ‘\(A\) or \(B\)’ is assertable just in case either ‘\(A\)’ is assertable or ‘\(B\)’ is assertable. But on this reading, the principle ‘\(A\) or not-\(A\)’ is not invariably assertable. Where ‘\(A\)’ is undecidable, neither ‘\(A\)’ nor its negation is assertable. Wright, however, objects to this conclusion. He suggests that it is clearly not in line with the general spirit of an assertability semantics. The central reason for endorsing Dummett’s account of meaning is that it accords better than the truth-conditional theory with our ongoing linguistic practices; but, then, to be told that we have to reject excluded middle and with it the inferences it warrants is to be told that we need to revise our ongoing linguistic practices. The two counsels, Wright argues, are in clear tension. We can, however, relieve the tension. We need not and should not provide an account of the connectives that forces us to reject classical inference patterns. If we are to give an account that genuinely reflects our linguistic practices, that expresses the use we

\(^{22}\) The objection and a reply are formulated in Putnam (1981: 54–6). For Wright’s very interesting and important work on the notion of superassertability, see Wright (1992).
make of the language, we will express our account of 'or' by saying that 'A or B' is assertable not merely when either disjunct is assertable but also when 'B' is the negation of 'A' or a consequence of the negation of 'A' (Wright 1987a: 328).

7. Dummett and Positivism

When we step back from debate over the details of Dummett's project and focus on the project as a whole, we cannot fail to be impressed by the similarities between his views and those of the positivists of the 1930s and 1940s. I have already alluded to some of these similarities. Dummett himself makes no secret of his debt to the positivists in the theory of meaning. Indeed, he borrows their label and calls his version of the epistemic theory of meaning verificationist semantics; and although he is far more sensitive than any positivists were to the technical demands on a theory of meaning, his own verificationist semantics yields results not all that different from those associated with the famous positivist slogan that the meaning of a sentence is its method of verification. In the same way, Dummett's worries about a realist conception of truth have their positivist analogues. His doubts about the provenance of a verification-transcendent notion of truth are reminiscent of positivist worries about the empirical credentials of a 'metaphysical' notion of truth; and, like some of the positivists, he takes these problems about empirical derivation to motivate an epistemically constrained conception of truth. And, in both Dummett and the positivists we get the result that evidence-transcendent claims are problematic. According to the 'official history' of the movement, positivism took those claims to be without cognitive significance; whereas Dummett denies them a truth-value. Although we have different accounts of just what the problematic status of undecidables comes to, there is an undeniable analogy between the verification principle and the claim that verification-transcendent statements lack a truth-value, an analogy that comes out more forcefully when we note that the two theses are subject to parallel reflexivity problems. Just as there can be genuine doubts about the verifiability of the verification principle, there can be legitimate concerns about the in principle decidability of the statement that bivalence fails for undecidables. Furthermore, in the most interesting case of evidence-transcendent claims—metaphysical statements—Dummett's views turn out to be barely discernible from considered positivist thinking. Like the positivists, he is unwilling to take metaphysical claims to have the cognitive content traditionally associated with them. They are not what they seem to be—claims about the existence and nature of a material world, numbers, or minds. According to the story we all learned as undergraduates, the positivists construed metaphysical claims as nonsense; and certainly they may have sometimes
said this. But they were not always comfortable with that verdict. Indeed, we are all familiar with the proposal to treat ontological claims as pseudo-material mode statements. So what the positivists offered us is a choice: take metaphysical ‘claims’ to be cognitively meaningless or take them to be disguised formal mode statements—statements about the syntactical properties of linguistic expressions. But Dummett likewise offers us a pair of options, and they are pretty close to the positivists’ options: either construe metaphysical sentences as pictures or images—as something akin to poetry—or take them to be disguised statements about the semantics of a certain fragment of our language. And Dummett’s characterization of particular disputes between realists and anti-realists does nothing so much as evoke a general sense of nostalgia for the good old days of logical positivism. Who, after all, are Dummett’s anti-realists? They are phenomenalists about the material world, operationalists and instrumentalists in the philosophy of science, and behaviourists in the philosophy of mind; and when Dummett tries to identify a historical precedent for anti-realism about the past, the only philosopher he can cite is A. J. Ayer.

Why do I belabour these similarities between Dummett’s views and those of the positivists? Because when we step back and attempt to get a fix on Dummett’s overall approach to issues of realism and anti-realism, we find ourselves confronted not so much with a philosophical problem as with a historical question; for what most needs explanation, I think, is just the fact that there has been such a thing as the ‘Dummett phenomenon’. On reflection, there is something genuinely puzzling in the fact that a view with such deep affinities to positivism should have received the hearing Dummett’s views have enjoyed. What we need to remind ourselves is just how few philosophers from the past two or three decades have been sympathetic with the ideas of the positivists of the 1930s and 1940s. The nearly universal verdict of the philosophical community at large is that positivism has been thoroughly discredited. Philosophers seldom like to speak of the refutation of a view; but the vast majority of philosophers would agree that if any ‘ism’ stands refuted, it is positivism; and the alleged refutation claims as its victims theses from virtually every area in philosophy—epistemology, philosophy of science, ethics, metaphilosophy. Even to use the language in which positivists expressed their views—with its talk of protocol sentences, physicalist language, sense data, reduction sentences—is to evoke derisive smirks. And nowhere have positivist views been more roundly criticized than in the theory of meaning. The central target of attack here has been the verificationism that is so prominent in positivist writings, and the philosophical community is so convinced of the success of the attack that we often hear philosophers speaking of ‘the verificationist fallacy’—the ‘fallacy’ of concluding that where evidence is, in principle lacking, there is no fact of the matter.

Of course, the philosophical community’s assessment of the contributions of positivism might turn out to be a mere matter of intellectual fashion. It might turn out to be the expression of a prejudice that future generations of philosophers will manage to overcome. But what is significant is the fact that this negative verdict on
positivism was part of the culture of Anglo-American philosophy in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. If prejudice, it was deeply entrenched prejudice. How, then, was it that a bundle of claims so close to the central themes of logical positivism could have succeeded in finding the prominent place on the philosophical stage that Dummett’s work occupied?

This is a difficult question. Towards answering it, one might point to features of Dummett’s work that are independent of his attempt to develop a verificationist semantics. His analysis of debates between realists and their opponents provides us with one such set of themes. But so do his work on Frege, his account of the structure of a semantical theory, his criticism of semantic holism, and his views about the justification of logical principles. And, of course, there is the fact that Dummett himself seldom presents his claims in the theory of meaning as descendants of positivist thinking. As we have seen, he typically presents them in different dress—as consequences of the Wittgensteinian themes I have discussed. The claim would be that the Wittgensteinian lineage has done much to provide Dummett’s epistemic theories of meaning and truth prima facie legitimacy.

But while there is something to these attempts to explain the ‘Dummett phenomenon,’ neither individually nor collectively do they give us a fully satisfactory account of the widespread attention his work has received. Philosophers have certainly been interested in his analysis of debates over realism, but what has drawn most attention are Dummett’s views in the philosophy of language proper; and although his views about other issues in that area have been taken seriously, the lion’s share of written work on Dummett focuses on his criticism of truth-conditional semantics and his attempt to develop epistemic theories of both meaning and truth. And while the Wittgensteinian flavour of his semantical theory might have given it an initial hearing, it is difficult to believe that their deference to the later Wittgenstein would have prevented philosophers from ultimately recognizing in Dummett’s philosophy of language the very positivist views they had officially rejected; and in any case, interest in Dummett has not been limited to philosophers under the spell of the later Wittgenstein. The fact is, I think, that we do not as yet have a satisfactory resolution of the historical puzzle of the ‘Dummett phenomenon’. It is a puzzle that future historians of twentieth-century Anglo-American philosophy will need to address.

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