

SEMANTIC REALISM, ACTUALLY

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Debates about realism are out of fashion.¹ This is not to say that realism itself is not in vogue. Indeed philosophers are prone to profess freely their realism concerning a wide range of subject matters: metaphysics, scientific posits, mathematics, God, modal locutions and mental states are just some of the topics about which one meets these confessions, often on the opening pages of a monograph on the subject. Rather what is lacking in the literature of recent years is much discussion of whether these popular realisms are justified. The problem is not just that anti-realisms of various sorts are relatively unpopular, but that realism itself is difficult to characterise. One of the foremost realists in contemporary metaphysics, Theodore Sider, says as much:

Knee-jerk realism is a vague picture rather than a precise thesis. According to the picture, the point of human inquiry – or a very large chunk of it anyway, a chunk that includes physics – is to *conform* itself to the world, rather than to *make* the world. The world is “out there”, and our job is to wrap our minds around it.[29, 18]

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¹An honourable example of unfashionable persistence is [2].

Pictures, including vague ones, have their place and philosophy could not proceed without them. But can more be said about the nature of realism? During recent decades a number of prominent thinkers – including Dummett, Wright, and Tennant – proposed a semantic characterisation of realism. This has faded from view, either because of sheer neglect or because of a sense that it has been undermined successfully in the literature. This is a mistake; a semantic understanding of what is at issue between the realist and the anti-realist gets to the heart of the matter in a fashion which is sufficiently precise to allow the debate to move forward without the parties talking past each other. This is a pre-requisite for resolution.

In what follows I will argue this point, laying out and defending a semantic characterisation of realism. I will draw mainly on Dummett's work, engaging with other authors as relevant, for the simple reason that I think his mature definitional work on realism was correct. If I am right about this a front opens up against unargued protestations of realism.

1. DUMMETT'S PROGRAMME

Dummett views his contribution to debates around realism as being to initiate a research programme [11].² Contrary to popular misconstruals of semantic approaches to realism, there is no suggestion in his work that *all* positions described as realist admit of a useful semantic characterisation, nor that attention to questions of meaning and truth alone will resolve every realist-antirealist debate. His more modest starting point is a belief that people described as realists and anti-realists respectively often disagree (or, perhaps more often, *ought* to disagree, if they follow through the implications

²There is a subtle shift in Dummett's characterisation of realism between [7], on the one hand, and [10] and [9], on the other. Here I will concentrate on the later work. For a thorough and insightful overview see [34].

of their own position) over the appropriate notion of truth, and therefore meaning,³ for some class of statements. The paradigm case is the dispute between intuitionists and platonists about mathematics. The Dummettian research programme consists in seeing how far this insight can be pushed, articulating a variety of realism disputes in semantic terms and seeking to make progress within these disputes by assessing which notion of truth is appropriate for the salient part of language.

Dummett hopes that understanding realism-antirealism debates in semantic terms will permit resolution, something which has been strikingly lacking in these debates up until this point. The arguments for and against realism about future and past times, for instance, or about mental states are well known and frequently rehearsed, but converts are rarely won for either side. Still less is there any sense that consensus might be reached in any of these debates on a basis more secure than that of philosophical fashion. Typically, the opposed positions are presented using metaphysical pictures – the anti-realist about mathematics believes that we construct mathematical reality, whereas the realist holds that we discover a mind-independent reality – which are at once readily grasped and yet difficult to flesh out in a manner that makes the underlying philosophical claims precise and the debate tractable, ‘The need to choose between these pictures seems very compelling; but the non-pictorial content of the picture is very unclear’ [9, 10]. The semantic characterisation of realism is intended to make this non-pictorial content clear.

³In the background here is a Fregean conviction that to understand the meaning of a statement is to know its truth-conditions [14].

The first stage towards Dummett's account of realism relative to many presentations of the doctrine is to understand it as concerned with a class of *statements* (or, semantically descending, a class of putative facts) rather than a collection of objects. It is tempting to think that what is at issue between the realist and the anti-realist about some subject matter is whether or not the furniture of reality includes objects from a disputed collection: numbers, or mental states, or material objects. No doubt this is sometimes the topic of dispute, but in some cases a focus on object existence claims would mischaracterise anti-realist positions as realist. The intuitionist does not deny that numbers exist, yet her account of mathematical reality is not a realist one. A more recent trend in metaphysics attempts to secure the ontological nature of a broad class of realist positions by either suggesting that they concern whether kind of entity *really* or *fundamentally* exists [3], or else (perhaps in association with talk of fundamentality) that they are best understood as concerning *grounding* [28]. These suggestions are only as good as the notions of 'real' existence, fundamentality and grounding. The first seems obscure, and I have argued elsewhere that no language user such as ourselves could acquire a bespoke, metaphysical, concept of existence which comes apart radically from the 'exists' of ordinary language [19]. Meanwhile grounding talk, in the sense of *grounding* for which the relata are objects (as distinguished from facts⁴) sheds light on realism debates only to the extent that non-metaphorical sense can be made of it. Otherwise we are back at the beginning of Dummett's investigations, presented with yet another picture of reality.

⁴The key text is [28]. On grounding in general see [4]. For scepticism about the research programme see [33] and [37].

The idea behind object-grounding is supposed to be that if x grounds y then y depends for its existence on x in a manner than is more intimate and ongoing than causal dependence. I am not grounded by my parents, I am – on one assay of the fundamental grounds – grounded by my mereological atoms. A frequently used illustration of grounding is the relation between a concrete particular and its singleton set. Socrates exists, and *because* Socrates exists his singleton exists. But this ‘because’ oughtn’t to be understood as causal; Socrates doesn’t cause his singleton to exist.⁵ Nor can it be confused with supervenience, since there is two way supervenience between Socrates and the singleton, having as they do identical modal profiles. Grounding is a *sui generis* relation, the converse of ontological dependence. So it is claimed.

The problem is that some people profess to ‘get’ grounding, whereas others think that it is *esoteric metaphysics*, neither raising nor addressing genuine questions [21]. Stalemate obtains. This is precisely the kind of situation which Dummett’s shift in understanding realism from a focus on objects to one on statements was intended to address. And there is reason to think that this shift might help us here. For how, other than by trading intuitions or constructing competing metaphysical schemes, might we assess whether a class of entities depends on some other class? Here is one suggestion. Consider two kinds of entities, the F s and the G s. The question before us is whether the G s ground the F s. Singular terms purporting to refer to F s occur in non-opaque contexts in true token sentences.⁶ This surely

⁵Although, might it not be said that Socrates’ parents cause the singleton to exist, or that the carpenter causes the singleton of a table to exist when she makes the table?

⁶My ‘surely’ in the following sentence might look hasty. In assuming that singular terms in true sentences carry ontological commitment, I’m adopting a neo-Fregean approach found in [16] and [18] (see also [32]). Plenty of authors disagree with this, arguing for more exacting criteria. In the present dialectical context, however, it is acceptable to set this

suffices to show that F s exist. But is the existence of F s derived from entities somehow more fundamental to the nature of reality, the G s? To make this question precise and tractable we transform it into a question about the truth-conditions of sentences about F s (recall that the truth of some of these was the basis for taking F s to exist). Now we ask: on the best semantic theory for statements about F s, is the truth of these statements explained referentially, such that an *explanatory*⁷ clause in a good semantic theory will yield that $\ulcorner \phi(a) \urcorner$ is true just in case a satisfies the condition associated with ϕ , where a is an F ? Is the truth of statements about F s explained by how things are with the F s? Suppose the answer is ‘no’. Suppose moreover that our best semantic theory instead supplies truth-conditions for statements about F s instead in terms of G s (we might imagine clauses for talk about directions in terms of parallel lines). Then there is a clear sense in which truths about the F s, including existential truths about the F s, depend on truths about the G s.

The scenario just described is one which our semantic theory is *reductionist* with respect to the F s, in Dummett’s sense, and this represents a relative retreat from realism about F s.⁸ It is, I think, the best exegesis available of the claim that the G s ground the F s and, crucially, it situates the retreat from realism in facts about the truth-conditions of sentences rather

position aside, since we’re trying to make sense of precisely the view that not all referents are equal, that some are more real than others (namely those that ground others). I’m arguing that the best chance we have of doing this is by *starting* with a generous ontological assay and then restricting it through attention to the role of entities in explaining truth.

⁷It’s vital that we insist on the clause being explanatory. Any semantic theory worth its salt will yield the platitude that ‘ Fa ’ is true iff Fa [39,].

⁸Dummett distinguishes reductionism from a yet weaker position, consisting in the provision of a *reductive thesis*. Such a thesis claims that ‘no statement of the given class [i.e. the class of statements for which truth-conditions are being supplied] can be true unless some suitable statement or statements of the reductive class are true’ [10, 242].

than about the existence of objects.⁹ Appeals to grounding do not furnish counter-examples to Dummett's proposal that realism debates ought to be understood as concerning statements as distinguished from objects.

The second stage in Dummett's approach is to define realism concerning some class of statements Γ :

Realism about Γ is the view that the sentences used to express the members of Γ are appropriately understood as being subject to a notion of truth such that truth is (a) explained referentially, through the contribution to truth-conditions of the referents of singular terms, and (b) bivalent (or, at least, all failures of bivalence are for shallow reasons).¹⁰

We met condition (a) in our discussion of grounding. The mature Dummett allows that there can be retreats from realism which do not involve the denial of bivalence [10, 240]. These take the forms of reductionism. So, for example, an idealist might specify the truth-conditions of sentences about material objects, without reference to material objects, in terms of mental states. If the idealist is entitled to claim bivalence for these truth conditions, as perhaps Berkley was through his appeal to God,¹¹ he is then entitled to what Dummett terms a *sophisticated realism*. Yet his reductionist sophistication makes him less of a realist than he could be. Many sophisticated realists are not, thinks Dummett, entitled to even this much realism. Consider a behaviourist who professes a sophisticated realism about

⁹Or unanalysed claims about the *fundamental* existence of objects.

¹⁰Remember that nothing here, and nothing in Dummett, commits us to the claim that every use of the English word 'realism' is correctly analysed thus. The more minimal claim is that there is a significant sense, deployed in key philosophical debates, which is appropriately precisified in terms of this definition.

¹¹My 'perhaps' here is really for the sake of argument. See my [20]. On the prospects for reviving Berkley see the essays in [15].

mental state talk, analysing this reductively using subjunctive conditionals concerning behaviour. Unless she has reason to believe that subjunctive conditionals yield bivalence for the analysed sentences (and this in turn is likely to require them validating principles such as conditional excluded middle), she is not entitled to realism about mental state talk, because she does not have support for (b).

It is bivalence, then, which is the primary criterion of realism for Dummett. Why is this? After all, historic debates concerning realism about various domains do not have anything obvious to do with bivalence. We've already met in passing one response Dummett can make here: many deniers or mitigators of realism (behaviourists being a case in point) accepted bivalence without entitlement. The question *should* have been raised, it's just that it wasn't. More generally, though, recall that Dummett thinks that metaphysical debates are customarily couched in pictorial terms and that philosophical work is often required in order to make clear what is at issue and so permit progress. It is unsurprising, then, that bivalence is frequently not seen as the issue by participants in realism debates. Pictures, as Wittgenstein cautioned, can conceal as well as illuminate.¹²

None of this explains why a class of sentences being appropriately thought to be governed by a bivalent notion of truth should be regarded as the primary non-pictorial content of realism. In order to get a sense of the plausibility of this claim it is instructive to review the extent to which many realism debates concern whether a certain domain of enquiry is independent of our cognitive activity (again, remember that semantic accounts of realism are

¹²'A picture held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably' [38, 115].

not intended as analyses of *every* doctrine about which the word ‘realism’ has been used). This is what separates the intuitionist from the platonist about mathematics, the phenomenalist from the materialist about material object talk, and the conceptualist from the realist over the theory of universals.¹³

The thought is now that once we have shifted our attention from ontology to semantics, what will be characteristic of an anti-realist position about some class of statements will be that the appropriate notion of truth for those statements is epistemically constrained. Now, the argument goes, once truth is regarded as epistemically constrained we are no longer assured of bivalence if there is any possibility that our epistemic resources might not be in principle capable of deciding every sentence in every context. Say that P is true just in case it can (ideally, in principle) be determined that P holds. Conversely, say that P is false just in case it can (ideally, in principle) be determined that $\neg P$ holds. If we are simply not capable of deciding P , then we have a failure of bivalence.

This is not to say that every failure of bivalence ought to be viewed as motivating a wholesale rejection of realism. Dummett discusses, what he terms, *shallow* failures of bivalence, such as those relating from vagueness or presupposition failure. The occurrence of these does not place an area of discourse beyond the Pale of realism (consider here the case of statements about material objects, surely infected with vagueness). However, we might well add, there is a case to be made (one to which Dummett is sympathetic)

¹³It is often suggested that the medieval debate about realism was not a realism debate in any sense which renders it susceptible to semantic treatment. It seems to me that this is because the dispute between realists and *nominalists* is the focus rather than that – more characteristic of most of the Middle Ages – between realists and *conceptualists*.

that they do signal a mitigation of realism since they are not compatible with the statements concerning a reality which is both independent of our conceptual machinery and fully determinate.¹⁴

Devitt and Miller have suggested that Dummett's account of realism consists of two theses [5] [24]:

- The **metaphor thesis**: all attempts to characterise realism in non-semantic terms are metaphorical.
- The **constitution thesis**: the non-metaphorical content of realism is a semantic claim concerning bivalence.

In the light of what has been said already, the reader might wonder about the adequacy of this characterisation of Dummett's position. In due course those worries will be affirmed. In the next two sections I will examine in turn attacks on Dummett via the metaphor thesis and the constitution thesis. None of these, I will argue, undermine fatally a semantic characterisation of a large class of realism debates.

2. METAPHOR, PICTURES, AND SUBJECT MATTER

Does Dummett sign up to the metaphor thesis? I have been able to find nothing in his work, nor that of other authors sympathetic to a semantic characterisation of realism, which advocates anything as strong as it. Dummett does however write in a Wittgensteinian key of realism debates being saturated with metaphysical *pictures*, particularly in [9]. How we ought to understand talk of philosophical pictures is a good question, but it cannot

¹⁴Think about the case of vagueness. Depending on how one theorises about this it will either involve our *concepts* not being well-delineated enough to deliver a classical truth-value for every statement, or else the *world* itself being vague. Only Williamson-style epistemism will deliver classical truth-values about *prima facie* vague discourse, and that by denying vagueness in either reality or the world [35]. This alone is full-blown realism about the disputed areas.

simply be assumed ahead of substantial argument that the entire content of a picture (if, indeed, pictures are the right kind of things to have *content*) is metaphorical. In places, however, Dummett does indeed talk of metaphors. He further thinks that customary formulations of realism debates often make it unclear what is at issue. So, in a passage quoted by Miller [25], he writes,

How [are] we to decide this dispute over the ontological status of mathematical objects[?] As I have remarked, we have here two metaphors: the platonist compares the mathematician with the astronomer, the geographer or the explorer, the intuitionist compares him with the sculptor or the imaginative writer; and neither comparison seems very apt. The disagreement evidently relates to the amount of freedom that the mathematician has. Put this way, however, both seem partly right and partly wrong: the mathematician has great freedom in devising the concepts he introduces and in delineating the structure he chooses to study, but he cannot prove just whatever he decides it would be attractive to prove. How are we to make the disagreement into a definite one, and how can we then resolve it?[6, xxv]

The final question is the key to understanding Dummett's shift towards attention to semantics. In order to make progress in realism debates it is needful to identify a clear and evaluable question at issue between the realist and the anti-realist. This certainly cannot be framed in metaphorical or otherwise figurative language. But the absence of figurative language in a statement of realism is not a sufficient condition for a productive presentation of the debate. For, as Tennant emphasises, anti-realists can (and do) sign up to many claims the realist takes to be definitive of her own position,

The realist, however, often thinks of himself as making philosophical mileage by advancing each thesis with a certain tone of voice: with a special ‘realist’ emphasis, say, on the notion of truth, or of reference. The trouble is, however, that these terms occur in the philosophical parlance of the anti-realist as well. And the theses in question really only have their realist bite if one can succeed in conferring on those terms their supposedly realist significance. [31, 28]

Dummett’s programme can be viewed as an attempt to show what it would be for attributions of truth and reference to have ‘realist significance’ and so to locate a subject matter for profitable dispute between the realist and the anti-realist. This in no way depends on Dummett signing up to the metaphor thesis, and so attacks on semantic approaches to realism on the basis of objections to the metaphor thesis are misplaced.¹⁵ All that is required to motivate Dummett’s approach is a recognition that statements of realism about various subject matters are often insufficiently precise to permit easy discussion, or else admit readings which are acceptable to the anti-realist. Once this has been recognised the turn to consideration of entitlement to a referential bivalent semantics promises a route out of dialectical stasis.

Many authors, however, view this as unnecessary since, they claim, it is perfectly possible to articulate realism in a fashion which is widely comprehensible and permits genuine disagreement without construing it in semantic terms. Consider Miller’s definition of *Generic Realism* [25]:

¹⁵For an example see [].

a, *b*, and *c* and so on exist, and the fact that they exist and have properties such as *F*-ness, *G*-ness, and *H*-ness is (apart from mundane empirical dependencies of the sort sometimes encountered in everyday life) independent of anyone's beliefs, linguistic practices, conceptual schemes, and so on.

The problem here, as Miller himself goes on to acknowledge, is that the salient notion of independence requires cashing out in order for Generic Realism to constitute a clear doctrine, instances of which may be asserted or denied. Within contemporary metaphysics, the most likely avenue for explicating independence is an appeal to grounding. Yet we have already seen that grounding itself is the subject of controversy and best clarified by semantic analysis. So if Generic Realism is clarified in terms of grounding, the understanding of realism it codifies is (at least) compatible with a semantic approach to realism debates.

Curiously, Miller prefers an alternative approach to clarifying realism, which he takes to show that the doctrine can be stated literally without appeal to semantic notions. He takes as an example realism about material objects. This, he thinks can be stated adequately as follows:

Tables, rocks, mountains, seas, and so on exist, and in general there is no guarantee that we will be able, even in principle, to recognise the fact that they exist and have properties such as mass, size, shape, colour, and so on. [25]

What is striking about this is that it is a characterisation of realism in terms of verification-transcendence. Given only a platitude about truth, that *P* only if *True*($\ulcorner P \urcorner$), Miller's realist is committed to verification-transcendent

truth, and by means of the argument outlined above, is in a position to follow Dummett in focusing on bivalence in her dispute with the anti-realist. Even without appeal to truth, a Dummettian position can be approached by arguing that Miller-style realism about material objects stands or falls with entitlement to use the law of excluded middle in reasoning about material objects, at least in areas where vagueness and other ‘shallow’ phenomena’ are not an issue. In what sense then is the availability of Miller’s characterisation supposed to present a problem to a semantic approach?

It does so only on a strict reading of the metaphor thesis (and remember that I do not think there is evidence that Dummett is committed to the metaphor thesis on *any* reading), for which there can be no successful attempt to characterise realism in non-metaphorical terms which does not make use of semantic vocabulary. But nothing this strong is needed to support the position that the matter of contention between the realist and anti-realist is best characterised in semantic terms. To see this, notice how difficult it is to formulate *anti*-realism about material objects in opposition to the above formulation of realism. The (wide scope) negation of the statement of realism won’t do: that is consistent with various forms of irrealism. How about, then, adding to the existence statement of the first clause,

... and it is guaranteed that we are in principle able to recognise the fact that they exist and have properties such as mass, size, shape, colour, and so on.

This is better, but is in danger of suggesting that what is at issue between the realist and anti-realist is confidence in human capacities – as though the anti-realist thinks that we are God-like in our capacity to know facts about material objects whereas the realist takes a more sober view. There is, of

course, a sense in which anti-realists *do* think that there are no facts which are in principle unknowable.¹⁶ The problem with taking this as definitional of anti-realism, however, is that it is compatible with a certain kind of realist picture: there is an independently existing, world out there, populated with material objects which would be there even had we not evolved, truths about which are settled quite apart from our epistemic activity and conceptual carving up of reality – it’s just that we are incredibly good at knowing things about this world. This is not, on any reasonable account, anti-realism.

We *can* identify a genuine matter for disagreement if we attend to the concept of truth [10, 230]. For whilst the anti-realist ought to be happy to deny that there are in principle unknowable truths, she ought not to infer from this that any proposition which is not knowable is false. For let P be undecidable, in the sense that the question of its truth transcends our epistemic abilities, then $\lceil \sim P \rceil$ must be undecidable too. But P is false only if $\lceil \sim P \rceil$ is true, but the anti-realist cannot allow that $\lceil \sim P \rceil$ is true, since it is undecidable. An epistemic constraint on the notion of truth yields a failure of bivalence, and *this* is a genuine subject matter for disagreement between the realist and the anti-realist.

This is the point of semantic approaches to realism, not that every non-semantic attempt at articulating realism need be metaphorical or otherwise figurative, nor that the realist can’t find a literal way of expressing her own position without recourse to semantics; rather the much more modest, but nonetheless potentially field-changing, position of proponents of these approaches is that describing anti/ realism in semantic terms affords disputants

¹⁶For a clear presentation of this epistemic optimism see [30] and [31, Ch. 8].

a clear and tractable subject matter. This position is in no way threatened by attacks on the metaphor thesis, nor even by the (obvious) fact that many realists do not present their position in semantic terms.

3. REALISM AS SEMANTICALLY CONSTITUTED

What, then, about the constitution thesis? This is that ‘the non-metaphorical content of realism is a semantic claim concerning bivalence’. It is undoubtedly the case that Dummett speaks of realism, understood in his favoured fashion as a claim about a class of sentences, as ‘a semantic thesis’ [10, 230] and as concerned with ‘the correct general model of meaning’ for sentences of the class, or alternatively ‘the appropriate notion of truth for statements made by means of such sentences.’ [8, 12] Indeed, he offers the following characterisation of realism:

We may thus characterise a realistic interpretation of a given class of statements as one which applies to them, in accordance with the structure they appear on the surface to have, the classical two-valued semantics, in particular treating the (apparent) singular terms occurring in them as denoting objects (elements of the relevant domain) and the statements themselves as being determinately true or false. [8, 326]

So, for Dummett, realism about some class Γ requires that every $\gamma \in \Gamma$ be determinately either true or false. Thus far, so much agreement with the constitution thesis. It ought to be emphasised at this stage that the constitution thesis, consistently with the early but not the later Dummett [7], fails to make mention of the referential role of *prima facie* singular terms. To this extent it falls short of capturing Dummett’s settled understanding of realism.¹⁷ However, bivalence is the principal territory on which Dummettian

¹⁷Although, see the discussion above of sophisticated realism.

realist-antirealist debates are played out, so let's bracket the question of referentialism and ask instead whether someone following Dummett need be committed to the position that the *content* of realism is a semantic claim. Here it pays to be clear about just what is understood by the *content of realism*.

Here is an unattractive way of fleshing out notion: what the realist *means* when she asserts her position is that bivalence holds for the contested class of statements. If the realist's articulation of her doctrine is any less trivial than 'I am a realist about *X*' then this is surely incredible. Somebody saying 'there are material objects which do not depend on mental objects' is not *really* saying that bivalence holds for statements about material objects. There two sentences do not, on any at all plausible account, mean the same thing. What Dummett himself says is that the semantic claim 'embod[ies] the intended application' of the metaphysical picture [8, 339]. The bare, commonplace, enunciation of realism in metaphysical language, which for Dummett is pictorial (a notion whose use here, and in its Wittgensteinian origins deserves more attention), suggests that things are such that bivalence holds. It is in assessing whether bivalence holds for the salient statements that we can decide for or against realism. The semantic presentation of realism renders a position the question of whose acceptability is otherwise intractable clear and contestable. It is in this sense, and not in any other, that it can be said to isolate the content of realism. The problem here, of course, is that 'content' has other senses, and opponents of semantic approaches can readily take their proponents to be committed to the constitution thesis as formulated in terms of one of these (and so, rightly in those terms, reject the semantic approach). It is important therefore to be clear that no stronger

form of the constitution thesis need be implicit in a semantic approach.

Still, on that approach realism does turn out to be a semantic position, in the sense that we can most clearly get at the realist's distinctive view by presenting it as a claim about the semantics of a class of statements, and that semantics is the terrain on which the debate between realist and anti-realist will be decided. Doesn't this turn questions which are about the *world* – to do with material objects, numbers, or scientific unobservables, for instance – into questions about *language*? And isn't it thereby an illicit reduction of the metaphysical to the linguistic? Here we run into what is arguably the central topic of metaphilosophy in the analytic tradition, the relationship between linguistic enquiry and the rest of the philosophy syllabus. Historically, of course, there was much hope that a proper understanding of the functioning of language would shed light on (or dissolve) the questions of philosophy. Semantic approaches to realism embody this hope (indeed Dummett has argued that the linguistic priority thesis – for which thought, and thereby the world, is to be investigated *via* language is definitive of the analytic tradition in philosophy [12]). More recently, however, there has been a tendency towards de-emphasising the foundational role of the philosophy of language; many theorists now view metaphysics as a science like any other, distinguished by the generality of its subject-matter, rather than by a focus on linguistic method, meanwhile there has been talk of an 'ontological turn' in metaphysics, reversing the 'linguistic turn' of Frege and Wittgenstein [36, Ch1][3].¹⁸

¹⁸The term originates with [27].

At the recent forefront of denying that there is anything peculiarly linguistic about philosophy's concerns stands Williamson. He concedes that this is

... quite compatible with a heavy emphasis on issues of semantic structure in philosophical discussion, for the validity or otherwise of philosophical reasoning is often highly sensitive to delicate aspects of the semantic structure of premises and conclusion: to make our reasoning instruments more reliable, we must investigate those instruments themselves, even when they are not the ultimate objects of our concern.
[36, 6]

Notice though that the concern here is with language as the medium of argument; analysis of the semantic structure of language is a precursor to *logic*, which is of great instrumental value to metaphysics and the other philosophical sciences. For the train of thought against which Williamson defines himself (which includes Dummett), the study of language enters directly into the method of those philosophical subdisciplines themselves. If we are to know anything about the structure of the world (whatever exactly that might turn out to mean), attention to the language by means of which we talk about that world will be central to our investigations. As we have seen, for Dummett (and other proponents of a semantic account of realism) a satisfactory solution to the question of realism about some area will consist in a semantic theory for statements in that area. Once a philosopher has provided this satisfactorily there is nothing more for her to do. In this sense, philosophy does not go beyond the philosophy of language.

It is this determining role for the philosophy of language to which Williamson objects. According to him, '[a]lthough philosophers have more reason than physicists to consider matters of language or thought, philosophy is in no deep sense a linguistic or conceptual enquiry, any more than physics is.' [36, 20] As a description of present-day philosophy by comparison with present-day physics, as distinct from a proposal that philosophy turn away from a linguistic or conceptual focus, this strikes me as deeply implausible. Rightly or otherwise, the metaphysics of a thinker like Thomasson, or the philosophy of mathematics of Hale and Wright concern themselves deeply with linguistic matters in a way that has no parallel in the special sciences [32] [17].¹⁹ In both cases, the work has given rise to flourishing research programmes.

Williamson's thought is presumably that, whether or not philosophers in fact focus especially on linguistic concerns, they ought not to. And one compelling reason for this is that the subject matter of philosophy is not peculiarly linguistic [36, Ch. 2]. If I ask whether universals exist, or how causation relates to laws of nature, or whether internalist justification is necessary for knowledge, I am not asking about language.²⁰ This is surely correct. Two points rescue the semantic account of realism from condemnation in its light. First, the fact that a philosopher makes use of linguistic enquiry in order to answer some question does not entail that the question itself concerns language. It is simply a mistake to think that, for example, the observation that someone assesses the semantic status of some class of noun-phrases in seeking to settle the question of realism about a class

¹⁹Except, uninterestingly, in linguistics.

²⁰This form of objection to linguistic approaches is reported by Hale (a proponent of such an approach) [16, 1.4]. He cites [5] and [13] as examples.

of statements in which those NPs occur shows her investigation to have a linguistic subject matter. Suppose the NPs in question purport to refer to numbers. Then our philosopher might perfectly well defend her claim to be interested in the reality *of numbers*, which are non-linguistic entities. It is not her subject matter, but the means by which she studies that subject matter, which is linguistic. Nor need this linguistic route to metaphysics represent an arbitrary methodological preference. If the philosopher holds, with Frege and others, that in seeking to assay reality we have to recognise that our access to that reality is mediated by thought, which is in turn linguistically structured, she is not in a position to bypass attention to language.

Williamson could concede this much but still think there is something untoward about our philosopher's methods. She presumably started off being interested in a standard selection of questions from the philosophy of arithmetic: do numbers exist? If so is their existence independent of our mathematical activity? What is the modal status of their existence? And so on. These questions are about numbers. She claims to have somehow made progress with respect to at least some of them. Yet her researches have issued in a claim concerning language about numbers. Hasn't she confused use and mention, and thereby changed the subject matter?

Here the second point enters the fray. Semantics is not *about language* to the exclusion of being about the extra-linguistic world. Rather, semantics as the theory of meaning concerns how linguistic items come to speak of the world and of the contribution they make to the truth-conditions of sentences. It is more correct then to say that semantics has as its subject

matter language *and* the world, each in relation to the other. This is the case most obviously in the case of the referentialist semantics which Dummett takes to be characteristic of full-blown realism. Here linguistic items are assigned non-linguistic items as their semantic values, which then deliver truth-conditions for sentences compositionally. Even non-referentialist approaches, however, yield results regarding word-world relations. It is just that these relations do not have the explanatory priority with respect to truth which characterises referentialist theories.²¹ An inferentialist, for example, will take the truth of a statement of the form $\lceil Fa \rceil$ to be determined by the conditions for appropriate assertion associated with the sentence.²² Here the inferentialist differs from the referentialist. She does not however differ from the referentialist in taking (at least) the singular term to be a referring expression,²³ and so is at one with him in taking the truth of the sentence to have ontological consequences. It is just that, whilst the referentialist understands the salient ontology as explanatory of the truth of the statement (' Fa ' is true because a exists and is F ; the recursive clauses in a Davidsonian theory model this), the inferentialist does not, and takes herself to be warranted in believing that any given object exists because of the truth of sentences containing singular terms referring to that object [1, 47]. Either way, however, semantics has something to say about ontology, and is not concerned solely with language to the exclusion of the extra-linguistic.

3.1. Bivalence and epistemically constrained truth. A semantic account of realism can, then, be defended against the usual criticisms in the literature. Nothing follows immediately about *which* semantic account of realism

²¹What Dummett calls referentialism is elsewhere termed *representationalism*. See, for instance [26].

²²For an introduction to inferentialism see [1].

²³The question of the reference of *predicates* is vexed. See [22] for a survey, and [16, Ch. 1] for a proposal congruent with the position of the inferentialist described here.

is the correct one. The proposal by Dummett and Tennant (amongst others) that the *sine qua none* of a realist approach to some subject matter is bivalence was challenged by McDowell [23]. McDowell agrees that realism requires an understanding of truth as not epistemically constrained; it is just that he thinks that the provision of a non-bivalent semantics for some region of discourse needn't imply that truth is not understood in this realist fashion for that region. Imagine a fragment of some language \mathcal{L}^* ; we devise a truth-theory for \mathcal{L}^* in which truth is assigned to atomics on a referentialist basis, with the usual appeal to reference and satisfaction, and no deference to epistemic considerations. Bivalence is secured for atomics. It looks as though a realist understanding of truth is at work. But now let the logic of the truth-theory be intuitionistic, and let the recursive clauses for moleculars be constructed accordingly. We now have a theory which ought to be anti-realist by Dummettian lights, but which intuitively is realist in character.

An adequate response to this challenge is provided by Weiss [34,]. The semantics McDowell describes is unmotivated in the following sense. It is not obvious why, given the referentialist approach to atomics (from which its alleged realist character arises), the truth-theory is governed by intuitionist logic. To see this, note that nothing said so far precludes adding classical negation to the logic as an additional connective, and adjusting the theory to guarantee bivalence. The only thing that could rule this out is a conviction that truth cannot transcend verifiability. But this confirms the Dummettian account. If there were a proponent of a semantics of the sort McDowell describes, and if she refused to shift in a classical direction as a matter of principle, she is appropriately described as an anti-realist.

It is often assumed that Dummett's understanding of realism gave rise to a now degenerated research project and that debates about realism in those terms are over. I have argued that this is a mistake; Dummett provides us with the means to characterise a wide range of realism debates. The resolution of a realism debate for any given class of statements in favour of the realist would consist in a defence of the availability of a verification transcendent notion of truth, typically through the provision of an appropriate meaning-theory. Williamson has suggested that the persistence of realism debates in Dummett's terms is undermined fatally by the provision of bivalent truth theories by empirical linguists, and that therefore those who continue engaging in these debates instance a flawed philosophical method insufficiently attentive to science[36,]. This consideration is likely to weigh heavy with naturalistic consciences, so it is worth emphasising that contemporary linguistics of the sort Williamson has in mind is far from being philosophically innocent. The assumption of realism is built into the truth-theories in question, as Dummett himself puts it '[p]resent-day truth-conditional meaning-theorists simply help themselves to what they have not earned'[11, 474]. Appeal to linguistic 'science' as decisive is, then, question-begging. The Dummettian question about entitlement to realist notions of truth remains both open and urgent.

This is the case because particular avenues of research of obvious general importance have opened up within metaphysics since the tapering off of the realism debate, and within these realism is either taken for granted or else construed as an ontological thesis. This is notably the case in the flourishing subdiscipline of social ontology. Here the question whether phenomena

are dependent on human life and relations, and if so in what sense, is often of real political significance. A Dummettian approach promises clarity and the prospect of purposeful debates in which the contending parties do not simply talk past each other.

Those debates would proceed on the basis of close attention to language, and in particular to the theory of meaning. The importance of this has been played down in much contemporary metaphysics, committed as it is to the quasi-scientific investigation of reality *in itself*, without linguistic mediation.²⁴ We live after the ontological turn. If what has been argued here is correct, it is time to turn again.

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²⁴Note that realism is presupposed in this very enterprise.

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