SEMANTIC CHALLENGES TO REALISM

Dummett and Putnam

Mark Quentin Gardiner

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Preface

The realism/anti-realism debate has become ubiquitous in philosophy: instrumentalism v. scientific realism in the philosophy of science; platonism v. constructivism in the philosophy of mathematics; legal positivism v. natural law in the philosophy of law; prescriptivism v. moral realism in ethics; behaviourism v. mental realism in the philosophy of mind; etc. I consider myself a realist in pretty much each of these disputes, and it would be nice if I could offer a knock-down argument for each. What is nice and what is possible, however, are two different things. All I can offer in this book is a strong set of considerations as to why realism should be retained in but one area: the semantic conception of truth. I am interested primarily in this one area because I believe, rightly or wrongly, that it is foundational. A vindication of a realist conception of truth would go a long way, I suspect, to vindicating realisms in the other subject matters. But even the hope of offering a general vindication of realism in semantic matters is too ambitious. I have had to limit myself to what I consider to be semantic realism's strongest and most influential challenges: the anti-realism of Michael Dummett and the internal realism of Hilary Putnam.

People even mildly familiar with this issue are aware that the literature is enormous. So why another contribution? Dummett's and Putnam's arguments are long, complicated, and often technical. They have been developed over long periods of time, often in response to criticism of earlier formulations and to parallel but independent research of others. Each premise gives rise to a host of other issues, questions, and concerns. To be fully appreciated, they must be understood from the perspective of the big picture rather than as a disjointed set of concerns. Journal articles are appropriate for discussion of isolated points, but not for an extended analysis and response to the overall

arguments. Book length treatments are often too ambitious, attempting to respond to all of the critiques of realism as well as to develop positive accounts of what an adequate realism would look like. The arguments of Dummett and Putnam are interesting, important, and influential enough, I feel, for an extended and single-minded treatment. This is what I have endeavoured to do.

As a result, this book is almost entirely negative. My sole concern is to demonstrate that Putnam and Dummett do not present arguments which should compel us to abandon a realist conception of truth. Readers looking for a clearly articulated defence of what an adequate realist position would look like will be disappointed. As an anonymous referee objected, "This isn't a criminal case where the defendant [realism] need never testify and all the onus is on the prosecution [anti-realism] to present an iron clad case." But, at least as far as this book is concerned, it *is* a criminal case of just the sort mentioned; the defendant's case requires a book of its own. I can only offer my apologies to those who wish for more.

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Introduction

The field and the frogs in it, the sun which shines on them, are there whether I look at them or not.[1]

Frege is making two distinct claims: (i) fields, frogs, and the sun *exist*, and (ii) their *being* is independent from their *being perceived.* Thus, Frege captures the two main senses in which a position may be described as "realist." A realism, in the first sense, is a position which makes positive existential claims – which asserts "There are X's." An anti-realism, in this sense, is a position which denies such claims. A realism, in the second sense, is a position which holds that ontology is completely independent of epistemology – that what there is has nothing to do with what we know. A corresponding anti-realism asserts the opposite – what there is is a function, in some sense, of what we know.[2] Only the latter debate concerns us.

Just as the 'epistemological turn' of the past invaded seemingly every outstanding philosophical question, this century has witnessed a similar 'linguistic turn.' The realism/anti-realism debate has not escaped these changes. It has been recast along semantic lines: Are the truth-values of sentences independent of our determination of them? The linguistic inheritor of realism answers "yes," the inheritor of anti-realism answers "no." For such a realist, truth is primarily a non-epistemic notion; for such an anti-realist, it is primarily an epistemic one.

In my opinion, the 'linguistic turn,' at least as far as the realism/anti-realism debate is concerned, has been a mistake I suggest, because at a fundamental level, it loses sight of what the original debate was about. I only suggest this, I will not argue for it. I will argue for something considerably less interesting,

but more manageable: *Cast in its strongest linguistic forms – those of Michael Dummett and Hilary Putnam – the debate is not won by the anti-realist.*

I am of the conviction that we begin our intellectual lives as realists, and only an awful lot of philosophy leads some of us to give it up later. This is the "common sense" view. I accept Rasmussen and Ravnkilde's observation that "a demonstration of the superiority of anti-realism over [realism] will necessitate the most radical imaginable revision of our wonted conception of reality"[3] and I understand Dummett's worry that "it is unclear whether the anti-realist's position can be made coherent."[4] We begin as realists, and this is enough to lend a certain *presumption* in its favour. While of course this presumption can count neither as an argument *for* realism nor *against* anti-realism, it has certain argumentative implications. More precisely, *the burden of proof lies with the anti-realist.* Moreover, the burden of proof is two-fold: not only must the anti-realist provide us with persuasive arguments advocating the adoption of an anti-realist attitude, they must also provide persuasive arguments for rejecting realism. It is not enough for an anti-realist to merely argue positively *for* their position – they must also argue negatively *against* realism.

There is, it seems to me, an interrelation between these two burdens. Rejecting realism is a precondition for accepting anti-realism: a persuasive argument for the latter will involve or presuppose a persuasive argument for the former. Moreover, an argument is a successful rejection of some established position as opposed to merely pointing out difficulties when a coherent alternative is proposed. The success of such an argument will in turn depend on the proposed alternative not falling prey to the very difficulties facing the established position. If the alternative is no better, then such an argument fails as a *rejection* of the established position. Therefore, the onus on the anti-realist is to demonstrate that there are irresolvable difficulties for realism from which anti-realism is immune.

As such my support of metaphysical realism can be seen largely in negative terms. I do not see my project as one of giving persuasive arguments as to why one ought to adopt metaphysical realism but rather as one of giving persuasive arguments as to why one ought not to give it up.[5] One ought not to give it up if the arguments advanced against it are not successful or if anti-realism, as the proposed alternative, is no better off. My counter-arguments to those advanced by the anti-realists are all, more or less, aimed at establishing one or the other of these conclusions.

Concerning Dummett's attack on realism, my strategy is to grant his pre-

mises – that an adequate theory of meaning must harmonize with an adequate theory of understanding (which requires that we be capable of *manifesting* our sentential understanding) – but deny his conclusions.[6] In particular, I will show that a semantic realist, which takes a recognition-transcendent (i.e., non-epistemic) notion of truth as its central concept, can meet all of Dummett's challenges.

Concerning Putnam's attack, my strategy is to reject his premises. I deny that we cannot make sense of an epistemically ideal theory failing to be true, that we cannot make sense of our being fundamentally mistaken about the nature of 'reality,' and that we cannot make sense of there being a unique and privileged description or theory of 'reality.'

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Dummett's Semantic Anti-Realism

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Dummett's Constraints – Meaning and Metaphysics

Dummett's overall goal is to demonstrate the inadequacies of a general realist metaphysics – the view that reality is, by and large, unconditioned by human conceptual scheming: that "our sense experiences are [not] constitutive of the world of macroscopic material objects," that "a mathematical proposition describes, truly or falsely, a reality that exists independently of us," that "a person's observable actions and behaviour are [merely] *evidence* of his inner states – his beliefs, desires, purposes, and feelings," that "science progressively uncovers what the world is like in itself," that "an ethical statement is as objectively true or false as one about the height of a mountain," and so on.[1] These disputes are both diverse and unified; they are diverse in that they range over seemingly distinct subjects while they are unified in that there is a common conception of reality running through them:

> These various metaphysical controversies have a wide range of subject matters but a marked resemblance in the forms of argument used by the opposing factions. No doubt, light will be cast upon each of these disputes by studying them comparatively; even so, we need a strategy for resolving them. Our decisions in favour of realism or against it in any one of these instances must certainly make a profound difference to our conception of reality.[2]

This is the first of Dummett's main contributions to the debate: we must understand the debate in terms of *local* disagreements over this or that subject matter. Nonetheless, there is a common thread running through all realist positions: statements in the disputed class are objectively true or false of a reality independently of our theorizing.