Realism and Idealism
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Realism and antirealism

- Last week, we saw that external realism – a highly intuitive view in all sorts of areas – faces a serious challenge from Putnam's model-theoretic arguments and JMT manoeuvre.

- In the final 2 lectures, we'll look at some more nuanced forms of realism. But, for the next 2, we'll turn to a position in total opposition to external realism: antirealism.

- We'll take Michael Dummett as our central example of an antirealist. We'll consider his attacks on realism in this lecture, and his positive position in the next.

The principle of bivalence

- Here are 2 familiar claims:
  BIV $\models P \lor \neg P$
  LEM $\vdash P \lor \neg P$
- BIV is classically valid, and LEM is a classical theorem.
- Let's focus on the semantic BIV. Michael Dummett believes that acceptance of this principle is the hallmark of realism.

A note on rejection

- It is common to read that Dummett *rejects* BIV. This is only true on some readings of 'reject'.
- It is natural to think that to reject P is to assert its negation, $\neg P$.
- This is not the case here: Dummett does not assert $\neg(P \vee \neg P)$, since from that (by DeMorgan) we get $\neg P \wedge \neg\neg P$, which is a contradiction.
- So Dummett rejects BIV only in the sense that there are domains over which he refuses to assert it, not that he asserts its negation.

Challenges to bivalence

- Why might we deny bivalence?

Mathematics	Goldbach's conjecture
Aesthetics	Oh what a lovely drawing of a horse
Ethics	Oh what a naughty murder
Past	Julius Caesar died with an even number of hairs on his head
Vagueness	Ian is bald
Modality	Surely Ian could have had more hair
Counterfactuals	If Ian had more hair, I'd like him more

Realism

- Let's focus on the case of the past, since it is one of Dummett's central cases (though you could use your favourite):

  JC Julius Caesar died with an even number of hairs on his head.

- The realist would say:
  1. JC is true iff Julius Caesar died with an even number of hairs on his head.
  2. We do not know whether Julius Caesar died with an even number of hairs on his head.
  3. Perhaps we *cannot* know whether Julius Caesar died with an even number of hairs on his head.
  4. We therefore do not know, and possibly cannot know, the truth conditions of JC.
  5. But JC is either true or it is false, so its truth-conditions either obtain or do not.
  6. So JC has *verification-transcendent* truth-conditions: it has truth-conditions that transcend our ability to know them.

Verificationism

- For Dummett, then, realism about domain D is committed to the following:

  > Realism The truth-conditions of the sentences of D *can* be verification-transcendent.

- Antirealism, on the other hand, is committed to:

  > Antirealism The truth-conditions of the sentences of D *cannot* be verification-transcendent.

- So, for Dummett, realism abour D has 2 major commitments: (1) BIV; (2) verification-transcendent truth-conditions.

- Dummett provides a wealth of arguments against realism, on his understanding of realism. The two best-known are the *acquisition* and *manifestation* arguments.

The acquisition argument

The process by which we came to grasp the sense of statements of the disputed class, and the use which we subsequently made of the disputed class, are such that we could not derive from it any notion of what it would be for such a statement to be true independently of the sort of thing we have learned to recognise as establishing the truth of such statements. ... In the very nature of the case, we could not possibly have come to understand what it would be for the statement to be true independently of that which we have learned to treat as establishing its truth: there simply was no means by which we could have shown this (Dummett, 'Truth', p. 362)

Acquisition

- The idea is that humans cannot acquire a conception of verification-transcendent truth-conditions.
- The support for this claim rests on a broadly empiricist account of learnability.
- One learns a linguistic concept by experiencing correct uses of it.

> We learn the use of the past tense by learning to recognise certain situations as justifying the assertion of certain statements expressed by means of that tense. These situations of course include those in which we remember the occurrence of some event which we witnessed, and our initial training in the use of the past tense consists in learning to use past-tense statements as the expression of such memories. ('The Reality of the Past', p.363)

More precisely

▶ Consider some domain of discourse D:

1. Suppose that some of the sentences of D have verification-transcendent truth-conditions. [assumption]
2. We understand the sentences of D. [premise]
3. To understand a sentence is to know its truth-conditions. [premise]
4. We know the truth-conditions of the sentences of D. [from 2, 3]
5. If we know the truth-conditions of the sentences of D, then it is possible for us to acquire that knowledge. [premise]
6. It was possible for us to acquire knowledge of the truth-conditions of the sentences of D. [from 4, 5]
7. It was possible for us to acquire knowledge of verification-transcendent truth-conditions. [from 1, 6]
8. It is not possible for us to acquire knowledge of verification-transcendent truth-conditions. [premise]
9. Contradiction. [from 7, 8]
10. The sentences of D do not have verification-transcendent truth-conditions. [1–9]

The acquisition argument assessed

- ▶ The crucial premise is obviously:
  - 8 It is not possible for us to acquire knowledge of verification-transcendent truth-conditions.
- ▶ How might the realist attempt to refute this?
- ▶ One possibility is that we can exploit our grasp of sentences which are unproblematic to the anti-realist in order to explain our grasp of sentences which are problematic.
- ▶ Consider:

  'Julius Caesar died with an even number of hairs on his head', uttereed by me now, is true iff 'Julius Caesar died with an even number of hairs on his head', as uttered by a Roman in 81BC, was true then.

- ▶ The RHS of this biconditional is thought to be less problematic, and we can exploit this knowledge to gain knowledge of the LHS.

McDowell's response

- ▶ This sort of response is refuted by John McDowell:

    > *The realist's purported reply is on these lines: "You can see how someone can know what it is for rain to be falling. Well, a sentence like 'It was raining' is understood as saying that that very circumstance obtained at some past time." Again, this does not meet the worry, but simply restates the claim that gave rise to it. The problem was precisely an inability to see how the past obtaining of that circumstance ... can possibly enter into any meaning one could succeed in attaching to a sentence (Meaning, Knowledge and Realty, p. 301).*

- ▶ What *are* unproblematic for the anti-realist, are sentences about the present tense *uttered now* and *uttered by me*. But these do not figure on the RHS: those are uttered in the past and by another. These truth-conditions are as inaccessible as those on the LHS.

Wright's response

- ▶ Crispin Wright summarises the situation well:

  > *The important projection is not that from the right to left across the truth-value links; it is that involved in securing ingress, as it were, into the right-hand sides. The problem, after all, was to explain how it was that a trainee, familiar with what it is for it to be raining at the present time, could arrive at a conception of what it is for that very same sort of circumstance to have obtained, in a manner possibly transcending our present capacities of awareness, at a particular past time. In supposing that the biconditional in question can be of any use to him, the problem is tacitly assumed to have been solved. (Realism, Meaning & Truth, p. 91)*

Compositionality

▶ Wright also puts forward a different response, which exploits the *compositionality* of meaning:

> *The realist seems to have a very simple answer. Given that the understanding of statements in general is to be viewed as consisting in possession of a concept of their truth-conditions, acquiring a concept of an evidence-transcendent state of affairs is simply a matter of acquiring an understanding of a statement for which that state of affairs would constitute the truth-condition. And such an understanding is acquired, like the understanding of any previously unheard sentence in the language, by understanging the constituent words and the significance of their mode of combination. (Realism, Meaning & Truth, p. 16)*

Compositionality

- ▶ The strategy is, again, to exploit our grasp of sentences that are unproblematic for the antirealist.
- ▶ But, in this case, we note that meaning is compositional.
- ▶ If we know the semantically significant parts of many sentences, and we know the syntax of the problematic sentence, we can grasp the problematic sentence's truth-conditions.
- ▶ Mastery of language just does allow us to formulate and understand conceptions of states of affairs that we've never encountered.
- ▶ It's not obvious why the same is not true of states of affairs that we *cannot* encounter.
- ▶ At least, there is nothing in the concept-acquisition story to lead us to doubt this.

The manifestation argument

- ▶ Let's move on to Dummett's second important argument against realism: the manifestation argument.

> *the knowledge that constitutes a grasp of the meaning of a sentence has to be capable of being manifested in actual linguistic practice ... When the sentence is one which we have a method for effectively deciding, there is again no problem ... But, when the sentence is one which is not in this way effectively decidable, as is the case with the vast majority of sentences of any interesting mathematical theory, the situation is different. ... It is, in fact, plain that the knowledge which is being ascribed to one who is said to understand the sentence is knowledge which transcends the capacity to manifest that knowledge by the way in which the sentence is used. ('The philosophical basis of intuitionistic logic', pp 224–225)*

The manifestation argument

- ▶ Consider again some domain of discourse D:
    1. Suppose that some of the sentences of D have verification-transcendent truth-conditions. [assumption]
    2. We understand the sentences of D. [premise]
    3. To understand a sentence is to know its truth-conditions. [premise]
    4. We know the truth-conditions of the sentences of D. [from 2, 3]
    5. If we know the truth-conditions of the sentences of D, then this knowledge is manifest in our use of the sentences of D. [premise]
    6. Our knowledge of the truth-conditions of the sentences of D is manifest in our use of the sentences of D. [from 4, 5]
    7. Our knowledge of verification-transcendent truth-conditions is manifest in our use of the sentences of D. [from 1, 6]
    8. Knowledge of verification-transcendent truth-conditions cannot be manifest in our use of the sentences of D. [premise]
    9. Contradiction. [from 7, 8]
    10. The sentences of D do not have verification-transcendent truth-conditions. [1–9]

Meaning is use

- The controversial premises this time are:
  - 5 If we know the truth-conditions of the sentences of D, then this knowledge is manifest in our use of the sentences of D.
  - 8 Knowledge of verification-transcendent truth-conditions cannot be manifest in our use of the sentences of D.
- 5 is an expression of the Wittgensteinian thought that *meaning is use*. For Dummett, to understand some expression, to know its meaning and to know its truth-conditions is to know how to use the expression. There is nothing to knowing the meaning of an expression beyond knowing how to use it.
- This is of course controversial, but let's accept it for now. It will be a major item of discussion next week.

The manifestation principle

- The other controversial claim was that knowledge of verification-transcendent truth-conditions cannot be manifest in use.
- Dummett said in the quote that effectively decidable sentences provide an example of sentences knowledge of whose truth-conditions is manifest in use.
- A sentence is effectively decidable iff there is a procedure for deciding the truth-value of the sentence in a finite number of steps.
- This is a technical term in mathematics, but we can find analogous procedures in non-mathematical cases.

The manifestation principle

- Wright offers the example of taste-predicates like 'is bitter' and 'is sweet'. We have an effectively decidable (in a stretched sense) procedure for deciding the truth-value of 'This is bitter': the procedure is to taste the thing in question.
- To manifest knowledge of the truth-conditions of the sentence 'This is bitter' is to demonstrate that you have a procedure for deciding the truth-value of the sentence.
- But, in the case of 'Julius Caesar died with an even number of hairs on his head', we plausibly lack any such procedure.

Abilities

- What the realist needs to supply, in response to the manifestation argument, is:

    > *a practical ability which stands to understanding an evidence-transcendent truth condition as recognitional skills stand to decidable truth-conditions (Wright, Realism, Meaning & Truth, p. 23)*

- Really, all the manifestation argument has presented the realist with is a challenge to point to such an ability.

Strawson on abilities

- ▶ One suggestion comes from Peter Strawson:

    > It is enough for the truth-theorist that the grasp of
    > the sense of a sentence can be displayed in response
    > to recognisable conditions – of various sorts: there
    > are those which conclusively establish the truth or
    > falsity of the sentence; there are those which (given
    > our general theory of the world) constitute evidence,
    > more or less good, for or against the truth of the
    > sentence; there are even those which point to the
    > unavoidable absence of evidence either way
    > ('Scruton and Wright on Anti-Realism', p. 16)

- ▶ The thought seems to be that *understanding* is a practical
  ability of the sort required. If we understand the sentences in
  question – which, by the setup of the manifestation argument
  we do – then *that* is a manifestation of the appropriate kind.

An antirealist reply

- Bob Hale replies:

    it is important to remember that the truth-theorist to whose defence Strawson is (or ought to be) contributing is a realist, who holds that grasp of the sense of a sentence consists, in the case where a sentence is not effectively decidable, in knowledge of its possibly evidence-transcendent truth-condition. The responses Strawson mentions, however, are entirely consistent with the anti-realist view that, in such cases, understanding the sentence consists in knowing the conditions for its warranted assertion. ('Realism and its Oppositions', p. 281)

An antirealist reply

- But, crucially, such a response weakens the manifestation argument.
- The manifestation argument purported to show that realism is inconsistent.
- Hale is using it to defend the weaker claim that we have no reason to prefer realism to antirealism.
- The conclusion is that, insofar as considerations of manifestation are concerned, there is no reason to accept realism over antirealism.
- Perhaps, though, this is the best that the antirealist can hope for.

Conclusion

- We have seen that Dummett offers a different characterisation of *realism* than Putnam: to be a realist about domain D is to assert BIV over D and be committed to verification-transcendent truth-conditions.
- Putnam's and Dummett's are both *semantic* characterisations.
- We have seen that Putnam's also crucially involves *scepticism*. As we will see next week, Dummett also believes that sceptical considerations favour antirealism.
- Against his characterisation of realism, Dummett offers the acquisition and manifestation arguments.
- The first seems to be answered by Wright's appeal to compositionality.
- The second is not so easily answered. It remains, however, little more than a *challenge*.