Dummett's Intuitionist Anti-Realism:
Is it really anti-realist?

Dummett proposes to replace the notion of truth with the notion of verification as the foundation for a theory of meaning, or he wants to revise the notion of truth and regard it as a product of the verification procedures we use to ascertain the truth of something. It seems to me that he has not fully realized the implications of what he is proposing. His alternative of founding meaning on justification conditions or verification has radically anti-realist consequences that he is unprepared to follow up. Dummett extrapolates the ideas of intuitionist mathematics to questions of truth and realism but does not venture, for whatever reasons, to fully elaborate the ontology that could be drawn out of this. This issues in a correction of realism in an intuitionist direction without presuming utterly to overturn it.

Justification raises the specter of relativism, Rorty, and the dreaded Feyerabend if it is taken to mean that truth is not independent of our discovering it. Dummett accepts that even less than truth-based realism. Justification would require, as McDowell believes, "a novel, anti-realist conception of the world," and "we must picture the world either as our own creation or, at least, as springing up in response to our investigations. So verificationist objections to a truth-conditions conception of sense would have far-reaching metaphysical implications."¹ One may be pardoned for initial uncertainty as to

whether Dummett meant for intuitionism to correct realism or to junk it; he appears to suggest both at different points in the convolutions of his arguments. But one begins to sense that his careful examination of conditionals and undecidables is intended only as a conceptual clarification of the bases of realism, to lay bare the general features of its conceptual structure and make minor repairs to the "massive core of human thinking which has no history." What Dummett does seem to be saying is that realist theories of truth are incorrect, not realism per se. The notion that things have an independent existence and truth apart from and completely to our procedures of coming to know them or ascertaining their truth is never effectually challenged despite his tendency to waffle between variant and seemingly contradictory theses. This issues in a recuperation or restoration of realism rather than an undermining of it. I think Rorty and others are right to see in this move something more non-foundational for the massive core of human thinking than does Dummett. You might say he is being Wittgensteinian and leaving things as they are; Dummett would say he is waiting for the adequate logical tools to be designed.

I share the view that verification, if consistently adhered to, equally requires a revision of our conception of the world, of our ontology far more in the direction of anti-realism than Dummett is willing to go. He manages to skirt round all the ontological questions that could be raised through the twists and turns of qualifications, conditionals, and gedankenexperimenten. If truth is not independent of our procedures of knowing, discovery, proof, and verification, then what exactly is the understanding of the world that should emerge from this. The status of the reality of the world begins to look very mysterious and perplexing indeed.

Dummett does not grapple with these questions of existential status, but retreats into the confident view that a complete and rich theory of meaning for natural languages is attainable with sufficient analytic rigor. He subjects the realist conception of truth to serious critique but without ever unequivocally and decisively abandoning a realist picture of the world. One begins to suspect that something is going on like we find in Davidson: the rug is pulled critically out from under realism, and you are amazed to find it still standing, complacently assumed, and, in Davidson's case, expressly reasserted. We can have our realist cake and eat it too.

This conservative maneuver of avoiding the radical implications opened up by the critique of realist notions and limiting the scope of skeptical attack to theoretical tidying-up
has a long pedigree in British philosophy starting with tory Hume's armchair skepticism, and most recently was impeccably practiced by Austin and the ordinary language Oxonians. Perhaps this is the sensible and modest way to do critique. Dummett allows that a truth-conditional theory of meaning may turn out after all to be right. So much of modern philosophy requires us to hang in suspense, indeterminacy, and aporia. After expending much effort in the demolition of the realist theory of truth at the center of the Davidsonian project, Dummett likewise professes neutrality about the metaphysical consequences of this demolition. He is content to rest in the ambiguities of his not-realist, not-anti-realist position; he leaves questions concerning the extent to which the logical defects of the realist theory of truth invalidate the concept of truth or realism itself in the zone of the undecided; and he retreats from a theory of truth to a theory of justification, but does not consider the problems with justification or its relations to pragmatism.

Like Strawson, Dummett wants to avoid apriori revisionist metaphysics and believes that clearing up the logical inadequacies and confusions of realist theory and confining it within its proper limits is all philosophically that can or should be done at present. However, even on that assessment all the problems and confusions of verification and non-realism remain to be sorted out. Interestingly, Dummett is quite ready to entertain the revision of logic to accommodate his critique of realism, but puts on hold any revisions of ontology it might suggest. Strawson in the preface to *Individuals* says "descriptive metaphysics is content to describe the actual structure of our thought about the world, revisionary metaphysics is concerned to produce a better structure." By this definition is Dummett's soft anti-realism descriptive or revisionary metaphysics? Is he clarifying the actual structure of our thought or improving it? He seems to intend his introduction of intuitionist logic and justification to be merely a modest piece of housekeeping based on sound description, but in other hands it can and does entail a more wholesale re-conceptualization of the structure of our thought about the world and leads to various forms of relativism, pragmatism, and hard anti-realism. He does admit in *The Logical Basis of Metaphysics* that construction is now in order after the long process of analytic destruction of logical defects and confusions. But this reconstruction must likewise proceed by the careful, prudent analysis of the structures of our thought. Moreover, we are in a better position to accomplish this task since the Fregeization of philosophy and the

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approach of tackling metaphysical problems through semantic ascent. Frege represented
the first major advance in establishing the logical the syntax of thought. 3

Dummett resorts to simile. Philosophy is a craft like plumbing, and should restrict
itself to repairing and unclogging the pipes of logic. A logician is like an optician sharpening
the focus of the lens with which we see things; he does not prescribe what we see. Philosophy is not yet in the position to answer the Great Questions of the layman, but it can provide the base from which we might set out to seek for the answers down the long winding road of syntactic analysis. In other words, Dummett wants to improve the actual structure of our understanding of realism, but without shaking things up in a revisionary way—revisionism, not revisioning.

For Dummett the large and long-standing metaphysical disputes are best treated by logical investigation of conflicting presuppositions of meaning. He derives this method from Frege, but it has a general family resemblance to ordinary language philosophy and the noxious Austin. 4 To speak more precisely, all of them are heirs to the idea that clarification of logic or usage will dissipate the fog of metaphysics. Dummett's approach to metaphysical questions through the analysis of meaning and the syntax of thought takes the "linguistic turn" of twentieth-century philosophy of language, and is liable to its pitfalls. Is it altogether certain that the limits of our language are the limits of our understanding or the limits of the world? Is the sorting out of meaning all we can expect to accomplish when this leaves most of reality in the realm of the undecidable, beyond true or false, or truth-transcendent? The world becomes curioser and curioser. In fact, most of the really interesting things in life appear to be beyond true and false, and by his own criteria, unclear—for instance, the bets, conditional commands, past and future events, prayers, card games, and tribal beliefs in magic Dummett ponders in various places in his writing. This would seem to call for more than a modest, conceptual anti-realism.

How little Dummettian anti-realism challenges rock-solid, commonsensical realism can be gauged from the book of one of his disciples, Neil Tennant, with the odd and revealing title, Anti-realism and Logic, Truth as Eternal. In this book we are given a veritable litany of realist tenets of belief and informed that they are perfectly compatible with Dummett's work on non-holism, undecidability, non-bivalence, truth, and assertion. Anti-realism seems to have become a façon de parler for in-house tinkerings with realism. One

apparently is now entitled to call oneself an anti-realist if one adheres to anti-bivalence and the claim that knowledge is public language.\textsuperscript{5}

In \textit{Realism, Meaning, & Truth} by another of his students, Crispin Wright, we learn that the clash of anti-realism with Timeless Truth and Truth-value links is only "prima facie."\textsuperscript{6} Dummett's anti-realism is in no way a rejection of eternal and self-existent truth, but only a reform and critique of the problems in our tensed conceptions of the reality of the past. Dummett is much concerned with the truth status of the past (the dancing chief in "Bringing about the Past") and the future (A city will never be built on this spot) as a part of his clarification of confusions about undecidable sentences: counterfactuals, subjunctive conditionals, quantifications over infinite or unsurveyable domains, and references to inaccessible regions of space-time. But his repudiation of a truth-conditional realism through a Critique of Pure Realism has had the result, incidentally (since this is not his declared aim), of retrenching realism by disburdening it of its logical incoherence. This is why many hard-core, trouble-shooting realists find aid and comfort in the putatively anti-realist Dummett.

Dummett himself, of course, professes to be an agnostic with regard to the realism/anti-realism dispute, but he feels pronounced discomfort with the extension of anti-realist arguments outside the circumscribed use he makes of them in logic—to the past, \textit{per exemplum}, where they are highly counter-intuitive from the naturalistic point of view as Husserl calls it. He discusses this in an interview with Joachim Schulte in the appendix to his \textit{Origins of Analytical Philosophy}, and it is well worth quoting in full.\textsuperscript{7}

\begin{quote}
Schulte: In various places you have stressed that, however strong the arguments for anti-realism may be, we are by nature disposed to remain realists. Is it perhaps necessary, in order to understand anti-realism correctly, for you to be tempted by realism?

Dummett: I think that is true. It was in my article 'Truth' that I came closest to absolutely endorsing an anti-realist view. In general, however, I have tried to avoid doing that. I have tried to remain agnostic between a realist and an anti-realist view, but have urged that the usual justifications of realism are inadequate, and that there is therefore a large problem to be resolved. As I said in my article, 'The Reality of the Past', it is in the temporal case that it becomes most repugnant to adopt an anti-realist view, this is, an anti-realist view of the past. There is a very strong drive to take a realist view, and I by no means want to commit myself to dismissing it as a mere error of the human mind. I do not see how the realist position can be defended against the anti-realist attack, but I should be very happy to be shown how it can. Some people take this whole question very, and I think them right to do so. Others react with indignation, because they feel so strongly convinced of the truth of realism that they dismiss the whole discussion as nonsense. They are quite mistaken, in my view, to brush the question aside.
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\textsuperscript{5}Preface to \textit{Anti-Realism and Logic}, Oxford, 1987.
\textsuperscript{7}ibid., pp. 191-192.
for it is a serious philosophical problem. I find it hard to believe that the arguments against realism are as strong as they give the appearance of being. I should be quite unhappy if I found that I really had to take an anti-realist view of the past; that would be for me a very uncomfortable position. It may be that there is some intermediate standpoint, but I cannot see just what it would be.

Dummett, in short, has a presumption in favor of realism; although he cannot logically defend it, his sympathies lie with the realists and he would be happy to see his own anti-realist arguments refuted! Anti-realism is philosophically strong, but metaphysically repugnant. This is to be a gentleman philosophically, but hardly a robust champion of anti-realism. Logically anti-realism may have the advantage but it is offensive to our deepest feelings about the world. But a critique of the inadequacies of a truth-conditional theory of meaning as a way of conceiving the world does not actually impugn realism. Thus his logical anti-realism, despite his disclaimers, leaves realism in the ascendant by default. However many philosophical problems there are with the logical bases of realism he wishes for its vindication, particularly in the temporal sphere.

In his paper, "Bringing about the Past," he worries logically about the possibility that the past might be alterable in the present. His example is a magical rite performed to affect the outcome of a tribal hunt. His conclusion is Dummettian—although our natural attitude is that the past cannot be changed retroactively, that causality does not go backwards, and we have a strong gut feeling against it, there are no conceptual difficulties in imagining such a backward world. But let us trust that the logic of temporal anti-realism will turn out to be wrong.⁸

Dummett made the dismaying discovery that the truth-conditional theory of realism was inconsistent with classical logic. Either bivalence and the law of excluded middle invalidates realism, or realism, if it is to be maintained, requires that classical logic be reformed. Dummett's answer was to scrape the truth-conditional theory of realism, if not realism tout court, and substitute intuitionist logic. Anti-realists may find the incoherence of realism a useful weapon for refuting it, logically at any rate. Dummett himself gives the impression of the reluctant anti-realist who has been coerced by the force of logic like an honest analyst to abandon realism.

The first to grasp the problems with realism and classical logic were the intuitionist and constructivist mathematicians of the school of Brouwer; for them mathematical statements are true only if we are able to prove them and there is no ground for assuming every

statement is either true or false. On the basis of this viewpoint they devised a stricter canon of inference in non-classical intuitionist logic. Anti-realism extends this logic to things in the world. If all things are neither determinably true or false but are, as often as not, unprovable and undecidable, then they cannot logically said to be real. One response to this is to say that if real things are beyond proof then so much the worse for our logic, classical or intuitionist. But Dummett is a staunch believer that there is nothing hors de logique. He rests all anti-realist argument on the refutation of bivalence. This is his model of how analytic philosophy should proceed with all the antique questions of metaphysical realism and idealism, the bottoms-up strategy. He firmly contends that this line of attack will eventually position us to settle the old, hoary controversies "without residue."

This strikes me as the brave new world or utopia of Analysis. Dummett insists that the work of comparing realist and anti-realist conceptions of objects, mathematical and scientific entities, time, and even ethical principles must be carried on with scrupulous technical impartiality. But why should we trust technicians of logic any more than other technocrats? An intuitionist model suggests there is an intermediate standpoint between competing realisms and anti-realisms. If the world does indeed arise as our creation or co-creation, or in response to our investigation in a way more like imagination than logic, we may find that it is better described by the paradoxes of Alice in Wonderland than by Sinn und Bedeutung. At some level imagination and logic coincide.