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## **Tracking Dummett's Anti-Realist**

There are many sorts of realism. One can be a realist about many different sorts of things, including universals, numbers, ordinary objects, and 'theoretical entities'. Yet there are similarities which link realism about these different things, tempting philosophers to seek a general account of what makes a position *realistic*. Michael Dummett has offered such an account, and with it an argument against the tenability of any such position. This paper is a brief exegesis and criticism of Dummett's anti-realist (A/R) argument. I will argue that the A/R argument depends on some dubious assumptions about meaning, and in particular that it involves a false dilemma between what Dummett calls 'holist' and 'molecular' theories of meaning.

To prevent misunderstanding, I will say immediately that this is not an argument against a Dummettian program in the theory of meaning. Instead, I want to raise the questions "How seriously must a realist take Dummett's A/R argument?" and (not unrelated) "How independent is the A/R argument from commitment to a Dummettian position on meaning?" It is my claim that the answer to both these questions is "Not very."

Realism, for Dummett, is "the belief that statements of the disputed class possess an objective truth-value, independently of our means of knowing it: they are true or false in virtue of a reality existing independently of us. The anti-realist opposes to this the view that statements of the disputed class are to be understood only by reference to the sort of thing which we count as evidence for statements of the class." ("Realism", p. 146). Thus realism, for Dummett, is a view about the independence of truth conditions for a class of claims from the things we take to be evidence for or against them.

Part of what Dummett calls the "general form of the argument employed by the anti-realist" ("The Reality of the Past" (ROP), p. 362) appear scattered throughout the collection of essays (*Truth and Other Enigmas*) which serves as my source. The exegesis will begin with a

broad statement of the argument, and then turn to other texts in search of support for the premises it depends on.

## I.

In ROP Dummett gives a brief statement of the A/R argument:

He (the anti-realist) maintains that the process by which we come to grasp the sense of statements of the disputed class, and the use which is subsequently made of these statements, are such that we could not derive from it any notion of what it would be for such a statement to be true independently of the sort of thing we have learned to recognise as establishing the truth of such statements . . . . It is true, indeed, that we tend to treat statements of the disputed class as if they must be either true or false independently of anything by which they could be known to be true, and therefore of anything in which their truth could consist. This leads us to use these statements in a recognisably different way from that in which we should use them if we had a clear grasp of the kind of meaning which we ourselves have conferred on them, namely by accepting as valid inferences which are in fact unjustifiable. (ROP, p. 362).

Here the anti-realist makes two claims:

- 1) When we learn meanings we acquire the ability to assert or deny claims in the appropriate circumstances.
- 2) The truth (falsehood) conditions for a statement must be identified with the assertibility conditions for it (its negation).

Given these, the argument flows easily. The assertibility conditions which we learn in learning the meanings of statements cannot be identical with classically conceived truth conditions. After all, the assertibility conditions which we learn often fail to be met when the assertibility conditions for the denial of the claim we're considering aren't met either. But classically, one of either a claim or its negation must be true. Thus from (1), we may suppose for some statement  $p$  that neither its assertibility conditions nor those of its negation,  $\sim p$ , are met. It follows from this and from (2) that  $p$  is neither true or false. The realist assumption that  $p$  must be true or false is incompatible with (1) and (2). Further, the realist's assumption leads him to infer that since  $(A \vee B)$  is true when at least one member of  $\{A, B\}$  is true,  $(p \vee \sim p)$  must always be true. Thus the realist infers the validity of  $(p \vee \sim p)$  from his beliefs about truth conditions, and then accepts inferences which rely on the validity of  $(p \vee \sim p)$  as themselves valid, while from the anti-realist point of view such inferences are unjustifiable.

However, although it is clear that the anti-realist claims (1) and (2) are incompatible with a claim of bivalence, ie. with a claim that

statements (of the 'disputed class') are true or false independently of the fulfillment of those conditions we have learned to use for deciding their truth or falsity, it is not clear that they are incompatible with the validity of inferences which depend on the law of excluded middle. Later in ROP Dummett actually allows that some anti-realists might in fact accept the law of excluded middle in the following way:

For (this) species of anti-realist . . . only those statements about the past are true whose assertion would be justified in the light of what is now the case. For him, this means that there is no one past history of the world: every possible history compatible with what is now the case stands on an equal footing . . . . But in any one such possible history of the world, any particular statement about the past will be either true or false . . . (and so) the disjunction of it and its negation must be true in every possible history, and hence true absolutely. (ROP, p. 367).

The position Dummett is describing here begins with a partial valuation (assignment of truth values) of sentences in the language determined by our evidence, and then considers the possible extensions of that partial valuation to all the sentences in the language. A "supervaluation" is then acquired by assigning truth to all the sentences true in every such extension, falsehood to all the sentences false in every such extension, and no value to sentences taking both the value true in some extension and the value false in another. Such an anti-realist position accepts every tautology and every inference of classical logic (cf. van Fraassen, *Formal Semantics and Logic*, (Macmillan, New York, 1971) pp. 94-96 for an account of supervaluations and a proof of this claim). Thus some anti-realists need not reject any realist inferences as unjustifiable.

Dummett takes the view that this move is not open to the 'global' anti-realist who applies the A/R argument to all statements, not just those of some restricted 'disputed class'. This is apparently because Dummett takes the justification of the essentially supervaluational procedure involved to depend on a bivalent (realist) view of present-tense claims, and the global anti-realist rejects *any* notion of truth which attaches to statements "independently of our means of recognising them as true" (ROP, pp. 375-67).

However, I see no need for such a realistic foundation for a supervaluational approach to truth value gaps. Rather than justify the determinacy of possible histories by reference to the (realist) determinacy of the present, we could justify it in terms of *possible extensions* of our evidence about the past. And similarly with regard to the present: we can reject bivalence here as well, while salvaging classical logic, so long as the supervaluational procedure is invoked. And this can be done without any (even imagined) separation of truth from grounds for

assertion. We can imagine extensions of our evidence which 'cover' any claim in question (where by 'cover' I mean of course provide us with grounds for asserting either it or its negation). On the basis of these alternative extensions of our evidence (which presumably can go either way for each claim not settled by the evidence actually in our possession) we can then do a supervaluation which would preserve truth value gaps while also preserving the validity of classical inferences.

So it seems that even a global anti-realist of this stripe could accept classical, realist inference patterns. The A/R argument, as it stands, needs some amendment. This can take either of two forms: we can take the A/R argument to tell simply against bivalence, or we can take it to tell against bivalence and the validity of classical inferences when construed in terms of standard truth-functional interpretations of the connectives.

As an attack on realism thus construed, the argument is undeniably valid. But its premises (1) and (2) are not ones the realist would accept save under the compulsion of further argument. The next section of the paper will focus on the ways in which Dummett's anti-realist might try to support them.

## II.

What the anti-realist must do, if he is to force the realist to accept (1) and (2), is show that an adequate semantics must be founded on assertability conditions, and not on independently conceived truth conditions. That is, he must show that the meanings of statements cannot properly be construed in terms of truth conditions *as distinct* from the conditions we learn to use as indicating their truth. In "The Philosophical Basis of Intuitionistic Logic" (PBIL) Dummett presents an argument meant to do just this. It turns on an application of the use theory of meaning, and in particular on a related Wittgensteinian requirement: "the ascription of implicit knowledge to someone is meaningful only if he is capable of fully manifesting that knowledge." (PBIL, p. 224).

The anti-realist argues: Suppose the realist position is true; then

Since, in general, the sentences of the language will not be ones whose truth-value we are capable of effectively deciding, the condition for the truth of such a sentence will be one which we are not, in general, capable of recognising whenever it obtains, or of getting ourselves into a position in which we can so recognise it. (PBIL, p. 224 f)

This gives rise to the question, "How, then, is it possible to manifest our knowledge of the meaning (i.e. the truth conditions) of these

sentences?" Although we may in some cases be able to state truth conditions, Dummett argues this cannot be all that's needed:

Even if it were always possible to find an equivalent, understanding plainly cannot in general consist in the ability to find a synonymous expression. Thus the knowledge in which, on the Platonistic view, a grasp of the meaning of a mathematical statement consists must, in general, be implicit knowledge, knowledge which does not reside in the capacity to state that which is known. (PBIL, p. 224).

Given this and given the Wittgensteinian requirement, it follows that what's needed is some account of how our use can fully manifest knowledge of realist truth conditions. And Dummett (or his hypothetical anti-realist) claims such an account can't be given:

Hence any behaviour which displays a capacity for acknowledging the sentence as being true in all cases in which the condition for its truth can be recognised as obtaining will fall short of being a full manifestation of the knowledge of the condition for its truth: it shows only that the condition can be recognised in certain cases, not that we have a grasp of what, in general, it is for that condition to obtain even in those cases when we are incapable of recognising that it does. It is, in fact, plain that the knowledge which is being ascribed to one who is said to understand the sentence is knowledge which transcends the capacity to manifest that knowledge by the way in which the sentence is used. (PBIL, p. 225).

This argument is incomplete, however, without a further assumption, to wit, that no *other* use of the sentence distinct from its use as an assertion can provide grounds for ascription of the relevant implicit knowledge. (The reader might consider as an example here the ability to reason hypothetically from the assumption that the claim is true, and/or the assumption that it is false.) However, Dummett is ready to assert the primacy of assertive use, at least in mathematics:

What we actually learn to do, when we learn some part of the language of mathematics, is to recognise, for each statement, what counts as establishing that statement as true or as false. In the case of very simple statements, we learn some computation procedure which decides their truth or falsity: for more complex statements, we learn to recognise what is to be counted as a proof or a disproof of them. (PBIL, p. 225)

This does the job quite nicely: we learn mathematics by learning assertibility conditions. But this means that assertibility conditions are the primary determiners of proper usage, and that a perspicuous semantics will turn on them. For the implicit knowledge involved in an understanding of mathematics is an ability to recognise correct demonstrations and that ability is enough to explain our use. Thus a semantics turning instead on truth conditions can't help but invoke

more implicit knowledge than our use of mathematics allows us to exhibit.

That Dummett thinks this same line of argument may work for other 'disputed classes' of statements is clear:

Now the first thing that ought to strike us about the form of argument which I have sketched is that it is virtually independent of any considerations relating specifically to the *mathematical* character of the statements under discussion. The . . . argument . . . could just as well have been applied to any statements whatsoever. (PBIL, p. 226).

and later:

It follows that, in so far as an intuitionist position in the philosophy of mathematics . . . is supported by an argument of this first type, similar, though not necessarily identical, revisions must be made in the logic accepted for statements of other kinds. What is involved is a thesis in the theory of meaning of the highest possible level of generality. (PBIL, p. 227).

So we may conclude that Dummett's A/R argument turns on a combination of the use theory of meaning with the claim that the primary use of statements is to make assertions. This leaves us with an important puzzle, however. Dummett says that by accepting bivalence (and classical logic) we demonstrate a commitment to a realist theory of meaning (JOD, pp. 317 f). Thus it seems that such meanings *are* reflected in our use. Dummett needs to find a way in which he can undermine the legitimacy of such usage; to be specific he must show that such use is not an *adequate* manifestation of any implicit knowledge of realistic truth conditions.

### III.

To make this further essential argument stand out, we will need to consider some more texts. First, on the criticism of linguistic usage:

It is the multiplicity of the different features of the use of sentences, and the consequent legitimacy of the demand, given a molecular view of language, for harmony between them, that makes it possible to criticise existing practice, to call in question uses that are actually made of sentences of the language. (PBIL p. 223).

And second, on the nature of this demand for harmony (in a molecular theory of language):

. . . it is essential to such a molecular view that there must be, for each sentence, a representation of its individual content which is independent of a description of the entire language to which the sentence belongs, and that we may distinguish among sentences according to their degree of complexity, where the representation of the meaning of any sentence

never involves the representation of that of a sentence of greater complexity. ("Justification of Deduction" (JOD), pp. 304-305).

This molecular theory of language is one essential premise for the A/R argument. Dummett sees a central parting of the ways in the theory of meaning, in which a choice is made between holism and what he calls a molecular theory of meaning. The holist, he argues, must give up all criticism of our linguistic use:

Holism . . . removes all desire to ask for a justification. We speak as we choose to speak, and our practice, in respect of the whole of our language, determines the meaning of each sentence belonging to it. Forms of deductive inference do not need to be faithful to the individual contents of the sentences . . . because there is no individual content other than that determined by the language as a whole, of which those forms of inference are a feature. (JOD, p. 304).

The anti-rational side of holism provides Dummett with a powerful motive for choosing a molecular theory of meaning. For, says Dummett, it rules out the possibility of any criticism of our linguistic usage. Few philosophers would be willing to accept such a limitation on their purview.

Thus this step of the argument relies on a dilemma: we are asked to choose between a holist and a molecularist theory of meaning. Since the holist position involves a radical rejection of *any* criticism of actual practice, we are inclined to choose the molecular theory; Dummett's A/R argument proceeds on that basis.

Dummett's account of the molecular theory moves from the claim that, on such a theory, a statement must have an individual content specifiable independently of the language as a whole. This leads to the invocation of the notion of a *conservative extension*: the appearances of a sentence in more complex locutions (those not appearing in the fragment of the language which determines its content) must constitute a conservative extension of its content:

(If) our actual language (were) a conservative extension of the fragmentary language . . . we could not establish, by its use, any sentence of the fragmentary language which could not already be established in that fragmentary language. The rules of inference which are applied in our language are, on such a molecular view, justified precisely by this fact, the fact, namely, that they remain faithful to the individual contents of the sentences which occur in any deduction carried out in accordance with them. (JOD, pp. 302-303).

This demand will constitute Dummett's touchstone for exposing the illegitimacy of a realistic theory of meaning. But before we can see how it is used, we must consider the notion of content more carefully.

There are, for Dummett, two senses of content. First,

Theories of meaning—rival types of semantics—thus differ, in the first instance, in what they represent as being the canonical means whereby the truth of sentences of various forms is to be established. Content, understood in this way, embodies the individual meaning of the sentence . . . It is, in effect, cognitive content; such content is *not* required to remain unamplified in the course of a valid chain of deductive inference. (JOD, p. 314).

And second, the sort of content which is not to be amplified in the course of a valid deductive argument:

But, in view of the present thesis, that the utility of deduction requires a gap between truth and recognition of truth by direct means, there is a further respect in which theories of meaning may differ: the notion of truth which they employ . . . We have . . . to operate with *some* notion, however attenuated, of things being such as to make a given statement true, whether or not it has been recognised as true, at least by the most direct means. (JOD, pp. 314-315).

Thus Dummett concludes:

The most that can be demanded (by the molecularist) is that the extension be conservative relative to the possibility of establishing a statement as true given a sufficiently detailed set of observations. (JOD, p. 316).

This, then, is the final version of the touchstone: a molecularist can demand that any use of a statement outside the language fragment in which its canonical assertability conditions are stated must not make it possible to assert the sentence unless it can be shown that (if the relevant evidence had been properly gathered) the canonical assertability conditions would have been met.

Now, for the realist the canonical means for establishing truth “will often be inaccessible to us”. Dummett conceives of the realist view as one which takes as its canonical means for establishing truth the decisions of a being “with sufficient powers and suitably situated”. (JOD p. 315) By contrast, the anti-realist’s canonical means for establishing truth are our own methods. This makes, in turn, for a difference in their notions of truth (*i.e.* content in the second sense). For the anti-realist a statement can be true only if it was, is, or will be possible for us to recognise its truth. But the realist allows truths which (because of our limits compared to the canonical, ideal observer) we could never recognise as true.

This opens the way for the final attack on the realist’s position:

Understood on such a model, the condition for the truth of a sentence cannot, in general, be equated with even the possibility in principle of



our knowing it to be true, however many observations we were able to make. Given such a model of meaning, there is no justice whatever in the idea that the language as a whole need be a conservative extension relative to our recognition of truth, of any fragment of it. (JOD, p. 316).

At first sight this is unfair to the realist. After all, he does not identify the canonical means of establishing truth with *our* 'in principle best effort at observation'. Rather he identifies them with an 'in principle best effort' on the part of the ideal observer. And so to meet the touchstone's requirements, his language (if he is to maintain a molecular theory of meaning) ought to be a conservative extension of some fragment of it *only if* we mean by that conservative with respect to the *ideal observer's* capacity to recognise truth.

But with this step the trap is sprung. *We* cannot manifest in *our* use of language any such conception of the canonical means for establishing truth. That is to say, we cannot apply the means, or in any way show specifically that we know *what they are* (even though we can, by accepting classical truth functional logic, or by simply accepting bivalence, manifest some kind of faith that they exist). So it seems that Dummett's argument in section II above succeeds: the realist theory of meaning in terms of truth-conditions is incompatible with a molecular, use theory of meaning, so long as the use in question is *our* use, and assertion is the semantically fundamental form of use.

#### IV.

Up to now I have been trying to present Dummett's A/R argument, specifically in order to gather together in one place all the threads of argument which it involves. The argument turns out to depend on a molecular, use theory of meaning. Such a theory rules out realism because the realist must either adopt criteria of truth which are not manifested in our use, but only in the use of hypothetical ideal observer, or give up on the notion of conservative extension altogether, and thus give up molecularism.

In this section I want to consider one possible response to the argument. It turns on the theory of meaning dilemma which Dummett presents us with in JOD, *i.e.*, the choice between holism and molecularism. What I wish to call in question is his claim that the theories he presents under these labels exhaustively encompass all tenable theories of meaning. However, I will not do this by directly developing an alternative theory of meaning which escapes between the horns of the dilemma. Instead, by investigating the epistemic consequences of Dummett's theory, and contrasting them with a coherentist position on epistemology, I hope to persuade the reader that a 'coherentist'

theory of meaning could be developed which would escape Dummett's dilemma.

Dummett's theory of meaning, fortunately for my purposes here, wears its epistemology on its sleeve. The primary use of statements is to make assertions; the central feature of language learning is acquiring the ability to recognise when a statement has been properly shown to be true (or false). Further, there is a hierarchy of complexity such that the canonical means of establishing a statement involve only statements of equal or lesser complexity and the truth of a statement depends on the possibility of its being established by those canonical means.

This leads to a specific, hierarchical picture of how knowledge is structured. Any time at which we can legitimately assert a claim we either have such canonical evidence in hand, or can *show* that, had our observations been more complete, we would have had such evidence. And this canonical evidence must be stated in terms which involve only statements of equal or lesser complexity than the statement it supports. Thus to each statement corresponds some fragment of the language which determines the meaning of the statement, and thereby its canonical evidence conditions. And (as there is a limit to how simple claims can be) there must ultimately be a class of claims to which there correspond minimal fragments of the language, and which can be canonically supported only by statements within those fragments.

We have not quite got a standard foundationalism here. For statements do not rely exclusively on statements of *lower* levels of complexity; the possibility of other statements of the same complexity being involved in the canonical evidence conditions opens the way for some coherence considerations: a given statement will, in general, rely for support on a combination of lower level claims, on which it has no (canonical) reciprocal evidential influence and claims of the same level, on which it *can* have such a reciprocal evidential influence.

However, the hierarchy does block any real influence of the more complex on the less complex; we can use more complex levels in the justification of a less complex claim only when the justification shows that a *canonical* justification of the claim was possible.

A coherentist epistemology, on the other hand, allows for real evidential reciprocity between different levels of complexity. There is no restriction corresponding to the molecularist requirement that higher levels of complexity be conservative extensions of less complex fragments of the language. Thus, for example, in our account of scientific reasoning, the introduction of theoretical principles may change our attitudes towards 'observational claims' which are (presumably) comparatively simple, on the grounds that the overall coher-

ence of our scientific account of things is thereby improved. This suggests that a coherent epistemology must involve what Dummett would term a holist theory of meaning.

Dummett tries to argue that holism makes criticism of use impossible: "We speak as we choose to speak, and our practice, in respect of the whole of our language, determines the meaning of each sentence belonging to it." (JOD, p. 304) But I can find no reason to believe that a coherentist epistemology in this sense (which allows evidential reciprocity, and thus from Dummett's point of view, a non-conservative "expansion" or change in the meaning of statements as one learns larger (richer) fragments of the language) must be radically holist. A coherentist *need not* accept all current practice as legitimate: where the practice fails to fit together neatly, where different aspects of practice come into conflict (for example, when different sources for evidence about a claim disagree), a coherentist has grounds for concern, and can find reasons to change previously accepted patterns of use. The point is, obeying a complex collection of rules governing proper usage can lead to conflict. And conflict *can be* good grounds for proposing alterations in the rules.

This is not intended as an objection to Dummett's own program, though I feel those who are seeking such objections would do well to press Dummett on his proposed account of the use of more complex claims to justify simpler claims. My own rather limited aim here has been merely to shift the burden of proof by outlining very simply a view which is neither molecularist in Dummett's sense, and so escapes the A/R argument against bivalence, nor radically holist, and so escapes the objection that it must rule out any criticism of actual usage.

## V.

What is the upshot of this reply for the realist? Does a coherentist account of justification open the way for characteristically realist notions like bivalence? Let's consider a claim of bivalence in the light of a broad-brush-stroke coherence account of its justification: we have a perfectly good account of what keeps us from knowing whether a raindrop did or did not fall at a certain time and place before the advent of man. It runs, roughly, like this: to check on the truth or falsity of such a claim, we must be at the right time and place, and (to generalize) have at hand the proper equipment. Since we aren't (and never were) in a position to get there and then, we cannot (and never could) establish whether the statement is true or not. But our physical conception of raindrops (and of time and space) is such that it is either true or false, nevertheless. Now, since the anti-realist holds that we can have no conception of what it would be for a statement to be true or

false independent of the possibility of our having established that it was, he has a choice here. Either, in some sense, it was (is? will be?) possible for us to do this in the case of the raindrop, or it is neither true nor false that the raindrop fell.

If he chooses the first option, then I suspect that his notion of possible observation is so loose as to concede almost all the realist could want. After all, the only 'truths' that some realist might allow, and such an anti-realist reject bivalence for, would be those truths which *any* evidence gathered by persons using any apparatus at any collection of places in space and time would be unable to establish. And such a realism is, I think, a straw man. These are the skeptics' truths, not those of someone who maintains bivalence about the claims of (say) physics, where we know what counts as evidence for them, and have access to it (when we're in the right place at the right time with the right equipment).

But if the anti-realist chooses the second option, then he must reject a very large and important part of our world view. Our notions of time, space, and physical objects provide us with an admirably coherent framework in which to order and deal with our experience. And they *dictate*, when conjoined with the forceful evidence for the earth's great antiquity and roughly stable climate, that it indeed makes sense to say that, though we know not which, it is either true or false that a raindrop fell at that time and place.

If we think of ourselves as having to be in certain physical relationship with objects in order to have evidence for or against certain claims about them, it seems perfectly reasonable to believe those claims are true or false even when we were never in a position to gather evidence which could settle which. It is only (I would suggest) when we think of evidence as somehow mysteriously given, rather than as arising from certain matter of fact relations, that we are tempted to reify the gaps in our evidence (or the evidence we have had access to), and project them on our concept of the world.