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A Companion to the Philosophy of Language

VOLUME II

Second Edition

Edited by

BOB HALE, CRISPIN WRIGHT, and ALEXANDER MILLER

WILEY Blackwell

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SECOND EDITION

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and Alexander Miller

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Contents

VOLUME I

List of Contributors viii
Preface to the Second Edition xv
Preface to the First Edition xvi

Part I Meaning and Theories of Meaning 1

1 Metaphysics, Philosophy, and the Philosophy of Language 3
Michael Morris
2 Meaning and Truth-Conditions: From Frege's Grand Design to Davidson's 27
David Wiggins
3 Intention and Convention in the Theory of Meaning 49
Stephen Schiffer
4 Meaning, Use, Verification 73
John Skorupski
Postscript: Bernhard Weiss
5 Semantics and Pragmatics 107
Guy Longworth
6 Pragmatics 127
Charles Travis
Postscript: Charles Travis
7 On the Linguistic Status of Context Sensitivity 151
John Collins
8 A Guide to Naturalizing Semantics 174
Barry Loewer
Postscript: Peter Schulte
9 Inferentialism 197
Julien Murzi and Florian Steinberger
10 Against Harmony 225
Ian Rumfitt

11 Meaning and Privacy 250
Edward Craig
Postscript: Guy Longworth
12 Tacit Knowledge 272
Alexander Miller
13 Radical Interpretation 299
Jane Heal
Postscript: Alexander Miller
14 Propositional Attitudes 324
Mark Richard
15 Holism 357
Christopher Peacocke
16 Metaphor 375
Richard Moran
Postscript: Andrew McGonigal
17 Conditionals 401
Anthony S. Gillies
18 Generics 437
Bernhard Nickel
19 Deflationist Theories of Truth, Meaning, and Content 463
Stephen Schiffer

VOLUME II

Part I Language, Truth, and Reality 491

20 Realism and its Oppositions 493
Bob Hale
Postscript: Bernhard Weiss
21 Theories of Truth 532
Ralph C. S. Walker
Postscript: Michael P. Lynch
22 Truthmaker Semantics 556
Kit Fine
23 Analyticity 578
Paul Artin Boghossian
Postscript: Paul Artin Boghossian
24 Rule-Following, Objectivity, and Meaning 619
Bob Hale
Postscript: Daniel Wee
25 The Normativity of Meaning 649
Anandi Hattiangadi
26 Indeterminacy of Translation 670
Crispin Wright
Postscript: Alexander Miller

27 Putnam's Model-Theoretic Argument against Metaphysical Realism 703
Bob Hale and Crispin Wright
Postscript: Jussi Haukioja
28 Sorites 734
Mark Sainsbury and Timothy Williamson
Postscript: Aidan McGlynn
29 Time and Tense 765
Berit Brogaard
30 Relativism 787
Patrick Shirreff and Brian Weatherson

Part II Reference, Identity, and Necessity 805

31 Modality 807
Bob Hale
Postscript: Bob Hale
32 Relativism about Epistemic Modals 843
Andy Egan
33 Internalism and Externalism 865
Jussi Haukioja
34 Essentialism 881
Graeme Forbes
Postscript: Penelope Mackie
35 Reference and Necessity 902
Robert Stalnaker
36 Names and Rigid Designation 920
Jason Stanley
37 Two-Dimensional Semantics 948
Christian Nimtz
38 The Semantics and Pragmatics of Indexicals 970
John Perry
39 Objects and Criteria of Identity 990
E. J. Lowe
Postscript: Harold Noonan
40 Relative Identity 1013
Harold Noonan
41 *De Jure* Codesignation 1033
James Pryor

Glossary 1080
Index 1117

PART I

Language, Truth, and Reality

20

Realism and its Oppositions

BOB HALE

In many branches of philosophy, dealing with very different areas of our thought and talk, there occur disputes centered on the tenability of positions described as 'realist.' In the philosophy of science, realism stands opposed to various forms of instrumentalism; mathematical realists, often known as Platonists, are opposed in one way by nominalists, in another by constructivists; moral realists contend with subjectivist tendencies, such as expressivism and projectivism, as well as with error theories; in the theory of meaning itself, realism is under attack from positions which hold that meaning must be explained in terms which preserve an essential link between what we mean and evidence, as well as from meaning-skeptical arguments advanced by Quine, Kripke, and others (see Chapter 26, INDETERMINACY OF TRANSLATION; Chapter 23, ANALYTICITY; Chapter 31, MODALITY, §2; Chapter 24, RULE-FOLLOWING, OBJECTIVITY, AND MEANING; and Chapter 27, PUTNAM'S MODEL-THEORETIC ARGUMENT AGAINST METAPHYSICAL REALISM). It is scarcely obvious that there is some single type of issue at stake in these disputes (henceforth R/AR disputes), or that there is at least some significant continuity between them. The very diversity of the positions set against realism in these different areas might of itself be thought to point towards the opposite conclusion: that realism amounts to different things in the different cases, so that any attempt at general discussion is doomed to failure. It is not obvious, either, that the various disputes have anything much to do with the philosophy of language, or that there is any reason to expect arguments in the philosophy of language to play a significant part in their resolution.

Against these dampening thoughts may be set – besides the feeling that it is unlikely to be sheer coincidence that the same label is applied to completely disparate positions with no significant similarities whatever – at least two reasons why philosophers of language may properly take an interest in general questions about realism and the forms which opposition to it may assume. First, and most obviously, there is an R/AR dispute (or disputes) within the philosophy of language itself, centered on the tenability of realist theories of meaning. At the very least, it might be expected that scrutiny of R/AR disputes in other areas may

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illuminate the issues here, if only through contrasts rather than parallels. But second, and more importantly, the notion that debates about other realisms – in science, mathematics, or other areas – may proceed unaffected by arguments in the philosophy of language overlooks the possibility that a successful anti-realist argument in the theory of meaning may ramify into other disputed areas (see Chapter 24, RULE-FOLLOWING, OBJECTIVITY, AND MEANING, §3).

We begin (§1) with an examination of Michael Dummett's influential treatment of these issues, which couples an attempt to identify a common form exemplified by a large, if not exhaustive, range of R/AR disputes with important arguments against a realist position about meaning which – if they are sound, and Dummett's diagnosis of what is at stake in those disputes is correct – promise to resolve the issue in the anti-realist's favor, not only in the theory of meaning itself, but across the board.[1] We then (§2) survey the principal negative arguments, advanced by Dummett and others, for semantic anti-realism. In §3, we turn to the wider question of the bearing of these arguments on R/AR disputes more generally, and review doubts about the adequacy of Dummett's general conception of their common form. Other ways in which the anti-realist case may be prosecuted are reviewed in §4: classical reductionist positions; error theories; expressivist/projectivist options and quasi-realism; and we conclude (§5) with a brief examination of the new perspective on R/AR disputes advocated in recent work by Wright.

1 Dummett's General Account of R/AR Disputes

Many traditional, and at least some currently active, R/AR disputes appear primarily to concern the existence of entities of some sort – objects of some general type, or perhaps entities which, if there are such, should be taken as belonging to some other category. Medieval realists and their nominalist adversaries, for example, were disagreed over the existence of universals – abstract entities conceived as objective worldly correlates of general terms like 'red' and 'honest' and denoted by corresponding abstract nouns like 'redness' and 'honesty.' The cardinal negative thesis of many modern nominalists has likewise been the denial that there exist any abstract entities – by which they chiefly understood properties or attributes, as opposed to the particular concrete entities they characterize, together with sets or classes. One kind of realism or platonism about mathematics is distinguished by its acceptance of numbers and sets as genuine objects, lying outside space and time but nonetheless existing independently of our thought. At least part of what is in dispute between scientific realists and their opponents is whether a satisfactory account of theoretical science requires us to see it as describing the properties of unobservable or theoretical entities such as particles, forces, and fields. Modal realists of one sort insist that there are possible worlds, distinct from but no less real than the actual world. (See Chapter 31, MODALITY, §3.)

Dummett's conception of R/AR disputes stands in sharp contrast with the model suggested by such examples. Issues between realists and their opponents are, he contends, usually best characterized *not* as disputes about the *existence of entities* of some problematic sort, but in terms of a certain *class of statements* – those distinctive of the area of thought and talk in question – which he usually labels the 'disputed' class. Further, the disagreement is not – or not primarily – over whether statements of the disputed class are true, since the anti-realist will agree that in many cases they are so; it concerns, rather, the nature or

character of the notion of truth which may be applied to them. This last point merits both emphasis and comment. A preference for formulating R/AR disputes in terms of problematic statements rather than problematic entities need, by itself, involve no significant break with the idea that those disputes centrally concern the existence of entities of certain kinds. It need not do so, because the preference might be grounded in the plausible view that general ontological questions (Do there exist so-and-sos?) reduce to, or are at least best approached as, questions partly about the logical form of some appropriate range of statements and partly about their truth-values. Thus one question at issue between mathematical Platonists on the one side and, on the other, nominalists and others is whether numbers, sets, and so on exist. Precisely because we are obviously not concerned with entities which might conceivably be objects of ostension or of any sort of perceptual encounter, or which might announce their presence indirectly through their effects, it is difficult to see how the question of their existence can be non-prejudicially approached, save by equating it with a question about truth and logical form: Are there true statements whose proper analysis discloses expressions purporting reference to numbers? General endorsement of this approach to questions of ontology is tantamount to acceptance of Frege's celebrated 'Context Principle' which, construed as a principle about reference, warns against asking after the reference of sub-sentential expressions outside the context of complete sentences (Frege, 1884, p. x and §62; Dummett, 1973a, pp. 192–196, 494–500; 1982, p. 239; 1991, chs 16 and 17; Wright, 1983, §§2, 3, 5, 8; Hale, 1987, pp. 10–14, 152–162, 228–230). Dummett is sympathetic to it. But his insistence upon treating R/AR disputes as centered on a class of statements is prelude to a quite different claim about their character. He writes:

> Realism I characterise as 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 a statement of that class ... The dispute thus concerns the notion of truth appropriate for statements of the disputed class; and this means that it is a dispute concerning the kind of *meaning* which these statements have. (Dummett, 1963, p. 146)

As Dummett goes on to make clear, he thinks that the notion of a statement's having an 'objective truth-value, independently of our means of knowing it ... in virtue of a reality existing independently of us' is to be understood in a very strong sense. The realist is to be understood as holding not merely that a statement may be true or false without our actually knowing its truth-value, nor even that a statement may be true or false even though we are in fact or in practice unable to tell which, but that there can be a much more radical dislocation of truth-value and our capacity for its recognition – a statement may possess a determinate truth-value without its being possible, even in principle, for us to come to know it (Dummett, 1963, p. 146; 1969, p. 358; 1973b, p. 224; 1982, p. 230). It is for this reason that realism, as Dummett conceives it, amounts to – or at least crucially involves – a thesis about meaning: to adopt a realist view of any area of thought and talk is to conceive of its distinctive statements as endowed with meaning through being associated with evidentially unconstrained truth-conditions, that is, conditions whose satisfaction bears no essential connection, however attenuated, with the possibility of its being recognized by us.

Although the foregoing characterization may be taken as definitive, Dummett very frequently depicts the issue between realists and their opponents in other, ostensibly quite

different terms, as concerning the principle of bivalence, according to which every statement is either true or false.[2] It is clear that in taking endorsement of unrestricted bivalence as 'a touchstone for a realistic interpretation of the statements of some given class,' Dummett intends no departure from his official characterization. The relations between the two are, however, by no means straightforward. It is, certainly, very plausible to regard unqualified endorsement of bivalence as *sufficient* for realism. For it is a plain fact that our language affords the means of framing various kinds of statement which are not effectively decidable – that is, statements for which there exists no procedure guaranteed to issue, after finitely many steps, in a correct verdict on their truth-values. To insist that such statements are, nevertheless, determinately either true or false would, it seems, require thinking of them as capable of being true, or false, in the absence of evidence either way, and thus as possessed of potentially evidence-transcendent truth-conditions. But realism does not obviously entail a commitment to unrestricted bivalence. It seems that one might decline to endorse bivalence for reasons which appear quite consistent with holding that certain statements may have their truth-values undetectably, say because one took failure of reference on the part of ingredient singular terms to deprive statements of truth-value.[3] A further complication concerns vagueness, which is commonly – though not invariably – taken to cause certain statements to lack determinate truth-value (see Chapter 28, SORITES). These considerations indicate that refusal to endorse bivalence may or may not signal adoption of an anti-realist view, depending upon the specific reasons for that refusal. If realism does involve a commitment to bivalence, it would seem that it can be at most a conditional one, to the effect that any statement is true or false whose ingredient terms are not subject to vagueness or reference-failure. Whether and how this qualified claim can be established, and, in particular, how it might be shown that vagueness and reference-failure are the only grounds on which a realist may properly refuse to endorse bivalence, are hard questions to which, so far as I know, we still want answers. Here they must be left open.

There are, as we have observed, many different areas in which what seems aptly described as a realist position may be defended or opposed. There is no clear presumption that one must be committed to realism across the board, if one seeks to uphold a realist position in any quarter of it. On the contrary, it appears that realism in one area might consist perfectly well with opposition to it in another – that one might, for instance, defend a realist view about theoretical science whilst rejecting realism about ethics, or values generally, or, even more selectively, combine a realist attitude towards some parts of scientific theory (such as classical physics) with anti-realism about other parts (such as quantum mechanics). Certainly there appears little prospect of a quite general argument enforcing adoption of a globally realist stance. A considerable part of the interest and importance of Dummett's configuration of R/AR disputes undoubtedly lies in the fact that it opens up the possibility – which might otherwise appear no less remote – of a quite general argument of the opposing tendency, enforcing global anti-realism across all the disputed areas. For if Dummett is right, realism everywhere depends upon the viability of a realist conception of meaning in terms of potentially evidence-transcendent truth-conditions (hereafter, 'realist truth-conditions' for brevity). Thus any argument against semantic realism as such is potentially quite generally destructive of realist options. There are, accordingly, two main questions requiring attention: (1) Are there compelling arguments – perhaps ones advanced by Dummett himself – against a realist conception of meaning? (2) Has Dummett provided an adequate general characterization of R/AR disputes? In the 50 or so years since Dummett's

earliest publications that bear on them, both questions have generated a very considerable amount of critical discussion, of which only the briefest overview can be given here.

2 Arguments against Semantic Realism

Dummett himself advances two main arguments against the idea that our understanding of disputed statements could consist in our associating them with realist truth-conditions, one focused on the difficulty of seeing how we could *acquire* such an understanding, and the other on the difficulty of seeing how we could *manifest* it. As will quickly become apparent, neither argument purports to be conclusive: each is, rather, to be seen as presenting the realist with a challenge which she appears unable to meet.

According to the *Acquisition Challenge*, our training in the use of language consists in our being taught to accept statements as true in circumstances of such-and-such a sort, and to reject them as false in circumstances of other sorts. This training *necessarily* proceeds in terms of states of affairs which we can *recognize* as obtaining. But how, in that case, are we supposed to come by the conception of evidence-transcendent truth-conditions which the realist postulates? How are we to come to know what it is for a statement of that kind to be true, or false, in virtue of the obtaining of some state of affairs which obtains *undetectably*? The challenge is to explain how we come to assign to statements truth-conditions involving states of affairs which, by their very nature, *can have played no part* in the process by which the meanings of those statements are learned or communicated. If it is conceded that there can indeed be no *ostensive* training that enables us to form such a conception, but suggested that we can nevertheless acquire it through *verbal explanation*, the counter may be given that this merely postpones the problem, since presumably no verbal explanation can be adequate that does not itself employ sentences already understood as having evidence-transcendent truth-conditions – but in that case, how is the proposed explanation to get off the ground?[4]

The *Manifestation Challenge* runs thus: If the meaning of a statement consists in its having certain (possibly evidence-transcendent) truth-conditions, then understanding it (knowing its meaning) is possessing knowledge of such. But knowledge of a statement's meaning cannot, in general, consist in the ability to provide an informative statement, in other words, of what it means (and obviously it can't consist in the ability to state *un*informatively what it means, just by disquoting it). We may concentrate on the case where knowledge of meaning does not consist in the capacity to give a verbal explanation of meaning, since no such explanation can introduce the possibility of evidence-transcendence. When knowledge of meaning is not verbalizable but implicit knowledge, it must be knowledge of how to use the sentence, and must therefore consist in the speaker's possession of certain practical abilities. But now, by just what practical abilities is an alleged grasp of evidence-transcendent truth-conditions supposed to be manifested? In the case of effectively decidable statements, or of statements which, whenever they are true, are recognizably so, a speaker's implicit knowledge can be identified with his capacity to discriminate between circumstances in which the statement is true and those in which it is not. But it clearly cannot do so in the case of any statement possessed of evidence-transcendent truth-conditions – in this case, there is nothing a speaker can do which fully manifests his supposed grasp of those conditions. Realism thus clashes head-on with the Wittgensteinian equation of meaning with use and of understanding with capacity for correct use.[5]

Attempts to Answer the Acquisition Challenge

Truth-Value Links

Among the types of statement that are problematic, in view of the anti-realist challenge, are statements about the past and about other minds. The realist conception has it that such statements can be determinately true or false in virtue of past states of affairs, or states of mind of others, to which we have no direct access, and for which adequate evidence may be quite simply unavailable. And the challenge is then to explain how we come by this conception. One suggestion is that the truth-values of statements of these problematic kinds are systematically connected with those of statements lying outside the anti-realistically problematic class – in these cases, present-tensed statements and first-person psychological statements. Thus there is a systematic link between the truth-value of a past-tensed statement made at one time, say now, and various corresponding present-tensed statements which were, or could have been, made at earlier times; for example:

> The statement: 'One million years ago, this place *was* covered with ice' is true now if and only if the statement 'This spot *is* covered with ice,' made a million years ago, was (or at least would have been) true.

The thought, then, is that understanding this truth-value link is an uncontroversial component in our mastery of tensed discourse. But present-tensed statements are not, as such, anti-realistically problematic, since they relate to conditions which obtain (or don't, as may be) detectably or recognizably. By our grasp of these two things, it is claimed, we can come to understand what it is for past-tensed statements to be true in virtue of states of affairs which are no longer accessible to us.[6]

This response fairly obviously fails to provide a *general* answer to the acquisition challenge, since no such maneuver appears feasible in the case of other types of problematic statement, such as unrestricted quantifications over an infinite, or otherwise unsurveyable, totality of objects, such as the natural numbers. Of course, '$\forall n Pn$' is true iff all its instances are true. But this is clearly no advance, since whilst the truth-value of each 'Pn' may be unproblematically recognizable, if 'P' is a decidable arithmetic predicate, we enjoy no unproblematic access to the fact, if it is one, that *all* of them are true.[7] But even in cases where the truth-value link gambit appears available, it does not really work. The trouble is that present-tensed statements have unproblematic (detectable) truth-conditions *only in the context of present use*. But the link only helps if we understand what it means to say, for example, 'This spot is covered with ice' *was* true; that is, what is *ceteris paribus* unproblematic is what it is for a present-tensed statement to be *true now*, but what we need, to move from right to left across the truth-value link to knowledge of what it is for a past-tensed statement to be now, but undetectably, true, is understanding of what it is for a present-tensed statement *to have been true* – and this is no less problematic than what we are seeking to explain.[8]

Partial Accessibility

We can distinguish between *chronically e-transcendent* statements – such as 'Everything in the universe has doubled in size' and 'The entire universe sprang into existence just five minutes ago, replete with traces of a long and complex past, etc.' – which by their very nature could in no possible circumstances be recognized as true, and statements which,

though not *guaranteed* to be so, are, *in favorable cases*, *detectably* true. Realists may concede that there is no hope of defending their distinctive conception of truth for the former, though claiming that this is no loss, since they are beyond the pale anyway; but they may insist that matters stand otherwise with the latter. Here, they may claim, if a statement of this sort is undetectably true, it is at most *contingent* that it is so. Statements of the same kind are, on occasion, recognizably true: that is, we sometimes have access to states of affairs of the kind which confer truth on them. And this, they may claim, is enough – enough to equip us with a conception of what it is for such statements to be true but undetectably so – this is just for there to obtain a state of affairs of the same kind as we have recognized to obtain in other cases. So it is, McDowell claims, with statements about the past and about the psychological states of others. Although we don't always, or even usually, have direct non-inferential access to past states of affairs, we do sometimes, through memory; and we can on occasion simply and literally observe that another is in pain or violent grief – we may see pain or grief in their face and actions, which express or manifest their state.[9]

Like the preceding response, this is of limited application at best. It is doubtfully available in the case of statements about the remote past, beyond the reach of living memory. Further, no response of this sort seems available for spatially or temporally unrestricted contingent generalizations (whether lawlike or accidental), or for quantifications through an infinite domain – in neither case does there appear to be any purchase for the idea of our being sometimes graced with direct access to an appropriate truth-conferring state of affairs. Clearly, too, the idea of occasional direct access to others' psychological states may be challenged. But there is a quite general difficulty with the partial access gambit, even in what might seem favorable cases.

First, and obviously, we should distinguish between the (problematic) case of a statement's being *undetectably* true and the (unproblematic) case of a statement's being true, though not, as it happens, known to be so, simply because we haven't taken steps we could have taken to ascertain its truth-value. We can, plausibly, understand what it is for a statement in the latter case to be true, in terms of there obtaining a state of affairs of the same kind as we have verified to obtain in the case of other statements of that type. But this is not to the point – for it is another, and much stronger, claim that we can come by the notion of undetectable truth by this route.

Second, with this out of the way, we can see that the crucial, but contentious, claim is that statements in respect of which we do *not* enjoy direct access to any truth-conferring state of affairs are *of the same kind* as other statements, such as those about the past, for which we do. Once it is allowed that they *are* of the same kind, it may seem an easy step to the realist's desired conclusion, that we can conceive of the former as true in the same way as the latter, for all that the former are, as it happens, undetectably true. Now they *are* of the same kind in one sense, for they are all statements *about the past*. But this, the anti-realist may protest, is not the point. In another sense, they are *not*: for the former are (allegedly) undetectably true, if true, whereas the latter are, *ex hypothesi*, detectably so. The realist simply *assumes*, but does nothing to show, that this difference *makes no difference*. But that it does make a difference is precisely the content of the acquisition challenge. So the question is begged, not answered.[10]

Enhanced Recognitional Capacities

The idea that underpins the preceding response, that undetectability of truth-value commonly derives from contingencies of our circumstances or contingent limitations upon our recognitional capacities, is sound enough. There may be some temptation to think it can be

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