DUMMETT'S ANTI-REALISM*

MICHAEL DUMMETT is a prolific, subtle, but complex writer in the philosophy of language and the philosophy of mathematics. It is well known that he argues against realism. In the philosophical circle centered on Oxford the influence of this argument is already great. Elsewhere its influence is growing. Crispin Wright, an able and vigorous defender of Dummett, claims that Dummett has "set up what promises to be one of the most fruitful philosophical research programmes of this century." Yet I suspect that many philosophers are skeptical about Dummett's argument: it smacks too much of positivism and Wittgensteinianism. I sympathize with the skeptics and disagree with Wright.

* Earlier versions of this paper were delivered at La Trobe University (July 1980), the 1980 Annual Conference of the Australasian Association of Philosophers in Sydney, the University of California, Los Angeles (January 1981), the University of Michigan (February 1982), and the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee (March 1982). I am indebted to many for comments. Those by the following have led to changes: Rogers Albritton, John Bigelow, Tyler Burge, Joshua Cohen, Hartry Field, Philippa Foot, Ken Gemes, Karen Green, Timothy McCarthy, Peter Snow, Kim Sterelny, and Nicholas White. I am particularly indebted to Gregory Currie for forcing me to see that a verificationist argument not based on "the propositional assumption" could be abstracted from Dummett's discussion. In effect the point had been made to me by Hilary Putnam in correspondence about my Designation (New York: Columbia, 1981), but I had failed to see its significance.


4 Wright was recently provoked to defend a Dummettian view partly by Peter Strawson's criticisms of that view, "Scruton and Wright on Anti-Realism etc.," Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society (New Series), lxxvii (1976/7): 15-22, and partly by "the grateful reception of [Strawson's] remarks by an audience who seemed, by and large, to think that anti-realism could be nothing other than the Positivism of the Thirties" ["Strawson on Anti-Realism," Synthese, xl, 2 (February 1979): 283-299, p. 283].

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Dummett's argument has a general form that is claimed to cover various "realisms," e.g., about common-sense physical entities, about scientific entities, about mathematical entities, and about the past. I shall be concerned only with the first of these. My aim is to defend realism about common-sense physical entities from Dummett's argument. I shall call the doctrine I defend simply Realism.

The twentieth century has seen a "linguistic turn" in philosophy. Dummett's argument against Realism exemplifies a strong commitment to this turn:

The whole point of my approach to [the various disputes concerning realism] has been to show that the theory of meaning underlies metaphysics. If I have made any worthwhile contribution to philosophy, I think it must lie in having raised this issue in these terms.5

For Dummett, "the goal of philosophy is the analysis of the structure of thought." He justifies the pre-eminence he assigns to the philosophy of language by its bearing on that analysis (TOE 458).6 Underlying my criticism of Dummett is a very different view of philosophy, what is sometimes called a "scientific" view. This does not make my criticism out of place; for Realism is as appropriate a place as any for these rival views of philosophy to join battle. I think Dummett would agree (see TOE 24).

There are three premises in Dummett's argument for anti-Realism:
A. The Realism dispute is the dispute about whether statements have realist (evidence-transcendent) or only verificationist truth conditions.

The statements in question here are, of course, statements containing words like 'stone', 'tree', and 'cat': "physical statements." Call


I shall often make multiple references to Dummett's work to support an attribution. In so doing I do not mean to suggest that these are the only places that would supply the support. Indeed any attempt to be comprehensive in such references is rapidly becoming hopeless. Aside from the 1800 odd pages in the works cited above, a follow-up volume to FPL of 621 pages, The Interpretation of Frege's Philosophy (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1981), appeared while the present paper was in the hands of this journal. And Dummett's William James Lectures, The Logical Basis of Metaphysics, are imminent. Is there any chance of a time out?

6 Dummett attributes this view of philosophy to Frege and sees it as definitive of "analytical philosophy" (TOE 442).
the doctrine that these statements have realist truth conditions \textit{Realist Truth}. For Dummett Realism is Realist Truth.

B. The dispute about truth conditions is the dispute about whether the competent speaker's understanding is realist (evidence-transcendent) or only verificationist. It follows from B that if the understanding is only verificationist then Realist Truth is false. With A this leads to anti-Realism.

C. The competent speaker's understanding is only verificationist.

(\text{A consequence of B and C is that verification is a more basic semantic notion than truth.})

There is general agreement on only one thing about Dummett's philosophy: it is difficult. So it may seem improbable that it could be made "as simple as A-B-C" (as John Bigelow nicely remarked to me). In fact B and C conceal complications: each has two distinct versions. With those complications taken into account I do indeed claim that the above three premises, together with their supporting arguments, constitute Dummett's argument against Realism.

Dummett focuses his discussion of Realism on verificationism and premise C. The discussion of A and B is slight. Yet these two premises are crucial to Dummett's case against Realism. My focus will be on them.

The paper is in four parts. Part I is on premise A and the relationship between Realism and Realist Truth. I argue first that A is false (I.1), next that Dummett subscribes to it (I.2), and finally that his argument for it is inadequate (I.3). Nothing simply follows about Realism from any view of Realist Truth. In Part II I distinguish two versions of B, hence two of C, which Dummett conflates. B1 and C1 are based on the assumption that linguistic competence involves propositional knowledge of truth conditions. B2 and C2 see competence as merely a practical ability (2.1). I argue that Dummett gives the "propositional assumption" about competence no adequate support (2.2) and that it is false (2.3). So B1 and C1 are false. Verificationist arguments to show that speakers do not know realist truth conditions are irrelevant to Realist Truth. Part III takes competence as a practical ability. Interest then centers on C2, the view that the sentences understood by the competent speaker have only verificationist truth conditions. I set out Dummett's argument for this (3.1) and reject it (3.2). In Part IV I argue that, in any case, verificationism has little bearing on Realism. Theories of language and understanding should not determine theories of the world (4.1).

I. REALISM AND REALIST TRUTH

I.1 \textit{Realism and Truth}

I seek first a statement of the doctrine of Realism that captures its traditional opposition to idealism and phenomenalism about
common-sense entities. There are two dimensions to this doctrine: first, a claim about what exists; second, a claim about the nature of that existence. To capture the first dimension we can say that it is common-sense physical entities that exist. Words that frequently occur in attempts to capture the second are ‘independent’, ‘external’, and ‘objective’. The entities must be independent of the mental; they must be external to the mind; they must exist objectively in that they exist whatever anyone’s opinions. We can capture both these dimensions well enough in the following doctrine:

Common-sense physical entities objectively exist independently of the mental.

A lot more than this could certainly be said to clarify Realism. I take it, however, that this characterization fairly obviously, even if a little vaguely, expresses the central intuitions of Realist doctrines about the external world, doctrines that have always seemed so plausible. I mean this statement of Realism to be a relatively uncontroversial preliminary statement such as might be made by any person informed by the history of philosophy prior to Dummett. It is, for example, in accord with the entry “Realism” in The Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

We are not entitled to insist that ‘realism’ be used in this way, rather than, say, for some semantic doctrine (as is now common), but we are entitled to wonder whether in another use it has anything to do with traditional metaphysical and epistemic disputes between realists and idealists/phenomenalists. In the next section we shall see that Dummett certainly does see Realism (characterized in the above way) as threatened by his arguments.

What has truth to do with this doctrine of Realism? On the face of it, nothing at all. Realism says nothing about truth nor even about the bearers of truth, sentences and beliefs (except perhaps, in its use of ‘objective’, the negative point that beliefs do not determine existence). Realism says nothing semantic at all.

Realism does not strictly entail any doctrine of truth nor, I would claim, is there any obviously true proposition which, together with Realism, entails a (nontrivial) doctrine of truth. There is no inconsistency in being a Realist and yet taking a thoroughly skeptical view of the need for an explanatory notion of truth. I take it that such a view is a central part of Quine’s semantic skepticism. It is very difficult for a physicalistically minded realist to undermine this skepticism, as Stephen Leeds has pointed out in an excellent article.9

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7 I say a lot more in Realism and Truth (in preparation).
So much for the entailment from Realism to a doctrine of truth. What about the reverse entailment? It is common to link a "correspondence" or "realist" notion of truth to Realism. Is a person committed to Realism if he adopts such a notion for physical statements?

We need to know more about this notion of truth than that it is "evidence-transcendent." Some may think that any notion that can be defined à la Tarski is realist. Such definitions, however, are philosophically neutral, as Hilary Putnam points out (2-4, 9/10): they miss the intuitive idea of correspondence to "a world out there" (1). The view that this correspondence is a "picturing" or "mirroring" relationship is nothing but a metaphor. What is needed, in my view, is to make truth dependent on genuine reference relations between words and objective reality. We might capture the doctrine that such a notion is appropriate for physical statements as follows:

Physical statements are true or false in virtue of: (i) their objective structure; (ii) the objective referential relations between their parts and reality; and (iii) the objective nature of that reality.

This is my characterization of the doctrine, Realist Truth. It does not make truth dependent on our having the evidence or on our having the capacity to get the evidence. Truth is altogether independent of evidence; it is "evidence-transcendent." This is not to say that truth is "unknowable," whatever that might mean, but simply that truth is one thing, our means of discovering it another.  

Does Realist Truth entail Realism? It does not. Realism (as I have defined it), requires the objective independent existence of common-sense physical entities. Realist Truth concerns physical statements and has no such requirement: it says nothing about the nature of the reality that makes those statements true or false, except that it is objective. An idealist who believed in the objective existence of a purely mental realm of sense data could subscribe to Realist Truth. He could believe that physical statements are true or false according as they do or do not correspond to the realm of sense data, whatever anyone's opinion on the matter: we have no "incorrigible knowledge" of sense data. (He might even believe in the objective existence of physical objects but think them nothing but sense data.) Analogously some nominalists in the philosophy of mathematics accept a doctrine of realist truth for mathematical statements by taking them to refer to linguistic items. And an operationist can accept realist truth for statements apparently about unobservables by taking them to be really about observables. In sum, mere talk of truth will not yield any particular ontology.

I conclude that no doctrine of truth is in any way constitutive of Realism and that premise A is false.

This conclusion does not mean, of course, that the issues of Realism and truth have no bearing on each other. Indeed I think it is impossible to find a plausible epistemology for Realism that can be combined with most, if not all, epistemic doctrines of truth. In general, we can expect a position on one of these issues to lead by inference to the best explanation to a position on the other. I will consider such inferences in IV.1. However, links of this sort are weak and should lead to great caution in running the two issues together.

I.2 Dummett's Commitment to A

Dummett is not at all cautious. He often straightforwardly identifies the two issues. Thus he says that the realism/anti-realism dispute

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 (TOE 146; see also XXX, 22/23, 155, 314, 358/359; CSP 3).

On this view the doctrine of Realist Truth is constitutive of Realism: it is the doctrine that physical statements "possess an objective truth-value, independently of our means of knowing it"; their meanings "are not directly tied to the kind of evidence for them we can have" (TOE 146; see also FPL 466). On the other hand, anti-Realism denies Realist Truth. This view is premise A.

Sometimes Dummett urges an apparently weaker view: the theory of meaning "underlies" the realism dispute (TOE xxx, xl) or supplies "the premisses" for various positions in the dispute (EI 382/383; TOE xxviii, 229). However, Dummett attaches no significance to the difference between these two views:

Realism rests upon—or better, consists in—an adherence to a truth-conditional semantics for our language (C 218).

Given that what I have characterized under the term 'Realism' is, prima facie, quite different from any semantic doctrine, it is appropriate to wonder whether my disagreement with Dummett over premise A is "merely verbal." Perhaps he is using the term differently and does not intend his discussion to have any bearing—at least not any direct bearing—on the traditional metaphysical dispute.

This is certainly not the case. He describes the realism that he identifies with (rests upon) a semantic doctrine in a traditional way:

... on a realistic conception of the physical universe, that universe constitutes an objective reality, independent of our knowledge of it (EI 382; see also TOE xxv, 228).
He sees the realism that is threatened by his discussion as a doctrine about what there really is, an ontological/metaphysical doctrine (EI 386; TOE 146/147, 230) opposed to idealism (FPL 671, 681; TOE 145) and phenomenalism (TOE 147). His problem is old, but the semantic approach is new (TOE xxxi). Indeed, as the passage quoted at the beginning of this paper shows, Dummett thinks that any worth-while contribution he has made to philosophy lies in this approach to such metaphysical problems. Finally, Dummett sometimes expresses the anti-realism that his argument inclines him toward in ontological terms, though the expression is brief and obscure. His anti-realism "appears a more radical repudiation of objective reality than idealism" (C 223); reality comes into existence as we probe, though we do not create it; it is not fully determinate (TOE xxviii/xxix, 18/19, 229/30; C 221/2).

So the difference of opinion over premise A is not merely verbal. Dummett sees his discussion as bearing directly on Realism. He does think that the particular form of his semantic version of realism may depart somewhat from traditional usage. He thinks that usage has confused two issues: (a) the issue of whether statements of one kind (e.g., physical) can be reduced to those of another (e.g., sense-datum); (b) the issue of whether statements of the one kind are determinately true or false (TOE xxxii, 157-159; CSP 1-5). His departure from tradition, he thinks, comes in his setting (a) aside and taking (b) as the basic issue.

Traditionally, as I have pointed out, there have been two dimensions to Realism: the dimension of existence and the dimension of independence from the mental. Now the second of these has usually been an issue of reduction: Can physical objects be reduced to ideas or sense data? This issue of ontological reduction is not the same as Dummett's (a), an issue of linguistic reduction. Overlook that, for Dummett sets (a) aside. My central disagreement concerns (b). What has the ontological issue of what exists to do with (b), the linguistic issue of determinate truth values? On the face of it, nothing at all.11

III.3 Dummett's Argument for A

Dummett completely misconceives the Realism issue. Why? The crux of the explanation is that, for Dummett, any metaphysical

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11 Dummett suggests that the importance of reduction to the Realism dispute has been its role as a step toward (b) (CSP 5). I suggest that its importance comes from the fact that anti-Realists have typically been conservative. Thus Berkeley did not deny the very existence of the common-sense physical world, but claimed that it could be reduced to something mental. This conservatism was good tactics: abandon it and anti-Realism would deserve refutation by the kicked stone and the incredulous stare.
The metaphysical view adds only a “metaphor” (TOE xxv/xxvi, 229). Such a picture or metaphor is nonetheless “natural” (TOE xxviii); it will “force itself” on us (TOE 229/30); it is “irresistible” (TOE xxviii, 230). So although Dummett will from time to time use the language of the traditional metaphysical dispute, when the chips are down he talks only of meaning.

Dummett’s belief in this metaphor thesis—metaphysics beyond meaning is mere metaphor—is central to the explanation of various puzzling aspects of his discussion which we have noted: first, of his holding premise A; second, of his attaching no significance to the difference between A and the apparently weaker view that the dispute over truth “underlies” the Realism dispute; third, of the brevity and obscurity of his account of the ontological consequences of his anti-Realist argument.

Why does Dummett believe the metaphor thesis? Why does he think the metaphysical dispute about Realism cannot stand on its own feet? The cause is clear, but it supplies no good reason.

Dummett’s view of metaphysics comes from his philosophy of mathematics (TOE xxiv). He thinks (i) that the critical disagreement between platonists and intuitionists is over the appropriate forms of reasoning in mathematics and that this is a disagreement over the meaning of mathematical statements, over the type of truth conditions those statements have (EI 380; TOE xvii/xxviii). Now this alone does not show, of course, that there is not another, even if less critical, disagreement over the metaphysical issue of the nature of mathematical objects; it does not show that there is not also a substantive disagreement over whether these objects are independently existing abstract objects or are creations of the human mind. Nevertheless, (ii) Dummett does want to claim that there is no such further substantive disagreement. He is impressed by Georg Kreisel’s remark, “the problem is not the existence of mathematical objects, but the objectivity of mathematical statements” (quoted, e.g., at TOE xxviii). He thinks that the disagreement over

objects adds only metaphors to the discussion, one metaphor seeing the mathematician as an astronomer, the other seeing him as an artist (EI 382/3; TOE xxv/xxvi, 229). Suppose this is so. It does not show, of course, that all metaphysical disagreements about the ontological status of objects have no substance beyond a disagreement over meaning. Perhaps the disagreement between Realists and idealists over physical objects is substantive even though that between platonists and intuitionists over mathematical objects is metaphorical. Yet, (iii) Dummett does want to extend his claim about mathematics to all fields (EI 381-383; TOE xxix). He arrives at the metaphor thesis.

Consider (ii). Why does the disagreement over mathematical objects add only metaphors to the disagreement over meaning? So far as I can see Dummett does little more than claim that it adds only this. For Dummett, it seems, the metaphysical disagreement makes no literal sense on the face of it, and the only way to interpret it is to relate it to the issue of meaning.

A certain argument does feature prominently in Dummett’s discussion of mathematical objects. Take the disagreement over these objects literally. Dummett argues that it does not bear on the disagreement over meaning. Assuming a platonist ontology does not lead to a platonist view of meaning and logic; assuming an intuitionist ontology does not lead to an intuitionist view of meaning and logic (FPL 507/8; EI 382-389; TOE 230-247).

Suppose Dummett were right about this lack of bearing of the ontological dispute on the semantic one. (I don’t think he is, for reasons indicated in I.1 and considered in IV.1. Dummett’s argument depends on his views about meaning, to be discussed in the next two parts of this paper.) The mere fact that a disagreement does not have any consequence for semantics does not show that it is not a real disagreement, does not show that it is only metaphorical. Most real disagreements are irrelevant to semantics.

Despite the lack of argument for it, Dummett’s claim about the metaphorical nature of the disagreement over mathematical objects seems to me to have some plausibility. Consider, however, how it would strike a hard-core platonist. For him the disagreement does not seem metaphorical; he thinks he has a clear conception of independently existing mathematical objects, a conception that he finds vividly different from a conception of mental constructs. He will think Dummett’s view mistaken. Furthermore, Dummett’s argument that the platonist’s ontology does not settle his semantics gives the platonist no reason to think otherwise.

We see the importance of this when we examine move (iii) in
Dummett's argument for the metaphor thesis: the extension of his view about mathematics to other fields. What reason is there for extending such sympathy as we may have for Dummett's position against the hard-core platonist to his position against the hard-core Realist about the physical world? So far as I can see Dummett offers no argument for this extension beyond claiming that the argument about the lack of bearing of ontology on semantics carries over from mathematics to other fields (EI 381; TOE xxix). Even if this were so, and the argument were good, it would no more show that the metaphysical dispute about physical objects is metaphorical than it earlier showed that the metaphysical dispute about mathematical objects was metaphorical.

Not only is the extension from mathematics unargued; it is highly implausible. The difference between the mathematical and physical worlds is striking. The platonist's conception of independently existing mathematical objects strikes many people as far-fetched. What are they like? Where do they exist? How could we come to know about them? The intuitionist's conception is no more transparent. How could numbers be mental constructions or free creations of the human mind? These conceptions are so odd, so hard to grasp, that a metaphorical interpretation of the dispute is tempting (though I don't say right). In contrast the Realist's conception of independently existing physical objects is the very core of common sense. There is certainly some vagueness about it, some room for further explanation, but it is not in the least bit metaphorical. Indeed if this talk cannot be taken literally, what talk can? It must be close to a bench mark of the literal. Even the idealist's conception, the traditional rival of Realism, has a certain transparency, for we are all familiar with minds and experiences. Only a philosopher could suppose that our talk about language, one of the newest and least developed areas of knowledge, is clearer on the face of it than our talk about ordinary physical things, one of the oldest and most developed areas of knowledge.

In this part of the paper I have argued that Dummett subscribes to premise A and that it is false. His reason for adopting A is the

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13 See the passage from Strawson's "Scruton and Wright on Anti-Realism etc." quoted by Dummett (TOE xxiv), which makes a similar point.

In a paper from TOE not so far cited, "Platonism" (pp. 202-214), Dummett himself emphasizes the differences between the mathematical and physical worlds, drawing attention particularly to the power of the physical world to affect us through observation. This seems to me very much along the right lines. It counts against the extension from mathematics to physics which I have attributed to Dummett, and hence against that attribution. However, without the extension and the metaphor thesis that is supported by it, there would be no argument at all in Dummett for premise A.
metaphor thesis. This rests on an unsupported though possibly plausible claim about the metaphorical nature of the ontological dispute in the philosophy of mathematics, and on an unsupported and highly implausible extension of that claim to the dispute about physical reality.

Experience suggests that some people will not accept that Dummett does subscribe to A, despite the evidence that he does. Suppose he does not. What then remains from this part? The claim that nothing simply follows about Realism from any thesis about the truth conditions of statements. So even if an argument is made against Realist Truth, a further argument is needed to establish anti-Realism. And this would still leave a possibility open to the Realist: he might reverse the order of argument. He might give a non-semantic argument for Realism and then use Realism to establish Realist Truth. These moves will be considered in IV.1.\(^{14}\)

II. THE PROPOSITIONAL ASSUMPTION ABOUT COMPETENCE

II.1. Versions of B and C

Dummett’s second premise is:

B. The dispute about truth conditions is the dispute about whether the competent speaker’s understanding is realist (evidence-transcendent) or only verificationist.

This is a corollary of Dummett’s thesis that “a theory of meaning is a theory of understanding” (FPL 92; WTM 99). With A it yields the view that if understanding is only verificationist, Realism is false.

On the face of it, B is odd. How could a semantic dispute about the truth conditions of sentences be a psychological dispute about the competent speaker’s understanding? How could disputes about such different sorts of property be the same?\(^{15}\) Yet Dummett does equate the two disputes (WTM II 68/69; TOE 153–155, 358/9). Why?

We must distinguish clearly, though Dummett does not, two versions of B, reflecting quite different assumptions about the nature of speaker competence. The first and most prominent version is based on the assumption that competence consists (at least partly) in knowledge of truth (falsity) conditions:\(^{16}\)

\(^{14}\) I have not considered the details of Dummett’s semantic version of Realism: he makes the principle of bivalence the touchstone (TOE xxx-xxxii, 149/50, 155; CSP 4). The details are not central to my argument.

\(^{15}\) I don’t mean to suggest that psychological properties could not enter into an explanation of semantic properties; I am too much of a Gricean for that; see my Designation op. cit., pp. 80–86. My point is only the trivial one that the semantic and psychological properties in question here are very different (ibid., pp. 92/3).

\(^{16}\) Parenthetical additions such as those in this sentence should be taken as read in future.
B1. The dispute about truth conditions is the dispute about whether the competent speaker knows realist (evidence-transcendent) or only verificationist truth conditions. The knowledge in question here is *propositional*: it is knowledge-*that* and not, for example, mere knowledge-*how*. So on this assumption an L-speaker’s understanding of a sentence of L consists in his knowing that the sentence is true-in-L in such and such circumstances. Now if he knows this, it must be so. Therefore a dispute over whether the truth conditions that a speaker knows are, as a matter of fact, realist or only verificationist would settle whether the truth conditions are realist or only verificationist. At least it would settle this if we assume that whatever truth conditions a sentence has, the speaker will know it to have. This assumption is probably implicit in the “propositional assumption” about competence. So we have established B1.

With the propositional assumption goes a version of C also:

Cl. The competent speaker knows only verificationist truth conditions.

The rival to this, which the believer in Realist Truth is thought to be committed to, is the view that a speaker knows realist (evidence-transcendent) truth conditions.

The propositional assumption about competence is a received wisdom of contemporary semantics. As Herbert Heidegger has recently pointed out, it seems to be regarded as uncontroversial, “perhaps unworthy of serious discussion.” Yet it is not “obviously true.” In my view it is false. Hence B1 and Cl are false. I think competence is simply a set of grounded skills or abilities. I shall indicate why in II.3.

The attribution of the propositional assumption, and hence of B1, to Dummett is well based but not certain. Philosophers who make the assumption usually hedge their bets. Dummett is no exception. It is clear that he thinks of competence as “a practical ability,” but this alone does not count against the attribution because he mostly writes as if the ability consisted in propositional knowledge of truth conditions. However, rather than straightforwardly identifying the ability with the knowledge, he seems to prefer to say that it can be “represented” as that knowledge (FLP 461/2; WTM 105–109, 121–125; WTM II 69–71; EI 373; TOE 128/9). Further, he thinks that part of this knowledge is only “implicit” or

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17 “Understanding and Truth Conditions” (Midwest Studies V: 401–410), p. 492. Heidegger goes on to argue that though knowledge of truth conditions does not imply competence, competence “nearly enough” implies the knowledge. I reject the latter argument, “Realism and Semantics,” sec. 2.
"tacit" (WTM II 70/1, 80; EI 373/4; TOE 129). This use of weasel words in stating the propositional assumption casts doubt on Dummett’s commitment to it. So I shall not rest my case against Dummett on attributing this assumption to him.

Abandoning the propositional assumption, and taking competence as simply a practical ability, we get another version both of B and of C:

B2. The dispute about truth conditions is the dispute about whether the sentences understood by the competent speaker have realist (evidence-transcendent) or only verificationist truth conditions.

C2. The sentences understood by the competent speaker have only verificationist truth conditions. These differ from B1 and C1 in making no mention of knowledge. B2 must be true, given the tautological assumption that the competent speaker understands the sentences of the language. Interest then focuses on C2. I shall argue in III.2 that it is false.

II.2 An Argument for the Propositional Assumption?

Meanwhile we must consider B1 and the propositional assumption on which it depends. That dependence requires that we take the assumption strictly and literally: it is no mere manner of speaking; the speaker really does know that the truth conditions are such and such.

At first sight it may seem that Dummett’s lengthy arguments for a verificationist and against a realist theory of understanding (e.g., in WTM and WTM II) constitute an argument for the propositional assumption. For the conclusion is always presented as: the speaker knows only verificationist truth conditions; i.e., as C1. However this way of putting the conclusion simply reflects Dummett’s conflation of the propositional and nonpropositional views of competence. There is nothing in Dummett’s argument for verifi-

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18 Dummett also makes the mysterious remark that a theory of meaning, which is for him a theory of understanding, is not “a psychological hypothesis” partly on the ground, it seems, that something with “internal mechanisms” unlike ours, e.g., a Martian or a robot, might have the required implicit knowledge (WTM II 70). This overlooks the distinction between psychological and physical mechanisms. A Martian or a robot that is physically different from us might be psychologically the same. The remark is mysterious because if understanding is anything it is (at least, partly) psychological.

19 I know of only one place in which Dummett does not conflate the view that understanding is propositional with the view that it is a practical ability. This is in his recent “Comments” (C) on Putnam’s “Reference and Understanding” (in Meaning and the Moral Sciences and in Margalit, ed., Meaning and Use). He there contemplates dropping the view that a theory of truth is a theory of understanding, and thus dropping the propositional assumption. In effect he rests his case on B2 and C2.
cationism, however sound, that makes it an argument for C1 rather than C2.

Despite the popularity of the propositional assumption, I can find nothing in the literature that could seriously be called an argument for it. Apparently it is thought to follow in some obvious way from the claim that speakers "know the meaning" of sentences in their language and from the slogan that "the meaning of a sentence is its truth conditions." Some passages in Dummett hint at this (e.g., WTM 105-109; WTM II 68/9; TOE 153-155). Consider also the following summary of Dummett's views by Colin McGinn:

If [a Tarskian theory of truth] is to serve as a theory of meaning for L, and if speakers are acknowledged to know what sentences of L mean, then there must be a sense in which the theory states, or serves to state, what speakers of L know in knowing what sentences of L mean.20

Remarks like this are common in the literature, and yet they represent not so much an argument as a play on words. Every attempt I have made to construct an argument around such remarks turns into a travesty. The following attempt, suggested by Dummett's discussion of Frege's distinction between sense and reference (TOE 117-126; particularly 124-126),21 is typical (X is a competent speaker):

(1) X understands S;

⁺ (2) X knows the meaning of S;

(3) The meaning of S = the truth conditions of S;

⁺ (4) X knows the truth conditions of S;

⁺ (5) X knows what the truth conditions of S are.

Let TC be the truth conditions of S.

⁺ (6) X knows that the truth conditions of S are TC.

No objection can be taken to (1). And the move to (2) is acceptable enough if (2) is taken as a mere everyday manner of speaking. However, if (2) is to be construed as requiring that there exist some entity—the meaning of S—which X knows in the sense that he is acquainted with it, then we should resist the move. We need a strong argument, not just ordinary talk, before we accept such a


21 In this discussion Dummett considers the view that sense is no more than reference. He makes it this to be the view that competence is no more than knowledge of reference. He goes on to argue that this knowledge consists in propositional knowledge of a certain sort. Roughly, I have constructed the argument I claim is suggested by this passage by replacing 'reference' by 'truth conditions'.
requirement on linguistic competence. (2) does have to be construed in this way if (4) is to follow from it and (3). There has to exist some entity which is both the meaning of $S$ and the truth conditions of $S$, so that if $X$ is acquainted with the one he is acquainted with the other. Thus the inference will not go through if we construe (2) as just another way of saying that $X$ knows what the meaning of $S$ is and construe (4) similarly [i.e., construe it as (5)]: knowing-what contexts are opaque. [And is (2) any more acceptable construed this way than the other way?]

Next consider (3), the other premise in the inference to (4). It is based on the slogan that the meaning of a sentence is its truth conditions. As slogans go, this is a good one in my view. Nevertheless it is only a slogan. One way of interpreting it would be as follows: it is because a sentence is true in such and such circumstances and only in those circumstances that it plays the special semantic role in our lives that it does play. There is no reason to suppose that a theory guided by this slogan will posit any entity, the meaning of $S$, or any entity, the truth conditions of $S$, as (3) requires. Furthermore, even if the theory were to posit such an entity and even if (2), construed as positing an entity, were acceptable, there would be no reason to suppose that the former “theoretical” entity would be the same as the latter “ordinary” entity. Certainly the mere fact that they were both called “the meaning of $S$” would not show that they were the same.

These are perhaps the worst aspects of the argument, but the rest of it is also bad. First, (5) does not follow from (4): a person can be acquainted with an entity without knowing what the entity is. [Of course, as I have noted, we could construe (4) as (5), but then it would not follow from (2) and (3).] Second, the inference from (5) to (6) is dubious, to say the least. The main problem with it is that knowing-what seems to be context-dependent (as Dummett himself notes but sets aside: TOE 126). Finally, (6) cannot be inferred directly from (4), ignoring (5): $X$ can be acquainted with an entity without knowing that it is anything in particular.

The argument seems like a travesty because it involves a naive view first of an ordinary use of the word ‘meaning’, second of a theoretical slogan, and third of the connection between the ordinary use and the slogan. So I don’t attribute the argument to Dummett. However I do claim that if this, or something like it, is not his implicit argument for the assumption that competence requires knowledge of truth conditions, then he has offered not even

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the glimmer of an argument for the assumption. If the assumption is false, so also are B1 and C1.

II.3 Arguments against the Propositional Assumption

In my view competence in a language does not consist in any semantic propositional knowledge at all. It is a set of grounded skills or abilities. It consists in being able to do things with a language, not in having thoughts about it. Understanding a language no more involves having propositional knowledge of a semantic sort about the language than being able to ride a bicycle involves having propositional knowledge about mechanics, or being able to digest food involves having propositional knowledge about digestion.23

Gilbert Harman has raised a very good objection to the propositional assumption.24 The knowledge it attributes to the speaker requires that he have some way of representing to himself the conditions that would make sentences true. But what does competence in the representing language consist in? Either the same problem has reappeared or we are faced with an equal one.25

I have raised a related objection.26 Briefly, a person could not have semantic propositional knowledge without having the semantic vocabulary of some language. That vocabulary is an isolable part of a language, just as is the biological or economic vocabulary. A person could be competent in the nonsemantic part of a language without being competent in its semantic part or in the semantic part of any other language. So competence in the nonsemantic part does not consist in semantic propositional knowledge. So competence in the language as a whole does not either.

This is not the place to attempt the large task of giving a theory of competence and its relation to semantic properties. In the course

23 Perhaps this overstates the case a little (see also Designation, p. 107). It is plausible to think that the explanation of reference for a term like ‘bachelor’ is in terms of the reference of ‘adult’, ‘unmarried’, ‘human’, and ‘male’ (ibid., pp. 202/3). If so it may be the case that understanding this term consists in knowing that it means adult unmarried human male. This could be the sort of term of which Dummett thinks the competent speaker has explicit propositional knowledge (EI 373). What I am most intent on denying is that competence requires primarily, and in general, semantic propositional knowledge, whether implicit or explicit.


25 This objection indicates an important fact about competence in L: this competence might cover many competences including, e.g., competence in understanding spoken L, competence in writing L and, most importantly, competence in thinking in L. In this paper I mostly follow the usual, rather misleading, practice of conflating competence in speaking L with competence in understanding (spoken?) L, and of writing as if these competences were the only ones that concerned us.

26 Designation, pp. 97-100.
of offering a semantic theory I have elsewhere made some preliminary remarks toward that task. These indicate how we might view competence as a set of grounded skills or abilities. I summarize.

I take the usual line of explaining meaning largely in terms of truth conditions. Truth conditions are to be explained ultimately in terms of reference under the guidance of Tarski, as interpreted and developed by Hartry Field. I look to causal theories for the ultimate explanation of reference. A causal theory explains the nature of reference in terms of a certain sort of causal chain, a chain with three kinds of link: groundings of word in object; reference borrowings when a word is passed on or reinforced in a person; and abilities with a word gained and sustained by groundings and reference borrowings.

Implicit in this semantics is a view of competence. Thus, to have the ability we all have with ‘cat’, to understand the English word ‘cat’, is to be appropriately linked to the network of causal chains for ‘cat’, a network involving other people’s abilities as well as groundings and reference borrowings. To have this ability a person must be able to combine ‘cat’ appropriately with other words to form sentences. He must be able to have thoughts which those sentences express. Furthermore, these thoughts must be grounded in cats. A Twin-Earthian, who in other respects has the same ability with ‘cat’ that we have, does not have our understanding of the term because his ability is grounded not in cats but in apparently similar but really quite different animals, Twin-Earth-cats. However, having our ability does not require knowing that ‘cat’ has any particular semantic or syntactic property, nor does it require being able to recognize cats.

The theory has little to say about the property of understanding a sentence, for example, the sentence ‘The cat is on the mat’. That understanding involves, of course, having abilities with contained words like ‘cat’. Beyond that it involves having the syntactic skill of combining words of those types into sentences of that structure. It does not involve knowing that the truth conditions of the sentence are such and such; it does not involve knowing that the sentence has any particular semantic properties.

On this view of linguistic competence, any propositional knowl-

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edge of a language that a person has is something over and above his competence, something gained from theorizing about the language.

In the previous section I argued that Dummett gives the propositional assumption no adequate support. In this section I have argued that the assumption is false and have suggested an alternative view of competence. If I am right then B1 and C1 are false.

It is worth highlighting the consequence of this for Dummett's verificationist argument against Realism. If the propositional assumption is false then a person committed to Realistic Truth should hold only to the view that the speaker understands sentences that have realist truth conditions. So it is quite beside the point to argue against him that speakers do not know realist truth conditions. Yet that is the central thrust of Dummett's verificationist argument against Davidson (WTM, WTM II). Davidson is open to the argument, of course, because he accepts the propositional assumption. Establishing merely that speakers do not know realist truth conditions casts no doubt on Realist Truth. Even less does it cast doubt on Realism.

III. COMPETENCE AS A PRACTICAL ABILITY

III.1. Dummett's Argument for Verificationism

Consider now the alternative versions of B and C. B2 is trivial. Interest settles on C2:

C2. The sentences understood by the competent speaker have only verificationist truth conditions.

To establish this Dummett needs to argue that a speaker could not understand a sentence that as a matter of fact had realist (evidence-transcendent) truth conditions.

In their original form Dummett's verificationist arguments are permeated by talk of the speaker's knowledge. The present task is to ignore all such talk and abstract an argument that treats competence as simply a practical ability. The task is hard, for the precise argument is elusive. What follows is my best attempt at abstraction (from FPL 467/8, WTM 115–123; WTM II 70–111; EI 4–6, 373–380; TOE xxxii-xl, 16–18, 23/4, 132/3, 153–155).

29 See also Wright, "Truth-Conditions and Criteria," and "Strawson on Anti-Realism."

30 The "Comments" (C) mentioned in fn 19, are an exception. However, the argument there is (i) very brief, (ii) unclear (to me, at least), and (iii) aimed specifically at Putnam's theory of truth, which does not make use of an explanatory notion of reference and hence is not what I have here called "Realist Truth" (see my "Critical Notice," op. cit., fn 28).

(1) The competent speaker’s understanding of a sentence $S$ is a practical ability;
(2) This practical ability is an ability to manifest a particular sort of behavior;
(3) The only sort of behavior that could manifest the speaker’s understanding of $S$ is that behavior which brings him into the position in which, if the condition obtains that conclusively justifies the assertion of $S$, he recognizes it as so doing;

$\therefore$ (4) The speaker’s understanding of $S$ is his ability to manifest behavior that brings him into the position in which, if the condition obtains which conclusively justifies the assertion of $S$, he recognizes it as so doing;

(5) The recognizable conditions of $S$’s conclusively justified assertion are its verificationist truth conditions.

Let us put (4) and (5) together and abbreviate by using the phrase ‘associates recognitionally’.

$\therefore$ (6) The speaker’s understanding of $S$ associates $S$ recognitionally with verificationist truth conditions.

This conclusion establishes that all understanding is verificationist but not that all truth is. The ‘only’ in C2 requires that $S$ not have any truth conditions other than verificationist ones: that it not have truth conditions transcending the recognizable conditions of conclusively justified assertion; that it not have realist truth conditions. Dummett has to rule out the possibility that $S$ has realist truth conditions as well as the verificationist truth conditions required for understanding.

(7) $S$ has no truth conditions other than those associated with it recognitionally by the speaker’s understanding;

$\therefore$ (8) $S$ has only verificationist truth conditions.

$S$ stands in here for any sentence understood by the competent speaker, and so C2 follows immediately.

The three key premises are (2), (3), and (7). The first two tie understanding to verificationist truth conditions. The third prevents $S$ from having any truth conditions that are not so tied.

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32 Dummett makes this claim only of sentences for which he thinks our knowledge of truth conditions is implicit. Where the knowledge is explicit the manifesting behavior is the statement of those conditions. He thinks that the basic manifesting behavior must be for sentences where we could not state truth conditions. See also fn 23.

33 Dummett sometimes leans toward preferring a semantics based on falsification to one based on verification (WTM II 127–137). This preference would require obvious adjustments to my version of Dummett’s argument. The difference between falsificationism and verificationism can be overlooked for our purposes.
III.2 *The Rejection of Dummett's Verificationism*34

Dummett's verificationist argument raises too many issues to be discussed in detail here. My strategy is first to make objections to the argument from the perspective of several contemporary theories; second, to reject the considerations Dummett offers in support of some of his premises. A thorough rebuttal of the argument would include a worked-out theory supporting Realist Truth. Such a theory is alluded to in IV.1.

Step 4 stands opposed to holism in psychology and epistemology. The stand on psychology comes mainly from premise 2. This requires, for understanding at least, a kind of behaviorism: to have an ability is to manifest a particular sort of behavior in the appropriate circumstances. In my view, recent work in the philosophy of mind decisively favors functionalism over this kind of behaviorism. The difference can be put like this. Behaviorism sees each mental state as a simple input-output function: to be in a mental state is simply to be apt to yield certain behavior as output given certain stimuli as input. According to functionalism a mental state is not a simple input-output function: it is related to input and output by causal relations to other mental states, usually complicated relations. Competence with a word or sentence can no more be tied to a particular manifestation than can pain, love, belief, or bravery.35

Dummett does argue against a holistic view of understanding, particularly in discussing Davidson and Quine (FPL 592-601; WTM 115-138; TOE 134-140, 301-309). However, so far as I can see, the argument depends on accepting the propositional assumption about competence. Furthermore, functionalism differs from the holism of Davidson or Quine.

Dummett's commitment to anti-holist epistemology comes with premise 3. It requires that there be a particular recognizable condition in which the belief expressed by S is conclusively justified. In my view the best recent work in epistemology and the philosophy of science shows this to be an impossible requirement. The relation between worldly conditions and a justified belief is much more complicated than is presupposed by the requirement. Many differ-

35 Dummett concludes a discussion of the realist view that a person who died without ever being put in danger either was brave or was not with the following astounding statement: "it is evident that only a philosophically quite naive person would adopt [the] realist view" (TOE 150). In my view, he was brave if he realized the appropriate functional state and not brave if he did not. His quiet life is beside the point.
ent worldly conditions can produce the same sensory stimulation. Given different past experiences and present beliefs, the same stimulation can produce different experiences. Given different other beliefs, the same experience can lead to different "observational" beliefs. Given different other beliefs, the same "observational" belief can lead to different "theoretical" beliefs. No belief is conclusively justified. Each belief is tied loosely to a range of conditions in which, relative to other beliefs, it is justified in varying degrees, Premise 3 requires an unreconstructed positivist epistemology.

There are two signs of Dummett's retreating from the epistemic extremism of (3). First, though Dummett usually talks of conclusive justification in presenting his verificationism (e.g., FPL 148, 467, 514, 586; WTM 123; WTM II 111, 132; EI 375), he now seems to think this is a mistake (TOE xxxviii). Second, he is sympathetic to the epistemic holism of Quine's "Two Dogmas" (FPL 591; WTM II 111; TOE 297/8). Despite this he does still want to hold, it seems, that some beliefs—the peripheral beliefs I have called "observational"—are conclusively justified in certain specifiable conditions. This is at odds with the theory-ladenness of observation I have described: the retreat has not gone far enough.

However, the most important point about this retreat is that it threatens the collapse of Dummett's position. How can (3), (4), and (5) be revised? The problem is that there are indefinitely many recognizable conditions that could give a belief some degree of support. And the one condition could give some degree of support to indefinitely many beliefs. Are we to modify (3) so that the speaker is to be able to recognize one of these conditions? Or a few? Or many? Or all? Whatever the answer, there seems to be no way to modify (5). We can pick out no condition from S's set of possible confirming conditions and make it the verificationist truth conditions of S in particular.

The retreat leads straight to a holistic verificationism, particularly when it is accompanied, as it should be, by a move to a functionalist theory of the mind. Holistic verificationism is not, of course, any comfort to the believer in Realist Truth (see IV.1 below). However, it is certainly not what Dummett wants. His "molecular" verificationism requires a behaviorist psychology and a positivist epistemology.

The objections so far are free of any semantic presuppositions. Not so the one that follows. The theory of understanding briefly described in II.3 is in direct conflict with the verificationism of (3) and (4). The basic disagreement is that between causal and description theories of reference. According to a description theory, a
competent speaker of a proper name or natural-kind term associates with the term a description sufficient to identify the referent. By allowing the description to include demonstrative elements, a description theory can cover a straightforward recognitional capacity. By allowing the description to refer to other people’s references the theory can cover a much more attenuated identificational capacity. All of this fits nicely with (3). Causal theories of reference were born out of the rejection of description theories. A speaker can use a term to refer though almost entirely ignorant about its referent. He may not be able to describe it, recognize it, or know how to track it down. Causal theories have a different view according to which reference is fixed by an appropriate causal link to reality. Judging which part of reality is so linked is a job for the experts, not the essence of what every speaker can do. The opinions of experts depend on their theories, and so opinions may differ and change over time even though reference remains constant.

This is not the place to air this disagreement in detail. In my opinion—some might say a biased one—the causal theory is leading heavily on points. Description theorists have not produced any effective response to the detailed criticisms (save to the red herring, “rigid designation”). Criticisms of causal theories by Dummett (FPL 135–151; TOE 140–144, 420–430) and others may appear more effective than they really are because of the undeveloped state of the theories at which they are aimed. I have attempted a development (in Designation).

It is worth emphasizing that this disagreement over understanding is not settled by whether or not “we would ordinarily say” that a person had “fully grasped the meaning” of a term in this and that circumstance. Even if Dummett were right in his claims about such matters (which I think he mostly isn’t) that would only show something about our folk theory. What the causal theorist is claiming is that his more austere concept of understanding is all that is needed to explain the behavior of speakers. If folk theory differs, so much the worse for folk theory (ibid., 8, 87-90, 99/100, 198).

If the causal theory of understanding is right then the verificationist theory is wrong. How is understanding manifested according to the causal theory? In a multitude of ways, many of them having nothing to do with verification.

My objections so far have been to (2) and (3). The causal theory

36 Rigid designation is a red herring because the best Kripkean arguments against description theories make no appeal to the modal intuitions on which that notion depends (Designation, pp. 13–23).
is also opposed to (7). It is a consequence of that theory that words have referents, and hence sentences have truth conditions, which are not associated with them recognitionally by the speaker’s understanding.

I have not yet considered Dummett’s arguments for (3) and (7). The slogan for these arguments is an appealing one which Dummett takes from Wittgenstein: “meaning is use.” It is important to see that a good deal of this slogan’s appeal comes from its suggesting an indubitable fact: it is what people do with words that makes them mean what they do; in particular, taking a central aspect of meaning, it is what people do that makes it the case that a certain object is the referent of a word. Similarly, it is what a person does that makes it the case that a certain object is his child. It no more follows from the first fact that a person must be able to recognize the object in question as the referent (let alone know that it is the referent) than it follows from the second fact that a person must be able to recognize the object in question as his child (know that it is his child). Our actions can relate us to objects and conditions without our having the capacity to recognize the objects and conditions as so related to us (know that they are so related).

The causal theorist can embrace the indubitable fact suggested by the slogan with as much enthusiasm as the verificationist. It alone gives no support to (3) or (7).

Wittgenstein’s slogan has to be construed in a Wittgensteinian way to give the required support: ‘use’ must be taken to mean “recognizable conditions of conclusively justified use.” That is how Dummett does construe it. The step from the indubitable fact to this construal is a giant step. What justifies it?

It is clear that Dummett thinks that the slogan, and hence (3) and (7), are justified by the nature of communication and by the way language is learned and taught.

A view of communication and a view of understanding are so closely related as to stand or fall together. For communicating successfully with \( S \) normally requires speaker and audience to understand \( S \) in the same way. Dummett’s view, in my terminology, is that they associate \( S \) recognitionally with the same verificationist truth conditions. All the objections to his view of understanding apply equally to this view. If communication is to be possible it must require speaker and audience to associate \( S \) with something other than its recognizable conditions of conclusively justified assertion.

Dummett’s brief remarks on language learning do not yield a view that is both plausible and supportive of (3) and (7). Often the
following argument seems to be suggested (FPL 467/8; EI 4–6, 375–380; TOE 16–18, 188–190). A person learns to understand S by being taught to associate it with the recognizable condition that in fact conclusively justifies its assertion. He can learn to associate no other semantic property with S. This supports (3). So S can have no other semantic property. This supports (7).

This argument is too crude to be Dummett’s actual argument, but it is quite unclear how Dummett would want it modified and how such modifications could remedy its failings.

First, the view of language learning is obviously at odds with the following relatively uncontroversial facts. (i) Most sentences we understand we never hear uttered. (ii) We mostly learn a language not from being taught it but from observing its use. (iii) Hardly any of these observations are of sentences in the presence of conditions that are close to being candidates for conclusively justifying the sentences. (iv) Many of the observations are of false or unjustified assertions which, nevertheless, manifest linguistic competence.

Next, all our earlier objections count against Dummett’s view of language learning. Indeed the perspective of those objections seems much more likely to provide an explanation of the uncontroversial facts of language learning than Dummett’s verificationism. So reflection on language learning seems likely to provide a good argument against verificationism. In particular, it suggests that verificationism is too passive. If we are to learn anything in the linguistic situations that we actually experience we must go way “beyond the evidence.” I suggest we learn a language in the course of very active theorizing about the world in general and about people in particular. And that what we primarily learn with sounds is to associate them with the thoughts that are conventionally related to them. But that’s another story (see Designation 75–86).

Finally, the support the crude argument is alleged to give to (7) is spurious. Even if it were the case that speakers recognitionally associate with S only the condition of its conclusively justified assertion, it would not follow that S had no semantic property other than association with that condition: the act of association can confer on S properties we don’t recognize. See above on parenthood.

In this section I have attempted to expose the elements of Dummett’s verificationism and indicate their opposition to well-sup-

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37 See also Prawitz, op. cit., pp. 3–6, 10.
38 Talk of “correct use” encourages a confusion here. An assertion can be correct in the sense of manifesting competence, but incorrect in the sense that it expresses a mistaken view of the world. Mistaken views are one thing, linguistic incompetence another.
ported contemporary theories in psychology, epistemology, and semantics. If any of those theories is right, Dummett’s view is in severe difficulty. I think they are all right. Further, there is little in Dummett to cast doubt on them. C2 is false. Realist Truth is unscathed.

IV. VERIFICATIONISM AND REALISM

IV.1 Verificationism and Realism

Dummett’s argument against Realism rests on three premises. I have argued that each of these (except B when construed as the trivial B2) is false. If I am right, Dummett’s argument is bad from beginning to end.

In this section I shall consider the general question of the relation between Realism and verificationism. This is important in order to guard against other verificationist attempts to undermine Realism (and against the inevitable charge that Dummett’s real argument is other than the argument I have attributed to him).

What sort of connection might there be between Realism and verificationism? My argument shows that the issues of Realism, truth, and understanding are distinct. So there will be no entailment relations between a position in one area and a position in the other. What we can expect are inferences to the best explanation holding between positions. With such inferences the case for Realism looks good.

I think that the most promising of such inferences starts from Realism, together with some observations about the properties and relations of the objects the Realist believes in, and argues for Realist Truth and a nonverificationist doctrine of understanding. The theory sketched in II.3 is, in effect, part of such an argument. The major problem for this inference to the best explanation is in showing that the Realist needs an explanatory notion of truth at all.39 However I think we can hope to show this need in order to explain learning and teaching.40 Showing this would complete the case against verificationism.

Now the striking thing about this inference, supposing that it can be made good, is that it starts from Realism. Those impressed with Dummett will object, claiming that we should start from the theory of understanding and see what we can infer from that about Realism. For example, suppose we can establish a verificationist

39 See I.1 above and Leeds, op. cit.
40 For some brief suggestions along these lines see Hartry Field, “Mental Representation,” Erkenntnis, xiii, 1 (July 1978): 9–61, pp. 47/8, and my Designation, pp. 68/9. In my “Critical Notice” of Putnam’s Meaning and the Moral Sciences, p. 403, I agreed with Putnam that we needed truth to explain the success of beliefs. I now think this a mistake: see Realism and Truth.
theory of understanding, then it may be claimed that we can infer from this an epistemic doctrine of truth. Then, given the earlier-mentioned impossibility of finding a plausible Realist epistemology to combine with that doctrine of truth (I.1), we can infer anti-Realism. I have three comments on this.

(a) The theory of understanding is the wrong place to start. The task is to put together the most plausible comprehensive theory of the phenomena that confront us. Theories of language and understanding are only two among many scientific theories that must be fitted into the comprehensive picture. Realism is an overarching empirical (scientific) theory or principle. It is initially plausible. It can be supported by arguments that make no appeal to theories of language or understanding: e.g., it is the only plausible explanation of the way things seem; it accords with our best science; criticisms of it fail; it is supported by naturalized epistemology; rival overarching principles such as those of idealism all fail. What firmer place could there be to stand than Realism, as we theorize in such undeveloped areas as those of language and understanding? In contrast, the poor state of theories in those areas, whether verificationist or not, makes them a bad place from which to start theorizing, particularly in determining overarching principles about the nature of reality. To think otherwise is to put the cart before the horse.

(b) Suppose, however, that a good argument could be produced for a verificationist theory, making us feel inclined to waive our objection in principle to using understanding as a starting place. Suppose further that from that theory we could infer anti-Realism in the way suggested. What should not be overlooked is that, however good that inference was, it alone would not undermine the earlier “promising” inference from Realism to Realist Truth. Our choice between these two inferences should be guided by our view of which starting assumption had the greater plausibility. I suggest that the arguments for Realism are very strong and that it would take an argument far stronger than any yet offered for a verificationist theory of understanding to make it the more plausible starting assumption.

(c) Finally, I doubt that inference to the best explanation from a verificationist theory of understanding would yield anti-Realism. If not, then it does not matter to the Realist how strong a case could be made for verificationism.

Consider the austere physicalism described by Leeds (op. cit.), drawing on Quine. This position is unequivocally committed to Realism, but skeptical about semantic notions like truth. So far as I
can see it could accommodate a verificationist theory of understanding (of a Quinean sort, for example). Given the independent plausibility of Realism, it seems likely that the best explanation of the world for a verificationist should be not that of anti-Realism but that of Leeds-Quine.

In these comments I have taken theories of language and understanding to be ordinary scientific theories. I give them no special role in settling our comprehensive world view. I think we should resist Dummettian attempts to use them as the basis for a "born-again first philosophy."

IV.2 Conclusion

In its more prominent version, Dummett's argument against Realism rests on the theory that linguistic competence consists in knowledge of truth conditions. In general it rests on a linguistic theory of metaphysics, a behaviorist theory of the mind, a positivist epistemology, and a description theory of reference. In my view all these theories are false. In part I have argued this here; in part I have relied on what has been done elsewhere.

Moving away from Dummett's actual argument to consider the general bearing of verificationism on Realism, I have found little for the Realist to worry about. Realism is too strong a doctrine to be overthrown by current speculations about understanding. Whatever one makes of those speculations, the best theory of the world is Realist. I think the best theory should include Realist Truth and a theory of understanding of the sort sketched here. However, even if I am wrong about this, the Realist should not despair: there is still the Leeds-Quine position. Better to throw all the semantic planks overboard than abandon the Realist boat.

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