
Contesting Realism

1.1 Realism and Metaphysical Determinacy

It is possible to characterize the crucial difference between metaphysical realism and antirealism, as Michael Dummett sees it, in terms of differing answers to a “truthmaker” question.

Consider the sentence:

(S) Socrates sneezed in his sleep the night before he took the hemlock.

Everyone agrees that there is no evidence one way or the other as to whether this sentence is true. Everyone also agrees that we have no way of obtaining any such evidence and that it is utterly improbable any relevant evidence will turn up. In Dummett’s terminology, (S) is paradigmatically “evidence-transcendent.”

Now ask yourself “What could make (S) true?” If your answer is “Some fact about the distant past concerning Socrates that we have no prospect of discovering, but which obtains or not independently of our ability to discover it,” then, in Dummett’s eyes, you are a metaphysical realist. If you answer “Some piece of confirming evidence for Socrates’ nocturnal sneezings that night in Athens 399 B.C.,” you are, in Dummett’s eyes, an antirealist.

Dummett thus diagnoses the fundamental divide between metaphysical realists and their antirealist opponents as deriving from differences in their respective understandings of what makes truth-evaluable or truth-aptness sentences such as (S) true. Where metaphysical realists take these sentences to describe *states of the world that either obtain or not independently of our ability to find out which*, antirealists understand them to be *rendered true or false by the types of evidence we recognize as confirming or disconfirming them*. Absent such evidence, we have no grounds for

thinking these sentences *are* either true or false, Dummett's antirealist contends.

Dummett often calls sentences such as (S) "verification-transcendent," "evidence-transcendent," or "undecidable," the last because we lack any effective means of determining their truth-value. The term "undecidable" is more restrictive than "evidence-transcendent" or "verification-transcendent," for there are any number of sentences for which there exists weak or even good evidence of a sort that is not sufficient to decide their truth value. Indeed, if confirmational holism is correct, then just about every empirical sentence falls into this category—"undecidable" but not evidence-transcendent—since these are deemed confirmable or disconfirmable in the light of empirical evidence, albeit not individually so.

Dummett has not always been as clear as he might have been about who the "we" who grasp these undecidable sentences actually refers to—humanity in general, people individually, twenty-first-century humans, who? It is implicit in all his arguments, though, that he is distinguishing linguistic communities in different epochs. Sentences decidable for one linguistic community in a previous epoch might now be undecidable for twenty-first-century humans. Perhaps Xanthippe awoke that fateful night to Socrates' sneezing, thus making it determinate for fourth-century B.C. Athenians that Socrates did indeed sneeze in his sleep the night before he took his own life, thereby rendering (S) true. (S) is not decidable for twenty-first-century humans, though. This issue will be explained in a little more detail in section 2.2 of chapter 2.

Since Dummett's own formulations of realism are complicated and in many respects misleading, it is useful to have this rough characterization of the essential difference between metaphysical realism and antirealism in mind in thinking about his arguments against realism. For Dummett, the issue boils down to *the determinacy of states of affairs for which there is no and never feasibly will be any evidence*. Metaphysical realists are precisely those who subscribe to a belief in the metaphysical determinacy of such states of affairs. To the extent that you think such states of affairs can hold independently of our best efforts to determine whether they do, you must, Dummett argues, be thinking of them in the way a metaphysical realist does.

Dummett's antirealist then sets out to attack the metaphysical realist's assumption of the metaphysical determinacy of verification-transcendent states of affairs, such as those described in (S). His arguments, the most important of which is the *manifestation argument*, are all

designed to show that to believe in metaphysical determinacy is to fall victim to a type of semantic illusion—it is to engage in a form of metaphysical credulism since, according to both Dummett and Putnam, it is simply inconsistent with any plausible account of how semantic content is determined that we be able to set up links between the uses of our words and states of affairs we cannot possibly detect.

It is this latter problem of *how mental representation of a mind-independent world is possible* that I mean to refer to when I talk of the antirealist challenge to realism. I call it the representation problem. If the representation problem was first raised by Dummett, it received its definitive formulation in a variety of ingenious arguments put forward by Hilary Putnam: the argument from conceptual relativity, the brains in a vat argument, and, most significantly, in my view, the model-theoretic argument.

In fact, neither Dummett nor Putnam explicitly put the problem they found with metaphysical realism in quite these terms. Neither said in so many words that metaphysical realism was untenable *because* it is impossible to explain how mental representation of a mind-independent world is possible, although Putnam came closest to doing so. Had they done so, it would have been clear what metaphysical realists had to do to meet the antirealist challenge, namely, give an account of mental representation compatible with their own strictures on mind-independence. It would also have been clear that the metaphysical realists least able to shirk the antirealist challenge were naturalistic ones committed to an explanation of mental representation in terms of physical mechanisms of some sort. Anyone conversant with the history of the realist–antirealist debate will know that this is the exact opposite of what actually happened. The realists most vulnerable to the antirealist challenge, naturalistic realists, were the first to dismiss it. Dispute centered and then largely stalled on a relatively minor issue, namely, how exactly metaphysical realism ought to be characterized. In particular, naturalistic realists questioned whether metaphysical realism presupposed a correspondence (or otherwise robust) theory of truth. Since both Dummett and Putnam seemed to ascribe just such a robust theory to their realist opponents and since many naturalistic realists saw their realism as a metaphysical thesis logically independent of any semantic theses, these naturalistic realists concluded that whatever it was that Dummett and Putnam had in mind by “realism,” it was not the honest-to-goodness metaphysical realism that they subscribed to. They concluded they had nothing at all to fear from antirealist arguments.

How this situation came about and how far some influential current protagonists in the realist/antirealist debate actually are from appreciating the significance of the antirealist challenge to realism is the subject of the rest of this chapter. Section 1.2 recounts the sorry history of mutual misunderstanding that has dogged the debate, while section 1.3 shows how some currently influential proposals about how to understand and resolve the dispute are based on misunderstandings. To forestall confusion on this matter, I should point out that none of the antirealist's arguments to be reviewed in this book contains explicit formulations of the representation problem, although, as indicated, the model-theoretic argument comes pretty close. Nonetheless, the representation problem underlies them all in the following sense: Whereas naturalistic realists do indeed have some plausible initial responses to the antirealist arguments put forward by Dummett, Putnam, and Wright, as we shall see in the pages ahead, these responses all presuppose that there exists some natural mechanism in virtue of which our mental symbols are able to target just the right mind-independent objects. But *how* this is possible is never explained, and *that* it is possible is precisely what antirealists doubt insofar as they reject the notion of "mind-independence" as incoherent.

1.2 Realism and Antirealism: A Sorry History of Misunderstandings

There is a widespread impression among realists of a naturalistic frame of mind that semantic challenges to their metaphysics posed by antirealists can be quickly and uniformly dismissed. All that one need do to disarm the antirealist's challenge is show that the metaphysical issue of realism has nothing at all to do with disputes about the nature of truth. This disarms all such challenges since all of these saddle realism with a belief in a correspondence theory of truth, a semantic doctrine wholly independent of the metaphysical question of which entities and structures exist in the world. Even if a truth predicate is needed to frame the debates between realists and their opponents in various domains, these debates are not about truth or reference or indeed anything semantic. They are about the furniture of the world. As to the significance of the issues raised by Michael Dummett's antirealism: it is but "a storm in a British teacup."¹ The view Dummett and Putnam attack has nothing at all to do with the naturalistic metaphysical realism to which such realists subscribe; it is, rather, a "semantic realism" completely orthogonal to their metaphysics and epistemology. Thus is one of the most powerful attacks on realist metaphysics and epistemology allegedly defused.

Realists are not alone in endorsing this deflation of the significance of antirealism. Pragmatists such as Richard Rorty and, albeit problematically,² Donald Davidson also believe that there is something deeply wrong with antirealism, but this is because they believe that there is something deeply wrong with the whole debate between realists and antirealists. So, for the pragmatist, *both* parties to the realist–antirealist dispute are in error; both sides err, according to Rorty, in seeking truthmakers for our beliefs and statements. Realists err in thinking that such truthmakers could only be mind-independent states of affairs of some sort, whose obtaining or not need not fall within the compass of our recognitional capacities. This makes it inexplicable why we should value truth in the first place if we cannot reliably detect it whenever it obtains. Antirealists err in taking truthmakers to be some mind-dependent ersatz. Their mistake is to respond to the gratuitous demand for mind-independent truthmakers by supplying epistemically sanitized mind-dependent surrogates.

Against both sides we can note that there need be nothing in the world or our minds or our linguistic practices that *makes* our statements true. Our practices do not need the type of externalist or internalist justification that the realist and the antirealist respectively seek to provide in the first place. Truth is not the important property both sides evidently take it to be.

I believe that all these views are bluntly mistaken in their assessment of the significance of antirealism. Take the naturalistic realist's quick dismissal first. Those who oppose metaphysical realism do so because they see it as a form of metaphysical credulism. Metaphysical realists of a naturalistic bent can thus no more afford to ignore the challenges to their view posed by Michael Dummett's antirealism than they can afford to ignore the challenges posed by Hilary Putnam's internal realism. Moreover, the neglect of the antirealist challenge to naturalistic realism has seen dogma and rigidity replace argument and openness in realist's defense of their metaphysics.

As to the pragmatists' "deconstruction," this backfires for precisely the reason that naturalistic realists cite in defense of their neglect of antirealism: naturalistic realists need not be committed to a correspondence theory of truth in the first place. So the realist–antirealist dispute is not about truthmakers at all. It is not about truth; nor is it about Truth. So what *is* it about?

I want to explain how the above (and other) misunderstandings occurred in the complex evolution of the realist–antirealist debate. I will explain what the antirealist challenge to realism *is* and why no realist of

any stripe can afford to ignore it. It will emerge that it is crucial to distinguish the sometimes wild characterization of realism antirealists have often provided from the legitimate challenge to realism that their own view presents. I focus on naturalistic realism not only because it is that version of realism which is today most prominent but also because it is naturalistic realists who are most susceptible to the delusion that they can dismiss attacks on their metaphysics and epistemology. I will deal with influential misunderstandings of the nature of the realist–antirealist dispute due to Crispin Wright, Michael Devitt, William Alston, Donald Davidson, and Richard Rorty.

Given the high degree of confusion surrounding these issues, it is unsurprising that the dialectical situation realists and their opponents find themselves in is often one of deadlock. There is no clearer illustration of this than the debate over Hilary Putnam’s model-theoretic argument (MTA). Surveying the recent literature on this leaves one with the impression that there is an impassable chasm between realist and antirealist. One either holds it to be a genuine question whether an ideal theory passes all conceivable constraints or claims that passing these constraints is a matter of “just more theory.” But in actual fact what one says about this issue in the MTA will largely be determined by one’s theory of truth. In particular, it will be determined by whether one holds with the realist that truth is radically nonepistemic or sides with antirealists like Dummett or internal realists like Putnam in believing it to be an epistemic notion. Because he sides with the antirealists on this matter, Putnam holds³ that for an ideal theory to pass all the constraints *is* in the end just more theory. For any theory *T* to pass every conceivable constraint just is, for Putnam’s “internal realist,” for an ideal theory to assert that *T* does pass every conceivable constraint.

It is not hard to justify a decision to take seriously Putnam’s challenge to what he calls metaphysical realism. To the contrary, it would appear remiss of any naturalistic realist to *shirk* that challenge, given that Putnam aims his principal attack fairly and squarely at *naturalistic* versions of metaphysical realism. Michael Dummett’s arguments, on the other hand, can seem, on first acquaintance, to engage a doctrine that he calls “realism” but which has more to do with semantics than with the metaphysical question of realism. Indeed, to many a card-carrying realist Dummett’s a priori meaning-theoretic arguments against realism represent precisely the sort of misguided transcendentalism that it is the purpose of naturalism to oppose. So what profit can there be in responding to his arguments?

A sticking point has been whether the so-called metaphysical issue of realism has anything at all to do with disputes about the nature of truth. Correspondingly, an appearance of incommensurability between realist and antirealist arguments has been fostered with the metaphysical purists (realists) campaigning to extrude from the realist–antirealist debate those very “semantic” issues that some antirealists take to lie at its heart. As a result, the dispute threatens to become *dialectically intractable*, with no neutral standpoint from which the claims of each disputant can be impartially assessed. Small wonder, then, that many despair of progress.

There is, in fact, a simple way around this apparent deadlock. It is for the antirealist to *agree* with the realist’s own characterization of realism as a metaphysical issue. Indeed, let both parties just accept *ab initio* that realism is a purely metaphysical view, say, the view that the objects and structures that comprise the furniture of the universe exist mind-independently. Well and good. Precisely how to characterize realism is not terribly important from the antirealist’s viewpoint, for surely, as good fallibilists, we should acknowledge that our initial intuitions—even about what realism is—may and typically will need revision as enquiry progresses. Moreover, there surely is something *right* about this characterization, as difficult as it may prove to explicate “mind-independent existence.” The point then is that even if, as realists, we take realism to be a metaphysical issue, wholly uncontaminated by semantics, we can still find ourselves obliged to defend realism from “semantic” attacks.

This point should be obvious, but I fear that it has been ignored in the confusion engendered by the characterization debate. So let me illustrate it by a historical parallel: Most of us take David Hume to have presented a fairly powerful case against the rationality of belief in miracles. Faced with the prospect of attempting to establish the negative existential claim that miracles cannot occur, Hume chose instead to try to establish something simpler—that even if miracles did or could occur it would never be rational to believe any report attesting to their occurrence. This is a methodology the naturalist understands and endorses. The antirealist or internal realist response to realism *qua* the thesis that objects exist mind-independently exactly parallels Hume’s response to the believer in miracles: “*Even if such mind-independent objects exist, one could never have any rational ground for believing that they do!*”

Thus the antirealist attack on realism, as I see it, is just a version of Hume’s strategy against the credulist. Let us call this strategy the Hume–Kant gambit (since Kant surely deserves equal billing for arguing

that mind-independent objects were singularly inappropriate objects of knowledge). Dummett's version of the Hume–Kant gambit is this: Even if the mind-independent states of affairs the realist believes in exist, it would never be possible for an agent to recognize that they did, so that an ascription of a grasp of such states of affairs to any such agent is completely unwarranted. Putnam's version is similar: We could never succeed in *referring* to objects so wholly divorced from our cognitive capacities.

Admittedly, the realist might retort to Putnam or Dummett, "Even if your grounds for skepticism about the possibility of our cognizance of or reference to mind-independent objects are sound, you still haven't shown that tables and rocks do *not* exist mind-independently!" Quite so. In just the same way, the credulist might respond to Hume: "Even if your grounds for skepticism about reports of miracles are cogent, you still haven't shown that miracles cannot occur!" The Hume–Kant–Dummett–Putnam response is, then (in unison): "*No. But we have established that nothing could compel belief in such things!*"

But *why* does the antirealist think that belief in mind-independent entities constitutes an indefensible metaphysical credulism? Hume's reason for dismissing the belief in miracles as metaphysical credulism was, as everybody knows, that they violated the laws of nature, which all our experience attested to, where by "laws" he meant those observable regularities in our experience with which we are most familiar. Dummett's and Putnam's reasons for dismissing belief in mind-independent entities as metaphysical credulism are similar. For Dummett, since there is no way of detecting such entities where and when they exist, there is nothing in what we say and believe about the world that could justify construal in terms of commitment to their existence; for Putnam, similarly, any reference to such entities is impossible.

Presumably, the realist does not want a Pyrrhic victory that accords his mind-independent real world the same status as that which the naturalist accords to miracles. That is why the naturalistic realist is *obliged* to square up to the challenges posed by Dummett and Putnam rather than ignore them by rigidly legislating their irrelevance.

Since Dummett's views have caused the most confusion, let me try to clear up some exegetical points concerning them and show in a little more detail why his attack on realism ought to be taken seriously by naturalistic realists. Dummett is fond of arguing for the foundational status of the theory of meaning in philosophy, suggesting at various points that metaphysical disputes *just are* at bottom disputes about the correct model of meaning for certain classes of statements. If we inter-

pret Dummett as making an *epistemological* point we will be forced, on naturalistic grounds, to reject this claim. That the theory of meaning (or any other part of total science) should enjoy some privileged *a priori* epistemic status in relation to the rest of the corpus of knowledge is flatly inconsistent with the naturalist's epistemological holism.

However, I do not believe that this epistemological reading is how Dummett means to be interpreted. I take him to be advancing a *semantic* rather than an epistemological thesis, namely, that once we examine the content of the realist's and antirealist's respective claims, we will see that the dispute arises because each party tacitly adopts incompatible interpretations of the same sentences. The theory of meaning is foundational for Dummett, then, not in the sense that it secures *epistemic* foundations for the metaphysician's erstwhile faltering edifices, but in the sense that it clarifies what the metaphysician is trying to say. The foundations are *logico-semantic* rather than epistemic, then, just as Frege's foundations for arithmetic were intended to be. Far from being inimical to naturalism, the thesis that metaphysical disputes just are at bottom disputes about the truth conditions of various statements is entirely compatible with it—indeed, it affords us a plausible naturalistic explanation of why such disputes arise in the first place.

It is a sad commentary on the contemporary debate that Dummett's fascinating, bold, and original conjecture about the nature of metaphysical disputes has been caricatured in the ways that it has—as a *confusion* of semantic with metaphysical issues or as representing a naturalistically unacceptable plea for the privileged epistemic status of the theory of meaning. Of course, the realist is not obliged to agree with Dummett's assessment of the nature and causes of metaphysical disputes. Dummett may or may not be right about this. However, Dummett's challenge to the realist to explain our grasp of verification-transcendent truth conditions is entirely independent of his being right about the nature of metaphysics, as should be obvious. What the realist *cannot* afford to do with this conjecture is ignore the reasons Dummett has for advancing it. Tractable philosophical debates between disputants who hold radically different beliefs are possible only if both parties strive to understand the reasons offered in support of those divergent beliefs.

Although not obliged to take a stand on whether metaphysical disputes are reducible to meaning-theoretic ones, the realist *is* obliged to defend his professed belief in objective mind-independent states of affairs. Since such states of affairs simply *comprise*, on his account, the conditions under which certain sentences of the language are true, it follows that such a realist is obliged to answer Dummett's challenge to

explain how we could become aware that such states of affairs obtain if and when they do, or if, *per impossibile*, we are somehow capable of doing so, how we could then *communicate* such knowledge to our fellows. Dummett's arguments focus largely on the impossibility of a speaker's *communicating* a grasp of verification-transcendent truth conditions to fellow language-users, but it is clear that this putative inability to communicate such an understanding stems, in Dummett's estimation at least, from the fact that such an understanding is impossible to come by in the first place. Accordingly, realist attempts to answer Dummett ought to correct for Dummett's own skewing of the debate along an axis of communication. If there is any substance to the complaint that Dummett's concern with meaning-theoretic issues distorts the real metaphysical issues, it is surely this and nothing more.

The realist has to explain how we are able to grasp the meaning of sentences with verification-transcendent truth conditions. Or, better, he has to explain what justifies a belief in the *existence* of such states of affairs in the first place. If that can be done, explaining how we acquire *a grasp* of sentences correlated with such states of affairs as their truth conditions might not be too difficult, and an account of how we manage to *communicate* our understanding of such truth conditions might be less difficult again. Expressing things this way around might make it look as if it is Dummett's so-called language acquisition argument (LAA) that presents the central challenge to the realist. However, recalling the analogy with Hume, we can see that the manifestation argument (MA) presents, if anything, a purer version of the Hume–Kant gambit than the former one. In fact, even if we ignore the analogy, the direction of dependence goes from the LAA to the MA rather than conversely, since it is the task of the latter to establish that nothing in our linguistic behavior *could* warrant an ascription of a grasp of realist truth conditions to us; given that we have a notion of truth at all, it must be a nonrealist one. The LAA then proceeds to argue that relative to our acquisition of such a nonrealist conception of truth, the use of distinctively classical modes of reasoning cannot be justified and therefore ought to be revised. In other words, the antirealist holds an error theory about our ordinary “realist” notion of truth—those features of our linguistic practice that attest to the existence of a shared conception of truth transcending any ability to recognize it simply attest to the pervasiveness of a shared illusion.

It is crucial to realize that Dummett's challenge to the realist still stands even if meaning is *not* constituted by truth conditions. One might

be skeptical about meaning or adopt a non-truth-conditional account of meaning. But so long as one holds that a given class of sentences has verification-transcendent truth conditions at all, one is obliged to answer the antirealist's challenge. Moreover, how, compatibly with realism, can one afford to *relinquish* such an assumption? One is a realist, we have agreed, just to the extent that one believes in the existence of mind-independent entities and structures involving those entities. Verification-transcendent states of affairs arise through mind-independent entities being mind-independently structured in just those ways suggested by our theory of nature. Such states of affairs, we have seen, constitute the truth conditions for the sentences of total theory. To the extent that one believes the theory, one believes that the truth conditions for its constituent sentences obtain. To the extent that one believes that the theory may nonetheless be mistaken, one believes that the truth conditions for its sentences are not *guaranteed* to obtain.

More controversially, I contend that both Dummett's and Putnam's challenges to realism still stand even if truth is deflationary rather than substantial. Much of the contemporary debate over realism has, I suspect, actually been marred by worrying about the difference it would make to the overall configuration of the metaphysical issues if truth *were* deflationary or, as I will henceforth term it, "minimal." *In actual fact, the answer is simple: "None."*⁴ The intuition to the contrary goes like this: Suppose one believes that "is true" is a purely disquotational predicate, or suppose one is a Horwich-styled minimalist or a Grover- or Brandom-styled prosententialist about truth. Then why should one take any interest at all in the meaning-theoretic attacks of Dummett or Putnam, which apparently build substantial content into the notions of truth and reference, burdening the realist unnecessarily with commitments to a substantial correspondence relation of truth or a substantial causal or information-theoretic account of reference?

If the dispute between realist and antirealist really *were* about the semantics of "true" or the explanatory power of truth, if it were concerned with whether truth is a correspondence relation or reducible to physicalistically specifiable causal or information-theoretic relations between appropriate bits of reality and linguistic expressions, the minimalists would have a point. But it is about *none* of these things. It is, to repeat, about the *metaphysics* of realism: about what the world contains. To be sure, Putnam has some powerful arguments against reductive physicalist accounts of reference, which he hopes to deploy to overturn metaphysical realism. By themselves, however, they are powerless to do

this, a fact that Putnam now acknowledges. The reason is simple: it is consistent to believe in a mind-independent reality while rejecting particular accounts of the way our minds make epistemic and semantic contact with that reality. Even if the reference relation *were* some relation between agents and the world (which disquotationalists and prosententialists precisely deny), that relation could hold inscrutably without impugning the mind-independent status of that world.

Thus the minimalist can lay claim to believing consistently in both a mind-independent reality and in minimal truth. It is commitment to the former that both Dummett and Putnam seek to undermine—Dummett by arguing that it is impossible to communicate, let alone acquire in the first instance, knowledge of such a reality, and Putnam by arguing that the supporter of the mind-independence of reality is committed to defend, incoherently in Putnam's view, the thesis that even an ideal theory might be false and that, for all we could tell, even in principle, we may yet be brains in a vat.

One cannot evade the antirealist's challenge merely by subscribing to a realist metaphysics and to a minimalist view of truth, then. The challenge is to justify belief in those mind-independent states of affairs that comprise the *truth conditions* of the sentences of a mature theory of nature; it is *not* to justify the claim that *truth* is a substantial property. Naturalistic realists who are minimalists about truth will want to say that one should no more think that one is predicating a substantial property—a property that can feature in bona fide naturalistic explanations of phenomena—of the sentences “ $2 + 2 = 4$ ” and “Napoleon was exiled to Elba” by calling both true than one would be by predicating the property “either summing to 4 when added to itself or being exiled to Elba” of both Napoleon and the sole even prime. Truth's dissentients as well as its true believers can still be metaphysical credulists—or so the antirealist maintains.⁵ The task now is to come up with a formulation of realism that is acceptable to naturalistic realists and antirealists alike. Even though the formulations proffered will be rough, they suffice to provide a characterization of realism that allows debate between realists and antirealists to proceed with the prospect of some intelligible resolution.

What Is “Metaphysical Realism”?

Realists and antirealists need to agree about the characterization of realism if any progress is to be made in the dispute between them. Since it

is naturalistic versions of realism on which I wish to focus, and naturalistic realists may be minimalists about truth, I suggest that we accept the following formulation as our working characterization of metaphysical realism:

(MR) The objects and structures that comprise the furniture of the universe exist mind-independently.

In fact, I think this formulation is substantially correct and can be defended against semantic construals.

The *metaphysical* dispute about realism underwent a wholesale *semantic* transformation in Dummett's hands, becoming a dispute about the right explanatory concept to use in the theory of meaning. For one who thinks that metaphysical theses just are disguised meaning-theoretical claims, this is, of course, completely unexceptionable. Dummett's problem is that virtually no one else agrees with him on this. This was precisely why naturalistic realists thought they could and still think they can just dismiss Dummett's arguments. What they typically fail to see, though, is that Dummett's arguments present a legitimate challenge to their views even if his formulation of those views goes a little awry.

However, on the opposing side, the puzzle is that antirealists have been equally insistent that realism is intimately concerned with truth, with the unfortunate result that meaningful debate simply stalled. One side, the naturalistic realists, insisted that realism was a metaphysical issue completely independent of semantics and that no progress could be made in the dispute with antirealists until they recognized this; and their opponents replied that realism is in actual fact an alethic matter and that no progress could be made until realists recognized this.

Why did antirealists make this reply when they didn't need to? Couldn't they have predicted that realists would respond in the way they did, as indeed would anyone whose favored characterization of their own views was not being taken seriously? It is hard to avoid the conclusion that antirealists did so because they were not entirely clear about *what it was* that they really objected to in metaphysical realism.

Case Study 1: Wright on the Realist–Antirealist Debate

In the light of the above, we should not be surprised that little progress is to be made in the realist–antirealist debate by searching for a “lowest common denominator” conception of truth that even the most die-hard physicalistic realist and the most extreme idealistic antirealist can agree

on. Yet this is precisely the tack taken by Crispin Wright in his *Truth and Objectivity*. As this book has proved highly influential and presents a challenge to the views expressed above on truth and realism, I think I should take some time explaining why I believe its suggested reconfiguration of the realist–antirealist dispute is unpromising. Wright’s project might have some real chance of success if the relevant lowest common denominator were argued to be *disquotational* truth, for this would be to acknowledge the point made above about the logical independence of debates about the nature of reality from those to do with the nature of truth, a point Michael Devitt has most forcefully made.⁶ Truth would be discussed only to be set aside, so to speak—a useful ploy given the problems that differing conceptions of truth pose for their partisans when attempting to communicate with one another about *any* philosophical matter.

But Wright will have none of this strategy. Deflationary conceptions of truth are fatally flawed, he believes. The argument he takes to constitute a “fundamental and decisive objection to deflationism as classically conceived,” however, rests on a misconception of deflationism about truth. Wright’s argument can be represented as follows:

(1) A deflationary conception of truth is one that is committed to two theses:

(T1) The predicate “true” functions purely as a device for endorsing assertions, beliefs and so on and therefore registers no norm distinct from justified assertibility.

(T2) The disquotational schema (DS), “ p ” is true if and only if p , constitutes a complete explanation of the meaning of “true.”

(2) Consider now a sentence we can neither verify nor refute, for example, Goldbach’s conjecture (GC) that every even number is the sum of two primes. We aim to show that T1 combined with T2 for this case yields an absurdity, for (DS) implies:

(i) “It is not the case that p ” is true iff it is not the case that p .

But (i) in combination with:

(ii) It is not the case that p iff it is not the case that “ p ” is true
yields:

(iii) “It is not the case that p ” is true iff it is not the case that “ p ” is true.

So far we have the standard Tarskian recursion clause for negation. But how does this represent any *problem* for the deflationist?

Although Wright never fully explains what he means by his claim in (T1) that the predicate “true” “registers no norm distinct from justified endorsability—that is, assertibility,” it seems that it is meant to imply at least that extensionally different predicates cannot “register the same norm.” But for the GC case, although “Every even number is the sum of two primes” is not assertible, neither is “It is not the case that every even number is the sum of two primes.” Thus the extension of “true” cannot coincide with that of “assertible,” since substitution of “assertible” for “true” in the extensional context of (iii) implies that we should now assert the negation of GC since GC is not currently assertible. Thus (T1) in conjunction with (T2) yields an absurdity for undecidable statements like GC, the absurdity that “while ‘is true’ and ‘is warrantably assertible’ are normatively coincident, satisfaction of the one norm does not entail satisfaction of the other.”⁷

I think there is a legitimate objection to *something* lurking behind Wright’s argument. But that something certainly is not deflationism “as classically conceived.” The theorist who *ought* to be embarrassed by the problem undecidable statements like GC present for attempts to satisfy Tarski’s material adequacy condition is not the deflationist but the proponent of an *epistemic* view of truth—one who wishes to define or at least explicate truth in terms of some epistemic notion such as warranted assertibility. This is typically an antirealist such as (a previous stage of) Wright himself.

The deflationist, however, is no such theorist. Truth is to be neither defined nor explained in terms of assertibility or of any other epistemic notion for the deflationist. *Nor is there any general requirement that the extension of “is true” should coincide with the extension of “is assertible.”* Indeed, were only the latter to hold, the Tarskian definition of truth could be recast in terms of assertibility, thereby belying the deflationist’s insistence that truth is nonepistemic. All such epistemic explications would have the effect of reinstating precisely what the deflationist is at pains to deny—that truth is some sort of substantial notion. Moreover, disquotationalism—the view that the primary function of the truth predicate in terms of which all its other functions are ultimately to be explained is the disquotation of the quoted sentences of one’s own language—is surely a deflationist view par excellence. Wright therefore owes us an explanation as to why belief in this (paradigmatic) version of deflationism automatically commits one to holding that there can be no fact to the matter as to whether every even number is the sum of two

primes. Holding that there *is* such a fact to the matter is, apparently, tantamount to denying that “true” and “assertible” are “normatively coincident,” something no deflationist can afford to deny by the lights of (T1).

But how *could* this be right? How could the mere relegation of the little word “true” to the menial role of quotation-mark-stripper possibly carry any metaphysical implications at all? Disquotation is simply a syntactic operation that undoes the effects of quotation. So is it the minimality clause in the disquotationalist’s theory that has this effect—the claim that *all there is* to the notion of truth is what is implicit in the logical behavior of the truth predicate, namely its foundational use in disquotation and supervenient roles of generalization over sentences and the formation of infinitary conjunctions?

Why should such a (deflationary) assessment of the expressive role of a single predicate foreclose on the metaphysical possibilities that *the rest of one’s predicates* can be used to express? To the contrary, it would appear straightforward for the disquotationalist to contemplate the possibility that “Every even number is the sum of two primes” is true—for this is just the possibility that every even number is the sum of two primes. The extent to which this represents a nonfactual or fictive possibility for the disquotationalist is the extent to which he is already a mathematical antirealist; it is no consequence at all of his deflationary attitude to truth. It is, as deflationists themselves rightly insist, logically independent of the latter. Wright seems to have ignored or forgotten the deflationist’s insistence that the truth predicate cannot be used to arbitrate metaphysical and epistemic disputes. Hence (T1), as Wright intends it to be interpreted, would be rejected *in principle* by most deflationists. The deflationary conception of truth as exemplified in disquotationalism, prosententialism, and Horwich-styled minimalism, at least, stands as implacably opposed to epistemic theories of truth as to correspondence theories. On paradigmatically deflationary theories, then, the truth predicate is a logico-syntactic device that earns its keep by permitting us to disquote sentences or propositions or to refer anaphorically to a speaker’s statements or utterances. Yet neither in disquoting sentences (or propositions) nor in generalizing over them, nor even in anaphorically referring to statements or utterances, does a predicate function to *endorse* “assertions, beliefs, and so on” in such a way that it “registers no norm distinct from justified assertibility.”

Endorsement is thus irrelevant except in the trivial sense explicitly allowed for by disquotationalism—that *if I believe p then I will also believe*

"p" is true (provided I understand the disquotational use of "true"), where "*p*" represents a sentence of my own language. The only "norms" that "true" registers for the disquotationalist are those already registered by the sentences it serves to disquote—which is to say all and any, or, more soberly, none at all. Endorsement, justified assertibility, and so on are all epistemic functions that no mere quotation-stripper can possibly discharge.

Moreover, what exactly is "justified assertibility" supposed to come to? This strikes me as a fairly urgent question for Wright's deflationist to ask, given that "is true" is supposed to have the same extension as this predicate. One well-understood alternative explication of "justified assertibility" goes by way of the notion of degrees of belief, where through a Dutch book argument⁸ these are taken to obey the rules of the probability calculus. One should assert *p* if one's degree of credence in *p* is sufficiently high, that is, if one assigns a high subjective probability to *p*. In such theories little interest is shown in the source of such prior probabilities, the whole focus being on the dynamics of belief revision via conditionalization on the receipt of new evidence. The important point for our purposes is that even though many have essayed to identify the extension of "justifiedly assertible" with "highly probable," *no one* would dream of identifying the extension of "true" with the extension of "highly probable." For one thing, truth is probability of 1, whereas probability remains high for values somewhat less than that. For another, truth is a monotonic property, whereas probability is not. Moreover, probabilities, as David Lewis has reminded us, are probabilities of truth.

Wright's deflationist apparently can no more afford to explicate justified assertibility in Bayesian terms, say, than he can afford to believe it a factual question whether every even number is the sum of two primes. Many would take this to be an abrogation of the theory of rationality along with any theory of a mind-independent world. Some even see these two theories as intimately connected. In fact, the only deflationary theory of truth I can think of that might assent to something like (T1) is Strawson's "amen" theory of truth. The problems facing that theory are well documented and are, in my estimation, crippling.

So why does Wright believe that any defensible version of deflationism should be committed to (T1)? My guess is that it is because he cannot see how truth could be anything other than something constructed out of assertibility, because he is, at heart, still wedded to an epistemic theory of truth.

Case Study 2: Devitt on Realism and Truth

Whereas Wright thinks that progress in the realism–antirealism dispute is contingent on both sides adopting a common notion of truth, Michael Devitt holds that truth has nothing at all to do with realism.⁹ I think there is something true and important in Devitt’s view, as I’ve already indicated. Realism is a metaphysical issue, whatever else it may be. Realists about moral values or numbers or electrons hold that the relevant entities exist mind-independently, and metaphysical realists hold that *whatever* objects the world contains, they exist independently of our perceptions and conceptions of them.

There is nothing in such metaphysical existence claims that involves reference to human beings or their cognitive powers at all. In response to questions about what it means for such entities to exist *mind-independently*, reference to minds or products thereof such as scientific or ethical theories might be needed by way of clarification of the original bald theses, but the theses themselves can be stated without reference to truth.

It may subsequently transpire that a disquotational truth predicate is needed to explicate various sorts of realisms—indeed I think it is. But this by itself need represent no concession at all to the Wright-styled view that the metaphysical issue of realism is intimately connected with the nature of truth, for disquotational truth is eliminable in favor of infinitary conjunction or primitive substitutional quantification. Admittedly there are good reasons for believing that neither of these latter devices can be understood without a notion of truth, but all that that need establish is the explanatory priority of disquotational truth in the circle of three notions of truth, infinitary conjunction, and substitutional quantification. Such an explanatory priority might be reversed for creatures with different cognitive makeups from our own.

The point, then, is that realism is rightly conceived, in my view as in Devitt’s, as a thesis about what the world contains, one that says nothing at all about how human or other inquirers are cognitively related to that world. Realist theses posit domains of entities without venturing any opinion about how humans are semantically or epistemically related to those entities. Yet it is precisely this fact that antirealists see as the fundamental weakness of realism. Not only does the realist not venture any opinion about how human enquirers can know about or refer to numbers or moral values or electrons, no plausible realist account *can* be given of our abilities here at all.

What is puzzling about Devitt's approach is that he seems to see this apparent weakness of realism as one of its strengths, as if he is exalting in the following argument from ignorance:

Realism per se has nothing at all to say about such epistemic or semantic matters, so any attack on realism on these grounds must be based on a confusion about what the real issues are.

When pressed, Devitt simply assumes that some plausible naturalistic story can be told about how humans can succeed in referring to mind-independent entities or in detecting verification-transcendent states of affairs. The problem is that he neither tells it nor provides any evidence that it can be told. But this is precisely what is at issue. In the next section we will see precisely how Devitt has misinterpreted Dummett's anti-realist challenge, and we shall also see how other influential responses to Dummett's challenge first from William Alston and then from Richard Rorty and Donald Davidson also seriously misconstrue its nature.

1.3 Antirealism Misconstrued

1.3.1 Devitt's Response to Dummett

Dummett invests much energy in attacking the verification-transcendent notion of truth. This is of concern to the naturalistic realist, for whatever else he is uncommitted to semantically, he is committed to the claim that those statements he interprets realistically at all can be true or false independently of whether we can verify which they are.

Yet Devitt surprisingly denies this commitment. He thinks that any semantic issue is simply irrelevant to the metaphysical issue of realism. Disquotationalists about truth characteristically claim that appending the predicate "is true" to the name of a sentence *s* results in a sentence that says the same thing as, or is cognitively equivalent to, the named sentence *s*. So consider the sentence "The entropy of the big bang was very low." Devitt is a scientific realist. So he believes in the reality of those entities that our best scientific theories posit. The event known as the big bang is surely among them. Presumably he also believes in bona fide physical properties such as entropy and so will believe the sentence "The entropy of the big bang was very low," which is implied by our best current physical theory. Moreover, as a good scientific realist Devitt will want to insist that even if no human had been clever enough to discover this fact about the origins of our universe or even if, universally dazzled by the brilliance of postmodernist arguments, we all come to believe this

sentence represents nothing more than a raw grab for power on the part of the scientific establishment, a sentence not even evaluable for truth or falsehood, it would still be the case that the entropy of the big bang was very low. But then, using disquotationalist precepts, since “The entropy of the big bang was very low” is cognitively equivalent to “‘The entropy of the big bang was very low’ is true,” the claim that the sentence “The entropy of the big bang was very low” could be true even if no one recognized that it was *just is* the distinctive scientific realist claim above that the entropy of the big bang could have been very low even if no one had recognized that it was. There is *no cognitive difference*, in other words, for the disquotationalist, between claiming that a certain state of affairs posited by our best scientific theory could have obtained independently of whether humans were capable of ascertaining that it did and claiming that the sentence for which that state of affairs comprises the disquotational truth condition could have been true independently of our capacity to verify it.

If there are verification-transcendent states of affairs, there are verification-transcendent truth conditions for the sentences our language correlates with those states of affairs. Of course, the fact that the big bang had very low entropy is not verification-transcendent. But it might have been, as in the imagined counterfactual circumstances, and there are any number of sentences that do have verification-transcendent truth conditions. One such sentence is this: “Julius Caesar’s systolic blood pressure rose by 30 mmHg the moment before he crossed the Rubicon.” Contrary to what he maintains, then, Devitt is committed to verification-transcendent truth conditions at least to the extent that he is committed to disquotational truth and to scientific realism. Devitt might respond that he is not committed to verification-transcendent correspondence truth, as he terms it. This is true but irrelevant; Dummett’s and Putnam’s challenges to realism require no favored theory of truth on the part of the realist. What has caused confusion is that both Dummett and Putnam *frame* the realism issue in terms of a substantial theory of truth.

With these preliminaries in mind, let us see what Devitt has to say about Dummett’s antirealism. Devitt ascribes the following 3 premises to Dummett in an effort to reconstruct his argument for antirealism:

A. The realism dispute is a dispute about whether statements have realist (evidence-transcendent) truth conditions or only verificationist truth conditions.

B. This dispute is in turn a dispute about whether a competent speaker's understanding is realist (evidence-transcendent) or only verificationist.

C. Competent speakers' understanding is only verificationist.

Devitt notes that Dummett seems to invest all his energies in establishing premise (C) without really attending to premises (A) or (B), which he takes to be crucial to Dummett's case. As a consequence, Devitt invests most of his energies in arguing against (A) and (B). Unfortunately for Devitt, (A) and (B) not only are *not* crucial to Dummett's case against realism, they are not even clearly part of it—which is why he spends little time defending them.

To be sure, Dummett has a favored way of framing the realism dispute, a rather *recherché* way, in which something like (A) and (B) do figure. But Dummett's case against metaphysical realism, even of the naturalistic sort favoured by Devitt, can be formulated, as below, in a way that makes no use of premises (A) and (B). To repeat, it is not crucial to Dummett's case against metaphysical realism (or Putnam's, for that matter) that he get the characterization of metaphysical realism exactly right. He could and should defer to the realist on this. A better way to formulate Dummett's argument might be this:

I. Realism implies that certain statements have realist (evidence-transcendent) truth conditions.

II. If such statements have realist truth conditions it must be possible for speakers to detect when such conditions are satisfied.

III. Speakers are capable of detecting only when verificationist truth conditions are satisfied.

This formulation is itself far from perfect, but it is an improvement over Devitt's ABC formulation. Dummett does not have to show that realism *just is* the thesis that statements have realist truth conditions, even if as a matter of fact he believes this. All he need show is that realism *implies* this thesis, which, as I argued above, it clearly does. Devitt commits a rather revealing error in discussing his premise (A), which I think explains his otherwise mystifying insistence that realism does *not* imply that certain sentences have evidence-transcendent truth conditions. The error is this: *Devitt glosses premise (A) as "realism is correspondence truth." This is mistaken. Evidence-transcendent truth conditions are not the sole province of correspondence theorists of truth.*

Disquotationalists who deny that truth has any hidden nature waiting to be uncovered (whether through naturalistic reduction to causally specified reference relations between words and things in the way Devitt favors or through anything else) are still obliged to acknowledge evidence-transcendent truth conditions wherever they acknowledge evidence-transcendent states of affairs. It is a common error to suppose that disquotationalism denies word-world connections. It doesn't. Indeed, versions of disquotationalism that define truth via disquotational reference can specify their reference relation *only* by making use of such connections.

Unfortunately for his case against Dummett, Devitt's critique is based on this misunderstanding. Devitt tells us on page 260 of his *Realism and Truth*, when elaborating on premise (A), "So, for Dummett, abbreviating, Realism is Correspondence Truth," where correspondence truth for sentences of type *x* is explicated as follows:

Sentences of type *x* are true or false in virtue of: (1) their structure; (2) the referential relations between their parts and reality; and (3) the objective and mind-independent nature of that reality.

What makes Devitt's misattribution even more extraordinary is that Dummett takes Donald Davidson to be his paradigmatic "realist" yet Davidson explicitly rejects the correspondence theory of truth. The evidence-transcendent truth conditions of Devitt's premise A need not be Devitt's correspondence truth conditions. They might be disquotational truth conditions instead. Evidence-transcendence, rather than correspondence, is all that Dummett's argument against realism needs.

When this error is unmasked, Devitt's critique of Dummett's anti-realism collapses. It consists mainly in the attempt to show that realism is independent of correspondence truth, a proposition Dummett need not contest and has independently argued for. Correlatively, because he is confident that Dummett has so thoroughly confounded the metaphysical question of realism with the semantic question of correspondence truth, Devitt does not even bother to respond to Dummett's crucial challenge to the realist—to say how unreflective speakers can detect evidence-transcendent truth conditions when they are in place, or why reflective truth theorists should believe such denizens of Plato's heaven exist to start with. Devitt effectively ignores the challenge, or brushes it aside impatiently when he does recognize it: "Verificationist arguments to show speakers do not know realist truth-conditions are

irrelevant to Correspondence Truth,” he tells us at page 261. Ironically, it is Devitt’s correspondence truth that is irrelevant to Dummett’s verificationist arguments. These target realist truth conditions in general.

1.3.2 *Alston on Dummett*

William Alston has recently advanced a different response to Dummett’s arguments, but one that, like Devitt’s, fails to take the antirealist challenge seriously. Alston sets out to show that Dummett’s manifestation and language acquisition arguments are flawed and that the verificationist semantics that Dummett advocates is quite compatible with realist truth.

Alston’s Critique of Verificationism In his assessment of Dummett’s verificationism, Alston adduces a consideration he takes to be fatal to it.¹⁰ This is that: “... with the possible exception of sentences usable for making observational or introspective reports ... no empirical sentence can be empirically verified or confirmed unless we assume the truth of various other sentences.”¹¹ Why should such a simple consideration sink Dummett’s program? The reason Alston gives is that “Dummett thinks in terms of assigning meanings one by one to sentences in terms of what would (conclusively or inconclusively) verify the sentence.”¹² Alston provides a sample sentence to show that this thesis cannot be sustained—that any empirical verification of the sentence “Jim is insecure” must depend on a “mini-theory of insecurity”; an extensive background theory and cannot depend just on the meaning of this sentence alone. Let us refer to this form of verificationism that Alston ascribes to Dummett as holophrastic verificationism (HV), since it apparently takes sentences to be discrete isolable units of significance, to be paired holophrastically with verification conditions.

Unfortunately, Alston provides no evidence at all that Dummett accepts HV. This is not surprising since Dummett himself provides ample evidence that he would reject it in principle. Dummett insists that our understanding of the sentences of our language has an interesting structure to it—it is partially, or at least quasi, ordered.¹³ “Jim is insecure” does indeed require a grasp of the verification conditions of sentences in those strata below the stratum containing the target sentence. Alston has apparently mistaken Dummett’s insistence on molecular theories of meaning and his animadversions against holism as evidence for a belief in holophrastic verificationism. This is a simple exegetical mistake.

Alston tries to undercut the verificationist reply that the meaning of a sentence is determined also by the contribution it makes to various complexes in which it may feature (observing, rightly, that this requires to be worked out) by producing a sentence whose meaning can be grasped even though it has no verification conditions. His example is “Matter is composed of tiny, invisible, indivisible particles” as uttered by Leucippus, who, we can reasonably suppose, lacked any means for verifying this.

The problem here is again partly exegetical. Dummett’s thesis is *not* that the meaning of such a sentence for Leucippus (or any of the Ancients who considered and disputed it) is given by the extant evidence for it, but rather that it is given by what would verify it. The relevant question is therefore not whether Leucippus or his cohorts could themselves verify this sentence, but whether they would recognize a verification of it if presented with one.

Naturally, since our current reason for believing that matter is composed of tiny particles, albeit ones that need not be indivisible (fundamental particles may be divisible “all the way down”) involves concepts Leucippus was not privy to, this type of verification is unacceptable. So we need to ask what what would have verified, relative to the concepts Leucippus actually possessed, the (possibly false) sentence “Matter is composed of tiny, indivisible particles.” Given that Leucippus had a grasp of a process of divisibility that could be carried on beyond the limits of human visual acuity and an argument for the thesis that any process of physical division must come to an end that he, along with the other Greek atomists, took to be convincing, there is no special problem at all in understanding why Leucippus considered himself justified in asserting the sentence “Matter is composed of tiny, indivisible, invisible particles”; neither is there any problem in understanding what its content might have been for him. The argument that convinced atomists such as Leucippus, Democritus, and Epicurus that matter could not be infinitely divisible was Zeno’s, according to Aristotle in his *Physics* 139, 24–140, 26:

1. If an object (or a magnitude such as a line or temporal period) were infinitely divisible, no contradiction should arise from the supposition that it has been divided “exhaustively.”
2. But any such exhaustive division would resolve the object (or magnitude) into elements of zero extension, which is clearly impossible, since:
3. No extensive magnitude could consist of extensionless elements.

This is perhaps the most famous argument in all antiquity against plurality. Aristotle's own refutation of it in the *Physics*, 316b 19ff, made no impression whatsoever on the atomists. Thus Epicurus was so persuaded by Zeno's argument that he asserted with utter confidence that if matter were infinitely divisible, Being, that which truly exists, would be reducible to Nonbeing.

Alston's Critique of Dummett's Manifestation and Acquisition Arguments

Alston's attack on Dummett's two central arguments for antirealism are, unfortunately, predicated on the mistaken attribution to him of holophrastic verificationism. Thus, he rejects the language acquisition argument on the basis of considerations that have to do with compositionality. Alston complains on page 113 that we do not acquire the use of sentences "one by one . . . attaching verification and falsification conditions to each one," but instead use our understanding of the components of a sentence to construct indefinitely many novel and complex sentences.

It is puzzling that Alston takes this to be a criticism of Dummett since, as he later recognizes, Dummett himself stresses the compositional character of our semantic competence.¹⁴ Leaving that to one side, though, he cites the aforementioned sentence, "Matter is composed of tiny, indivisible, invisible particles," and claims that if we understand the terms "particle," "composed of," "divisible," and so on, we'd understand the sentence without understanding any verification conditions.¹⁵ But this conclusion is a non sequitur. Subsentential expressions, on Dummett's model of semantic competence, are to be understood in terms of the contribution they make to the recognizable truth conditions, that is, verification conditions, of sentences in which they occur. With holophrastic verificationism firmly entrenched as his (mistaken) exegesis of Dummett's verificationism, Alston confidently asserts that "The 'Manifestation Argument' can be dismissed on the same grounds. Since our understanding of sentences is not, in general, a matter of knowing their verification conditions, we cannot expect a 'manifestation' of that understanding to amount, in general, to showing that we know under what conditions they are verified or falsified."¹⁶

In summary, much more work needs to be done to "dismiss" Dummett's manifestation argument than to saddle him with a version of verificationism he explicitly rejects. It is Alston's exegesis that should be rejected, not Dummett's legitimate challenge to realism.

Alston's Critique of Verificationism (II)—“Realist” Truth and Verificationist Semantics Alston makes a further attempt to rebut Dummett, arguing that Dummett's own verificationism is quite compatible with realist truth. This is a rather striking claim on the face of it. Dummett's view is that truth is epistemically constrained by human recognitional capacities and that the semantic contents of the sentences of a language are given by their recognizable truth conditions. How can this position possibly be squared with the view that truth is epistemically unconstrained?

The appearance of conflict quickly dissipates, however, once one discovers that by “realist truth” Alston does not mean what Dummett or most philosophers mean, namely, evidence-transcendent truth. At least, Alston cannot assume that his “realist truth” coincides with this more familiar understanding. Alston tells us that the following truth schema for propositions (which he takes to be the basic truth-bearers) completely characterizes truth:

(T) Πp . The proposition that p is true if and only if p .

This sounds like a straightforward version of minimalism about truth, in the manner of Paul Horwich. Minimalists claim that truth is merely a logical property, as opposed to a substantive one, such as having a mass, being a genotype, suffering from an attentional deficit, and so on. Such views stand opposed to traditional theories of truth such as correspondence or coherence theories. Nonetheless, Alston believes that his theory of truth will, on closer inspection, reveal itself to be a covertly realist one, since (T) is actually equivalent, he argues, to an “overtly realist” schema:

(TSp) Πp . The proposition that p is true if and only if it is a fact that p .

The problem with Alston's view, and the reason that Dummett's theory of truth poses a challenge to it, is that there is nothing “overtly realist” about (TSp) at all. Merely appending the operator “it is a fact that” to the right hand side of the biconditional in (T) does not a realist theory of truth make—not unless antirealists can make no sense of the notion of a fact, which they clearly can. Why does Alston think otherwise?

He tells us that his version of truth is a “minimalist correspondence” theory of truth. This sounds like an oxymoron, but let us pursue his ideas. Minimalist correspondence theories of truth are to be distinguished from robust correspondence theories, he informs us, in that the

latter, unlike the former, make truth a matter of a certain sort of structural fit between propositions and nonlinguistic facts. In contrast, minimalist correspondence theories leave propositions and facts unanalyzed. Furthermore, robust theories try to explicate the fact–proposition relation on which truth supervenes, whereas minimalist theories treat the relation as one of content identity between fact and proposition.

Two comments. First, there is nothing in any of this to distinguish Alston's view from Horwich's. Deflationists generally will read Alston's (TSp) as little more than a platitude—"it is a fact that *p*" is simply an alternative way of saying "it is true that *p*," for them. So they can endorse (TSp) while claiming that, *pace* Alston, the direction of explanation goes from (TSp) to (T) rather than conversely. Perhaps Alston thinks that deflationists in general and minimalists in particular must eschew the correspondences between true propositions and those states of affairs they describe in rejecting the correspondence theory of truth, but if so, this is an error. Witness Horwich:

The correspondence conception of truth involves two claims:

- (a) that truths correspond to reality; and
- (b) that such correspondence is what truth essentially is.

And the minimalist response ... is to concede the first of these theses but to deny the second.¹⁷

Minimalists also agree with Alston that the fact-proposition relation is one of content identity—"the fact that snow is white" has exactly the same content as "the proposition that snow is white is true," that content simply being: *snow is white*.

Second, not all correspondence theories of truth make the relation between their favored truthbearers and the corresponding facts a matter of "structural fit." Such a view of the correspondence relation, most clearly attributable to Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus*, has comparatively few supporters today largely because many think that the "picturing relation" between propositions and facts is simply too mysterious. Naturalistic-minded philosophers attracted to the correspondence theory are more likely to follow the lead of (the early) Hartry Field and Michael Devitt in seeing correspondence as a relation between subsentential expressions such as singular terms and objects, predicates and properties of objects, and so on. If objects together with their properties and relations are conceived of as *components* of facts, then this

“referentialist” theory is clearly still a version of the correspondence theory of truth.

In recent years, an alternative understanding of the correspondence theory has been gathering momentum wherein true propositions do not require unique correspondents to make them true. “Truthmaker theory” holds that for every truth p there is a truthmaker, where by “truthmaker” is simply meant *any entity whose existence entails p* . So it may be that the mere existence of Hersch the kelpie makes it true that dogs exist and also makes it true that unless dogs exist the big pet food manufacturers have an awful lot of explaining to do. Indeed, it may even be that Hersch’s existence makes it true that thirteen is a prime number if in making true some contingent truth Hersch’s existence a fortiori makes true all necessary truths. This theory has considerable independent interest and is discussed in the final chapter where I develop my own version of the correspondence theory, distinct from both the truthmaker and referentialist versions alluded to above.

Plainly, if Alston’s theory of truth is to be distinguished as a genuine version of the correspondence theory, he has to tell us something more about the relation between facts and propositions. As the quotation from Horwich indicates, Alston has to at least show how positing a relation of correspondence between facts and propositions *explains* why those propositions are true. Content identity is too weak to discharge this explanatory task, since minimalists and other deflationists who reject the correspondence theory independently advance the “content identity” account of the relation between true propositions and facts precisely because they wish to demonstrate the explanatory *vacuity* of that theory.

To return now to Alston’s critique of Dummett. Suppose that one understands propositions in the manner of Frege as encapsulations of truth conditions and that, along with Dummett’s antirealist, one can make no sense of the idea that truth can outrun human recognitional capacities. Then both facts and propositions, if one accepts Alston’s minimalist correspondence theory of truth, become epistemically circumscribed since their contents are identical. In this way one would be led to endorse an epistemic theory of truth, which is flatly inconsistent with a realist theory in the sense in which we have been using the term “realist.”

Alston does not think his own minimalism about truth *excludes* verificationist theories of content. Indeed, his position is just the opposite: One can subscribe to a verificationist theory of content, he argues, while

accepting minimalist correspondence truth. Yet although Alston takes this to be a criticism of Dummett's verificationism—establishing that there is no passage from verificationist content to verificationist truth—in actual fact the alleged incompatibility between the two rebounds on him.

We have just seen that if content is determined by recognizable truth conditions, as Dummett maintains, truth is epistemically constrained. If content is not so determined, then, of course, there need be no passage from the nature of content to the nature of truth. But on Alston's view, minimalist correspondence truth is silent about content, treating it as unanalyzed. It is therefore an open question how it is to be best analyzed. So, since on one analysis, Dummett's, we are led from verificationist content to verificationist truth and verificationist content is compatible with minimalist correspondence truth, Alston has not said enough about truth to rule out (Dummett's brand of) verificationist truth as a species of minimal correspondence truth. The result is that Alston's claim that the schema (T) *completely* characterizes his theory of truth must be wrong. The schema patently admits as one of its instances a type of truth that Alston is at pains to reject—verificationist truth.

Alston would undoubtedly reject this criticism of his views since he has an argument to show that Dummett can maintain his verificationist semantics only "at the price of rendering his concept of truth gratuitous."¹⁸ His argument goes like this. There are two possible ways in which verificationist semantics can be distinguished from realist semantics:

- (I) by adopting a verificationist account of propositional content; or
- (II) by adopting a verificationist account of truth, leaving propositional content alone.

Alston interprets Dummett as proceeding by way of (II) even though he has "already made it verificationist in the first way."¹⁹ He then contends in the same passage that "although Dummett says that his view is distinctively verificationist in the second way, he has already made it verificationist in the first way. That being the case, he is unwarranted in claiming that ... verificationism requires the second way—adopting a different understanding of truth." From this he infers: "The reductionist theory of content cuts the ground from under the demand for a nonrealist theory of truth."²⁰

What are we to make of this argument? Alston tells us that he does not believe (I) and (II) are incompatible, but he then adds: "My point

is only that the verificationist semantics does not provide a basis for the verificationist account of truth.”²¹ If Alston simply wishes to make the general point that one can be a verificationist about content while holding a nonverificationist view about truth, or conversely that one can believe in verificationist truth but give some nonverificationist account of content, then this point is perfectly true but entirely orthogonal to Dummett’s position, which is that propositional content must needs be truth-conditional. Once this is appreciated, it no longer appears gratuitous that Dummett should argue from the nature of content to the nature of truth, since content is to be understood in terms of recognizable truth conditions, and Alston’s forced choice between (I) and (II) becomes a false dichotomy.

The answer to Alston’s charge on page 124 that “Dummett cannot take the second way instead of the first without abandoning the verificationist account of sentence meaning, thus rendering his position unrecognizable” is therefore quite simple: Dummett neither intends nor is forced to choose between an account of content and an account of truth, since his position *just is* that content is truth-conditional.

1.3.3 Rorty and Davidson on Transcending the Realist–Antirealist Debate

Richard Rorty and Donald Davidson think that instead of siding either with realists or with their opponents, we should transcend the whole realist–antirealist debate. For Davidson, this is because both sides assume a scheme–content division that would allow us a neutral vantage point from which we could examine our beliefs or statements and see what items (either in the world or in minds or linguistic practices) could make those beliefs or statements true, a division he believes to be senseless. Rorty, for his part, likewise rejects any conception of our beliefs or conceptual schemes or languages as mirroring the world.

Perhaps Davidson and Rorty are right. Perhaps representationalism, the view that we construct representations of the world that are true or false according to how the world is or is not, ought to be rejected.

Does granting this imply that the realist–antirealist debate has been spirited away? No. Not unless granting this also implies that no sense can be made *either* of the idea of certain objects such as electrons or numbers or values *existing* mind-independently or of their *not existing* mind-independently. One serious problem arises with the attempt to deny sense to both the notion of mind-independent existence and its complement, non-mind-independent existence, without denying sense to the notion of existence altogether. Even assuming this can be done,

perhaps because the whole idea of “mind-independence” involves some pernicious confusion, how is the resultant view to be distinguished from antirealism? If one claims that the concept of mind-independent existence is *incoherent*, one has a reason, perhaps the best of reasons, for opposing the realist’s thesis that mental states or moral values or inaccessible cardinals exist independently of the mind. Once we reject the illusion of a distinction between a conceptual scheme or a system of practices and a reality to which the conceptual scheme or system of practices is answerable, the realist’s credo is revealed as simply incoherent. This is an even more serious failure than garden-variety falsity, one might have thought. However one assesses it, though, this is a ground, perhaps the strongest possible ground, for antirealism.

Despite their protestations, then, both Rorty and Davidson, to the extent that they wish to really reject a conceptual scheme–world distinction, are antirealists. There has been no “going beyond” the realist–antirealist debate, only a failure to appreciate which side of the fence they’re really on. In fact, I believe that it is possible to show that the pragmatist conception of truth that Rorty, at any rate, endorses is flatly mistaken. I undertake that task in the final chapter at section 8.2.

Summary

I have argued that naturalistic realists cannot afford to ignore the charge of metaphysical credulism that antirealists level against them. I have tried to show that the debate between realists and antirealists has stalled largely because of a worry about how precisely to formulate the commitments of realism. But characterization is a minor issue. Indeed, the whole characterization problem is a blind alley. I have argued that pervasive confusions and false starts have obfuscated the real issue between antirealists and realists. Last, I have tried to show that there is no “going beyond” the realist–antirealist debate in the manner of Rorty or Davidson—the logical space they wish to occupy has already been occupied by antirealism. Antirealism is simply any type of principled opposition to realism, an opposition ultimately motivated by the suspicion that realism is an indefensible form of metaphysical credulism.