

## YES, VIRGINIA, THERE IS A REAL WORLD

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My topic this evening is realism, which I come not to bury but to praise. More specifically, I shall be casting a critical eye on some recent divagations from the straight and narrow path of realism, and I shall be considering whether these tempting by-ways do really exist. My contention shall be that there is, in truth, but the one path through the forest, and that what have been taken as alternative routes, are but insubstantial phantoms.

### I

But first I must explain what view this is that will be so earnestly commended. Many a position wears the name of “realism”, and with most of them I shall not be concerned.

As a first shot, let's say that Realism is here being understood as the view that whatever there is is what it is regardless of how we think of it. Even if there were no human thought, even if there were no human beings, whatever there is other than human thought (and what depends on that, causally or logically) would still be just what it actually is.

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\*Presidential Address delivered before the Seventy-Seventh Annual Western Division Meeting of the American Philosophical Association in Denver, Colorado, May 20, 1979.

As just stated the position is quite compatible with there being nothing except human thought and what depends on that. So watery a potion is unsuitable for this high occasion. Let's turn it into wine by a codicil to the effect that there is something independent of human thought.

Realism, so stated, is a bit hard to get hold of. It will prove useful to concentrate instead on a certain consequence around which many of the historic battles have raged. If there is a reality independent of our thought it obviously behooves us to find out as much about it as possible. This means that our thought and discourse will be (largely) directed to thinking (saying) it like it is. Believing (saying) what is true rather than what is false will be the primary goal of cognition; where we have said what is true iff what we were talking about is as we have said it to be.<sup>1</sup> I shall call this the realistic conception of truth, and where 'true' and its cognates are used in the sequel without further qualification this is the intended meaning. So the consequence in question is: The primary goal of human thought and discourse is to believe (say) what is true in the realistic sense. Although this is the full statement of the consequence, I shall be working with a somewhat less inflated form:

Our statements are issued with a (realistic)  
truth claim (a claim to truth in the realist  
sense).

I agree with Hilary Putnam<sup>2</sup> that a distinguishing feature of the realistic sense of 'true' is that it is logically possible for even the best attested statement to be false, where the attestation is in terms of "internal" criteria like coherence with the total system of beliefs, being self-evident, being a report of current experience, or being the best explanation of something or other. That is what is "realistic" about this concept of truth. In the final analysis what makes our statement true or false is the way things are (the things the statement is about); not the reasons, evidence, or justification we have for it.

Our thesis is marked by exemplary modesty. It only requires that we hold our statements subject to assessment in terms of truth

and falsity. A bolder thesis would be that we sometimes succeed in making statements that are true rather than false. I shall not be so rash this evening; it will not be necessary, since the issues I will be considering concern the viability of the realistic concept of truth and its attempted substitutes. Therefore it will be sufficient to consider whether we can, and whether we must, make statements with that kind of claim.

But even within this ambit we can distinguish more and less modest claims. Let me illustrate this point with respect to singular subject-predicate statements. Suppose I assert that this cup is empty. According to the above formulation of the realist thesis, that statement is true or false, depending on whether what the statement is about is as it is said to be. That formulation presupposes that I have succeeded at least to the extent of picking out a particular referent about which to make a statement. But even if I had failed in that referential task (there is nothing that I would be prepared to recognize as what I was saying to be empty), I would still be saying something intelligible that could be assessed for its success in "saying it like it is". There is, notoriously, controversy over whether, in that case, I said anything that could be evaluated as true or false. Be that as it may, a realistic thesis more modest than ours could be formulated as follows: a statement is put forward with the claim that what it is about, if there is anything it is about, is as it is said to be. I shall not carry modesty to those lengths in this paper; I shall be rash enough to assume that we often do succeed in making a statement about something. If anyone feels that this unfairly begs an important question against the anti-realist, he may substitute the more guarded formulation without disrupting the ensuing discussion.

Here are a few additional exegetical notes.

(1) I have presented the thesis in terms both of thought and discourse (beliefs and statements). To sharpen the focus I shall henceforward restrict the discussion to statements. I do this not because I consider statement more fundamental than belief; my bent is the opposite one. It is rather that statements are more "out in the open" and, hence, the structure is more readily identified and denominated.

(2) My formulation is limited to statements that can be said to be about something(s). This will take in a wider territory than is sometimes supposed, e.g., not only singular statements but also universal and existential generalizations if we can think of the latter as being “about” all the values of the variables. Other kinds of statements, e.g., subjunctive conditionals, will be harder to fit into this model. But enough statements clearly do fit to give our discussion a point.

(3) Whether my version of realism boils down to a “correspondence” theory of truth depends on how that term is construed. If correspondence theory of truth merely holds that the truth-value of a statement depends on how it is with what the statement is about, rather than on, e.g., its relations to other statements, then of course this is a (the) correspondence theory. But that term is often reserved for theories that take truth to consist in some structural isomorphism, or mirroring or picturing relation between statements (propositions) and facts. Nothing of that sort is implied by my thesis.

(4) In espousing realism in this fundamental sense I am not committed to acknowledging the independent reality of any particular kinds of entities -- material substances, numbers, classes, properties, facts, propositions, quanta, angels, or whatever. The thesis is quite neutral as to what is real; it merely holds that our attempts at knowledge are to be evaluated in terms of whether we succeed in picking out something(s) real and saying them to be as they are. Thus it is not tied to most of the views called “realism” -- “Platonic” realism about abstract objects, perceptual realism about common-sense physical objects, “scientific” realism about theoretical entities, and so on. These are all much more specific doctrines than the one being defended here.

Because of this my thesis is not necessarily opposed to many of the positions with which realism is commonly contrasted -- idealism (in most uses of that term), phenomenalism, verificationism, even conventionalism as applied to some restricted domain, such as scientific theories. If idealism is the view that reality is basically mental or spiritual in character, whether this be a Berkeleyan, Leibnizian, or Hegelian<sup>3</sup> version of that thesis, then idealism allows parti-

cular statements (about spirits, monads, the Absolute, or whatever) to be true or false in a realistic sense. If you're attributing to the Absolute characteristics it really has you are speaking truly; if not, not.

I note in this connection that in the March, 1979 issue of The Journal of Philosophy an excellent article by Colin McGinn, entitled "An A Priori Argument for Realism" begins with the sentence:

Except in the vulgar sense, one is not a realist tout court; one is a realist with respect to some or other type of subject matter -- or better, with respect to particular classes of statements.

As Thomas Reid said, in connection with Hume's contract between the vulgar and the philosophical opinions concerning the immediate objects of perception, "In this division, to my great humiliation, I find myself classed with the vulgar".

Realism, as I have defined it, may seem to the uninitiated to be so minimal as to be trivially true. But notoriously even so minimal a doctrine as this has been repeatedly denied; and the denials supported by elaborate and ingenious argumentation. Nineteenth-century idealism and pragmatism were in good part devoted to attacking realism and searching for an alternative. Thus F. H. Bradley tells us that truth is "that which satisfies the intellect"<sup>4</sup>, "an ideal expression of the Universe, at once coherent and comprehensive"<sup>5</sup> and Brand Blanshard that a proposition is true if it coheres with an all comprehensive and fully articulated whole.<sup>6</sup> From the pragmatist side, C. S. Peirce's well known view is that "the opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate, is what we mean by the truth",<sup>7</sup> while William James writes that "true ideas are those that we can assimilate, validate, corroborate, and verify".<sup>8</sup> John Dewey holds true ideas to be those that are instrumental to "an active reorganization of the given environment, a removal of

phers would make the truth of the statement that snow is white to consist in something other than snow's being white. More recently Hilary Putnam, who for years had been presenting a highly visible target to the anti-realist, has now been kind enough to turn the other cheek and present an equally prominent target to the realist. In his recent Presidential Address to the Eastern Division,<sup>10</sup> he argues that it is incoherent to suppose that a theory that satisfies all epistemic criteria might be false.

After having dominated the field for some time the idealist and pragmatist movements provoked a vigorous realist reaction in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in the redoubtable persons of Frege, Husserl, Moore, and Russell. It is not my intention this evening to do an instant replay of these epic battles, even though it might result in changing some earlier calls by the arbiters of philosophic fashion. Rather I shall look at some recent anti-realist tendencies. Though these are by no means unconnected with their distinguished precedents, they also present some apparently new features.

My procedure will be as follows. First, I shall look at some anti-realist arguments, or trends of thought, and find them lacking in merit. Second, I shall consider some attempts to work out a non-realist position, and conclude that no coherent alternative has been provided. At that point the defense will rest.

## II

### A

Under the first rubric I will begin by taking a very brief look at the Quinean theses of indeterminacy of translation and inscrutability of reference. I have no time to enter the formidable thickets of Quinean exegesis, and so I refrain from asking whether Quine is a realist, or whether Quine himself takes these theses to have an anti-realist thrust. But they have frequently been so taken, a tendency encouraged by Quine's use of the label "Ontological Relativism". Just what bearing do these celebrated doctrines have on the matter?

It seems to me somewhat less direct than ordinarily supposed. They don't exactly contradict realism; rather they strike at a presupposition of the question for which realism is one possible answer. They make, or seem to make, it impossible to raise the question. What indeterminacy of translation and inscrutability of reference most directly imply is that our thought and discourse is irremediably indeterminate in a thoroughgoing and shocking fashion. To wit, there is no particular determinate content to any assertion. Because of the indeterminacy of translation there are indefinitely many versions of what it is I am saying about an object in any assertion I make. And because of inscrutability of reference there are indefinitely many versions of what I would be saying it about if there were any particular thing I were saying. Viewed in a larger context, this is simply an extreme version of forms of indeterminacy that have long been recognized as affecting much of our speech. It is uncontroversial that people frequently use words in an ambiguous or confused manner, so that there is no precise answer to the question: "What is he saying?". And again it is uncontroversial that there are breakdowns in reference in which it is in principle indeterminate to what the speaker meant to be referring. Quine is simply holding, with what justice I shall not inquire, that such indeterminacies ineluctably affect all speech. Now it has long been recognized by realists that a statement will have a definite truth-value only to the extent that it has a definite content. If I am not saying anything definite it will be correspondingly indefinite whether what I say is true or false. If, e.g., the meaning of 'religion' does not involve precise necessary and sufficient conditions for something's being a religion then there is no definite answer to the question whether the Ethical Culture movement is a religion. Since the Quinean doctrines under consideration imply that all our utterances are in this condition, they imply that the issue of realism cannot arise anywhere in human discourse. Anti-realism goes down the drain along with realism. For the remainder of this section I shall concentrate on arguments that have been thought to support an anti-realist answer to the question to which realism is another answer.

## B

Next let's take a brief look at some echoes of Nineteenth

Century Idealism – the attack on the “Given”. This familiar theme of Hegelianism and Pragmatism has reappeared in partially novel garb in the work of Quine, Sellars, and others. As in the previous century, it is denied that there are any fixed immutable certainties, any statements totally immune to revision or rejection, any points at which an objective fact itself is directly given to us, so that all we need to is to note it. Since it is assumed, wrongly in my opinion, that unless a statement satisfies these descriptions it cannot be justified save by its support from other statements, these denials issue in some form of a coherence or contextualist epistemology. Insofar as there is novelty in the recent attack on fixed, isolated, intuitive certainties, it comes from the “linguistic turn”, e.g., the resting of epistemic status on conditions of assertability in a language community.

So far this is epistemology. What does it have to do with truth and reality? Not all the recent opponents of the given have followed their idealist and pragmatist forebears in rejecting a realist conception of truth. The story of where Sellars, e.g., stands on this matter is too complex to be gone into here. But at least one contemporary thinker has drawn anti-realist morals from this epistemology. In a forthcoming book, Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (Princeton University Press, 1979), Richard Rorty writes:

Shall we take . . . “S knows non-inferentially that p” . . . as a remark about the status of S’s reports among his peers, or shall we take it as a remark about the relation between nature and its mirror?<sup>11</sup> The first alternative leads to a pragmatic view of truth . . . (on) the second alternative . . . truth is something more than what Dewey called “warranted assertability”: more than what our peers will, ceteris paribus, let us get away with saying . . . To choose between these approaches is to choose between truth as “what it is good for us to believe” and truth as “contact with reality”.

Why should we suppose realism to depend on the existence of fixed intuitive certainties? Perhaps the argument goes like this. If we are to have any reason for supposing that any of our statements are realistically true, there must be some points at which we have direct access to the way things are in themselves. If some objective states of affairs are directly presented to consciousness, so that here we have the fact itself and not just our own "interpretation", then at those points at least, we can tell whether a statement is telling it like it is. But if we never enjoy any such intuitive apprehensions of objective reality, how could we ever tell whether any statement is or is not in accord with the facts. And if it is in principle impossible to determine this, it is idle, meaningless, or empty, to claim such an accord or to wonder whether it obtains.

This argument is in two stages. (1) Without fixed intuitive certainties we have no way of telling whether any statement is realistically true. (2) Hence it is unintelligible, or otherwise out of order, to employ this dimension of evaluation. Both steps seem to me unwarranted.

The first stage is, at best, question begging. The basic issue here is the status and evaluation of epistemic principles. The argument obviously assumes that a valid (reasonable, justified) set of epistemic principles might be such that a statement could satisfy sufficient conditions for acceptability without our having any reason to think it realistically true. But that is just what a realist would deny. From a realist point of view, epistemic justification is intimately connected with truth; not necessarily so closely connected that justification entails truth, but at least so closely connected that justification entails a considerable probability of truth. An epistemic principle that laid down sufficient principles of justification such that we could know that a statement satisfied them while having no reason to think it true, would ipso facto be unacceptable.

Another way of putting this last point. This first stage of the argument is one form of the old contention that "we can't get outside our thought and experience to compare it with reality". Therefore we had better renounce any ambition to make our thought

conform to "reality" and concentrate instead on tidying up its internal structure. But from a realist point of view this picture of being trapped inside our own thought, unable to get a glimpse of what it is like outside, is radically misleading – even if we do lack fixed intuitive certainties. For whenever we have knowledge, that is ipso facto a case of getting a glimpse of the reality "outside". However we get this knowledge, it wouldn't be knowledge unless the belief in question were conformed to its referent(s).<sup>12</sup> It is unfortunate picture-thinking to suppose that only some specially direct or intuitive knowledge constitutes finding out what something is really like.

The second stage of the argument is plain unvarnished verificationism. If there is no way of telling whether a given statement is realistically true, then we can attach no sense (or, if you prefer, no cognitive or factual meaning) to the supposition that it is true. It would be pleasant to suppose that verificationism is now in such ill repute that to tar the argument with this brush would be condemnation enow. But, alas, such is not the case. The verificationist criterion has conclusively and repeatedly been found wanting; but perhaps excessive attention to technical details has obscured the basic point of these criticisms. If the underlying causes of the disease are not clearly identified, relapses are to be expected. The basic point is simply this. Except for such statements as are directly testable, no statement can be empirically tested in isolation. We must conjoin it with other statements if we are to derive any directly testable consequences. And for any sentence, no matter how meaningless, we can find some set of sentences that together with the former will yield observation sentences not derivable from that set alone. Thus the capacity of a sentence to contribute to the generation of directly testable consequences completely fails to discriminate between the meaningful and the meaningless. We do, of course, make distinctions between those sentences that do, and those that do not, enter fruitfully into empirically testable systems, though it is either very difficult or impossible to formulate precise criteria for this. But this distinction also fails to coincide with the distinction between meaningful and meaningless, as is shown by the fact that one and the same statement, e.g., "Matter is composed of tiny indivisible particles", will enter into such combinations fruitfully at one period but not at another.<sup>13</sup>

## C

Rorty's argument can be generally characterized as moving from epistemology to ontology, from considerations concerning the epistemic status of statements to conclusions concerning their capacity to "reveal" reality. I now want to consider some further arguments of this general sort, which differ from the argument just discussed in being of a relativistic character. Although Rorty's argument depends on rejecting classical foundationalism, it does not question (1) the existence of a single set of epistemological principles that (2) yield a unique result in each individual instance. The two lines of thought I shall now consider each deny one of these assumptions.

The first assumption is rejected by, e.g., the language-game approach that stems from the later work of Wittgenstein and is found full-blown in Peter Winch and D. Z. Phillips. Here the idea is that there are radically different criteria of justification and rationality for different spheres of discourse – common sense-talk about the physical environment, talk about personal agents, moral discourse, religious discourse, scientific theorizing, reports of dreams, experiential reports, etc. Observation is crucial for physical-object talk, the authority of sacred books and holy persons for religious discourse, and the sincere asseveration of the subject for reports of experience. It is a piece of outrageous imperialism to suppose that any single requirement for justification applies across the board.

What bearing is this supposed to have on realism? Well, first there is a straight verificationist argument from the fact that different language games have different criteria of truth to the conclusion that they employ different concepts of truth. This argument pre-supposes a stronger form of verificationism. Rorty's argument only required us to suppose that being empirically testable is a necessary condition of meaningfulness for sentences. But here we need the additional assumption that the mode of verification constitutes the meaning. We need this stronger thesis if we are to infer a difference in the meaning of 'true' in different language-games from differences in the way of verifying truth-ascriptions in different language-games. This stronger verificationist thesis can

hardly be in a more favorable position than the weaker one, since it entails the latter.

The language-game approach also generates arguments of a more distinctive sort, though I cannot see that they fare any better.

(1) The irreducible plurality of language-games militates against the realist position in another way. The ontologies of different language-games do not all fit into any single scheme. There is no place in physical space for minds, sense-data, or God. Agency cannot be located in the interstices of the physiological causal network. Nor is there any overarching neutral position from which particular language-games can be criticized and their subject-matters integrated into a single framework. Therefore it seems quite unjustified to suppose that the success of a statement in some particular language-game depends on whether it conforms to the constitution of something called "reality".

This argument also depends on verificationism. It argues from our inability to see whether, or how, different sorts of entities fit into one scheme, to the unintelligibility of supposing that they do. But, more basically, the argument suffers from a naively simplistic conception of reality. Why suppose that reality, if there be such, must fall into some single pattern? Why shouldn't reality be as many-mansioned as you like? Why should there not be even more kinds of entities in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our language-games? And if there is some significant degree of unity to it all, why should we expect to be able to discern it? Even if we can't integrate agency and physical causation in a single "space", they may, for all that, be what they are apart from our attempts to conceptualize them. The argument suffers from a grievous lack of ontological imagination.

(2) We find in the writings of Sprachspielists, as well as in their historical relativist forebears, the insistence that our concepts of truth and reality are rooted in our forms of life, our practices – linguistic and non-linguistic. From this the inference is drawn that truth cannot consist in conformity to the way things are "outside" our thought and practice. But this is just the old

question-begging argument that we “can’t get outside our own thought and experience to compare it with reality”. Of course when we use the term ‘true’ or any other term we are using our language, if we know what we are talking about. Who else’s language might we be using? (I could have been speaking French or Bantu instead, but that is presumably not to the point.) But this has absolutely no implications for the content of what I am saying, nor for the ways in which it is properly evaluated. The fact that when I say anything I am using the language I am using, which is rooted in the social practices it is rooted in, is a miserable truism that has no bearing on our problem. It leaves completely open the question of whether, in saying what I say, I am claiming to refer to something that exists independent of our discourse, and whether this is an intelligible or reasonable claim to make.<sup>14</sup>

#### D

Although Sprachspielism is relativistic in the sense that it takes any particular cognitive success to be relative to some particular language-game, it is not so relativistic as to suppose that different language-games yield mutually incompatible results. On the contrary, it considers different language-games to be too different to be in competition for the same prize. We now turn to a more extreme relativism, which denies the second of the assumptions listed earlier – that our epistemological principles yield a unique result in each application.

This line of thought has taken many forms from the ancient Greek sophists to the present. Its most prominent recent incarnation is in the work of Feyerabend and Kuhn. Here is a highly oversimplified version. In the development of a science we have a succession of “theoretical (or conceptual) frameworks” or “paradigms”. Each of these paradigms is self-enclosed in something like the way Winch and Phillips think of a language-game as being self-enclosed. The constituent terms get their meanings by their place in the framework; observations are conceptualized and reported in these terms; and hypotheses are evaluated in terms of how well they explain data so construed, and in terms of how well they solve the problems generated by that paradigm. Hence we are unable to choose be-

tween rival theoretical frameworks in terms of one or another contestant.

The position is usually not held in so extreme a form, but I wanted to present it as such so as to see what bearing it would have on realism. The obvious argument is this. All our conclusions are relative to the assumptions and conceptual framework of a given paradigm, which has indefinitely many alternatives. Therefore we can never have reason to think that any of our conclusions are in conformity with reality itself. Hence the realist notion of truth is inapplicable to our discourse. Clearly this is but another re-run of the same old verificationist argument. And again the same comments are applicable.

These, I take it, are the epistemological arguments against realism that are most prominent on the current scene. I have not contested their epistemological premises, though I do not accept them in every case, but instead have concentrated on showing that even with these premises the arguments are far from cogent.

## E

Finally, there is the direct application of verificationism to the crucial implication of realism mentioned above, viz., that however well confirmed, justified, or rationally acceptable a statement may be, it is logically possible that it be false. The argument is very simple. We have, ex hypothesi, ruled out any possible reason for supposing the statement false. Therefore we cannot attach any meaning to the denial that it is true. This is clearly not just an argument against realism, but also an argument for the equation of 'true' and 'justified' (or 'could be justified'), or at least for the substitution of the latter for the former. In only slightly different garb it is the main argument of Peirce, James, and Dewey for their several pragmatic conceptions of truth. It is given a fancy logical dress in Hilary Putnam's recent Presidential address to the Eastern Division, but the verificationist underpinning is the same in all its versions. And about this enough has been said.

I conclude from this discussion that the recent opponents of realism have failed to shake our common-sense confidence in that doctrine. They have not done significantly better than Hegel, Bradley, James, and Dewey; in fact, their arguments turn out to be warmed over scraps from the idealist, pragmatist and positivist traditions, masked by a few ingenious sauces from *La Nouvelle Cuisine*.

### III

However, on this solemn occasion I am not content with simply shooting down the arguments of opponents. A more fitting aspiration would be to show that there is no coherent alternative to realism. Unfortunately, I can see no way to do this other than by examining all sufficiently promising alternatives. This is, of course, a very large task, and I shall only be able to make a start.

The most obvious move for the anti-realist is to define truth in terms of whatever he takes to be the appropriate standards for accepting a statement. A common thread in the arguments we have been considering is the verificationist objection to the idea that there is something involved in a statement's being true over and above the grounds we can have for regarding it as true. Such arguments naturally lead to an identification of a statement's being true with there being adequate grounds for taking it to be true (not, of course, with anyone's seeing that there are adequate grounds). Thus the truth of a statement, S, will be identified with S's cohering with the rest of ones beliefs, with S's leading, or having the capacity to lead, to fruitful consequences, with S's satisfying the standards of the particular language-game in which it is a move, with S's being one of the survivors at the ideal limit of scientific inquiry, or whatever.<sup>15</sup>

Instead of proposing a non-realist analysis of 'true' the anti-realist may instead (more candidly, in my view) propose that we abandon the concept of truth and talk instead of justification, confirmation, or verification. Thus Dewey once advocated dropping 'true' in favor of 'warrantably assertable'. It will be easier to focus

the discussion if I stick with the version in which some non-realist analysis of 'true' is given.

As is implicit in the list just given, these non-realist theories differ along various dimensions. They may be atomistic or holistic; i.e., they may attach justification conditions to individual statements or only to larger systems; in the latter case what it is for a particular statement to be true is to belong to a system that, as a whole, satisfies certain constraints. Again, they may seek to give a single account of justification for all statements, like the traditional coherence theories, or they may hold, like Sprachspielism, that different accounts are to be given for different realms of discourse. The question I want to explore is whether any verificationist account of truth can be intelligibly and coherently spelled out (while not completely losing touch with its subject-matter), without involving or presupposing the realist concept of truth.

## A

The first place a realist will look for a chink in the armor is the status of the higher-level epistemic judgments like  $S_1$  – 'S would be included in the ultimate scientific theory'.<sup>16</sup> Isn't Peirce implicitly thinking of this as true in the realist sense? In asserting S, isn't he thinking that it is really the case that if scientific inquiry were pushed to the limit S would still be there? If so, we have extruded (real) truth from first-level statements, only to have it reappear on a second-level.<sup>17</sup> But suppose that Peirce retorts that he is prepared to treat these second-level statements in the same way, i.e., hold their truth to consist in their membership in the ultimate scientific theory. In that case he will be faced with an infinite regress. For this will set up a still higher-level statement –  $S_2$ ' $S_1$  would be included in the ultimate scientific theory'. And if that in turn is treated in the same way . . . .

I am uncertain as to the force of this realist criticism. It is unclear to me whether this regress is any more vicious than a variety of other infinite regresses with which we are saddled anyway, e.g., the regress of truth levels, or the regress of levels of justification.

Hence I will pass on to difficulties that seem to me to be clearly fatal.

## B

The real crusher for the anti-realist is the question "How are we to interpret the statements to which you apply your concept of truth?" What is crushing about this question? Well, the point is that on a natural, intuitive way of understanding statement content [of specifying what is being asserted in a given statement], that content carries with it the applicability of the realist concept of truth. Let's continue to restrict the discussion to those statements that can plausibly be thought of as being "about something(s)". For such a statement, the natural way of specifying content, of making explicit what statement it is, is to specify the referent(s), and to make explicit what is being asserted of that referent(s). But if that is what makes the statement the statement it is, then there is no alternative to supposing that the statement is true iff the referent(s) is as it is being said to be. If what I did in a certain utterance was to refer to snow and say of it that it is white, what alternative is there to holding that my statement is true iff snow is white?<sup>18</sup> You can't in one and the same breath construe the statement as a commitment to X's being  $\phi$ , and also deny that the statement is true iff X is  $\phi$ . To understand statement content in this familiar way is to subject it to realistic truth conditions. It is incoherent to say "What I asserted was that snow is white (or what I did in my assertion was to refer to snow and say of it that it is white), but the truth of my assertion does not ride on whether snow is white". This is to take away with one hand what was offered with the other. The realistic concept of truth is indissolubly bound up with this familiar way of specifying statement content.<sup>19</sup> If I am correct in this, the anti-realist will have to provide some other way of specifying what is being asserted – other than "The speaker referred to snow and said of it that it is white".

If we ask whether anti-realists have recognized the necessity for an alternative reading, the picture appears to be a mixed one.

I believe that idealists in the Hegelian tradition have generally been alive to the issue. Consider Bradley's view of the nature of judgment, as involving a separation of the 'that' and the 'what', and a vain attempt to reunite them in the forms of predication, together with the view that the essential aim of thought is to produce a comprehensive, coherent totality that would be identical with reality. This is an attempt to give an account of what we are up to in statement making that is fundamentally different from the familiar account and that is in harmony with a coherence account of the nature of truth. Again, we can see Dewey's emphasis on the "instrumental" function of ideas and judgments as the germ of a different kind of alternative account. If what we are up to in statement making is not attempting to tell it like it is with particular referents or classes thereof, but rather providing effective guidance to our active commerce with the environment (allowing, as I would not, that the latter can be separated from the former), then it might be not incoherent to hold that the fundamental dimension of evaluation for statements is their effectiveness in this role. In many cases, however, one is left with the impression that the anti-realist takes individual statements in the same old way, but simply proposes to change the account of what it is for them to be true. If the above argument is correct, this is just what she cannot do.

A thoroughgoing anti anti-realist argument would involve a careful scrutiny of all the noteworthy attempts, actual and possible, to devise a mode of statement interpretation suitable for their purposes. However I fear that an examination of such darkly labyrinthine authors as Bradley and Dewey would be beyond the bounds of this lecture even if we were at the beginning rather than, as I hasten to assure you, in the latter half. Instead, I shall consider some moves that are more in accord with the dominant temper of Anglo-American philosophy of the last half-century, moves that might well tempt anti-realists, and in some cases actually have.

# 1.

(1) The anti-realist may try to turn the above argument back on her opponent in the following manner. "The argument depends on the claim that statemental content is tied to truth conditions.

Well and good; two can play at this game. If a realist construal of statements yields realist truth conditions, then non-realist truth conditions can be associated with a corresponding mode of assigning statement-content. If what it takes for a statement, *S*, to be true is that it belong to the ultimate scientific theory (call that 'T') then we will simply assign to *S* the content – *S* belongs to T."

However tempting this may sound in the abstract, as soon as it is stated explicitly it clearly displays its absurdity. How could it be that asserting that *S* is asserting that *S* has some property or other? How could *S* be some higher-level statement about *S*, i.e., be a higher level statement than itself? How can a statement be a statement about itself, rather than itself?

A contemporary anti-realist like Dummett, or (the most recent) Putnam, would not be moved by this. They would just take it as illustrating the futility of working with statements or propositions as our basic units, instead of sentences in a language. Of course we can't regard a statement as being a statement about itself, instead of being itself. But we do not find the same absurdity in the suggestion that each of our statements makes a claim about a certain sentence, even the very sentence used to make that statement. Let's follow recent fashion and take a theory to consist of a set of sentences. Then we may formulate the following Peircean view of statement interpretation. When I assertorically utter 'Lead melts at 327 degrees F.', what I am claiming is: "The sentence 'Lead melts at 327 degrees F.' will (would) be included in the final scientific theory, T".<sup>20</sup>

But though this escapes the absurdity of denying that a statement is identical with itself, it suffers the same unhappy fate that befalls other attempts to substitute sentences for beliefs, propositions, or statements. Here, as elsewhere, it turns out that even the closest possible statement about language will fail to have the same force as the original. In this case (passing over the parochiality involved in supposing that the ultimate scientific theory will consist of English sentences) the difficulty is that whether the sentence in question figures in T depends, inter alia, on what that sentence will mean by the time the final consummation is achieved. If the sentence means something different from what it means now, it

may not be included, even if T does include a statement to the effect that lead melts at 327 degrees F. Thus on this interpretation, when we assert "Lead melts at 327 degrees F.", we are, in part, making a claim about the future history of the English language. This radically distorts our intent. Sometimes we are talking about language, but most of the time we are not.

Of course, this view may be so construed that our statement has to do not with a mere phonological string (which might receive various semantic interpretations) but with the semantically interpreted sentence 'Lead melts at 327 degrees F.'? But that is to throw us back on the absurdities of treating a statement as being about itself. For a semantic interpretation of an assertoric sentence is precisely designed to determine a statement content; it specifies what is asserted when the sentence is used assertorically. Therefore this latest proposal amounts to assigning two different contents to the statement: -- the one determined by the presupposed semantic interpretation, and the one built on that -- to the effect that the sentence used to express the first content will be in T. Again we lapse into incoherence.

## 2

The moral of this story is that we can't identify a statement with a statement about itself, whether about its epistemic status or about the sentence used to make it. But the diagnosis suggests a simple remedy. Why not take S to be, not the statement that S satisfies certain epistemic conditions, but rather the statement of those conditions themselves? For each statement, S, we will choose conditions the satisfaction of which will guarantee that the statement has the desired epistemic status; but we will construe S not as the statement that S has that status, but rather as the affirmation of those conditions.

It would seem that this kind of first-level interpretation is not available for holistic theories that identify the truth of S with the way it fits into some system -- [the final scientific theory, the most coherent and comprehensive theory of truth, or the ongoing enterprise of coping with the environment.] Here a blanket state-

ment that makes reference to S (to the way S fits into some system) is all we have to work with. But an empirical verifiability theory of truth looks more promising. If we can specify conditions under which S would be verified, why not identify what is stated by S with the satisfaction of those conditions?

Interpretations like this were prominent in twentieth-century phenomenalism and in early logical positivism. ("The meaning of a statement is its method of verification.")<sup>21</sup> And recently Michael Dummett has suggested the possibility of replacing (realist) truth-conditions with "verification-conditions" in giving a semantic description of a language. Let's use as our example an oversimplified statement of C. I. Lewis' version of phenomenalism.<sup>22</sup> A singular attribution of a property to a physical object, like 'This container is made of glass', is to be construed as the assertion of an indefinitely large conjunction of subjunctive conditionals like the following:

1. If I were to seem to dash this container to the floor, I would seem to see the container shattering.
2. If I were to seem to thump this container with my finger, I would hear a certain kind of ringing sound.

Each of these "terminating judgments" is supposed to have the virtue of being decisively verified or falsified by "sensory presentations". And the verification of the whole set would be the verification of the original statement, since they are one and the same.<sup>23</sup>

It has been frequently argued and, I think, to good effect, that projects like Lewis' cannot be carried out, that no purely phenomenalistic statement is equivalent to any physical-object statement. I don't want to get into all of that. I merely want to ask whether, assuming that some such project can be carried through, it enables us to avoid the realistic concept of truth. And here I am not asking whether the concept of verification can be cut loose from dependence on the concept of truth, as it would have to be if it is to be used in an analysis of truth. Clearly the ordinary meaning of 'verify' is simply – show (ascertain) to be true. But this is not to the present point, since the second-level concept of verifi-

cation does not enter into the proposed interpretation of first-level statemens like This container is made of paper.

The crucial point, rather, is this. Let's say that S is taken to be the assertion that  $p, q, \dots$ , where these are verifying conditions, whether stated in Lewis' way or in some other. We have given a propositional content to S that differs from the familiar one. But in giving it this new content, are we not thereby committed to realistic truth conditions for that content as firmly as we were with the earlier one? Instead of simply attributing a property to the object referred to by 'this container', we are asserting a number of contingencies in sense experience. But with respect to each of those contingencies are we not asserting that it in fact obtains – that if I were to seem to dash this container to the floor it would seem to break? But if so, then again I am saying something that is true iff that consequence would result from that activity.<sup>24</sup> Once more I cannot both be making that claim and denying that whether the claim is true rides on whether things would come out that way under those conditions. In fact, this is the way in which the matter has been viewed by most phenomenologists and other verificationists. They were far from wanting to jettison the realistic concept of truth. They simply wanted to put restrictions on what sorts of statements are susceptible of (realistic) truth and falsity.

One might think that the failure to slough off realistic truth-conditions comes from making the verificationist interpretation match the original too closely. By insisting on conditions of conclusive verification, we have guaranteed that the translation says just the same as the original, and that is why we wind up with realistic truth-claims after all. This suggests that we should follow the pilgrimage of logical positivism from conclusive verification to "confirmation". Perhaps we should interpret our statements in terms of what would provide (more or less strong) confirmation, rather than in terms of what would conclusively verify. But this suggestion is even more incoherent than its predecessor. We cannot judge a certain condition to be merely providing some evidence for S, rather than conclusively verifying it, except against the background of a conception of what would render S true, or, if you like, of what would conclusively verify S. Why do we suppose

that determining that X is malleable is only some evidence for X's being gold, but does not conclusively establish that it is gold? Because we have enough of an idea of what it is for X to be gold to see that it is possible for something to be malleable and yet not be gold.

Contrariwise, if we simply take some "confirmation condition" as giving the content of a statement, then it follows that we can't be taking it to be merely non-conclusively confirming. If what I am asserting when I utter 'X is gold' is that X is malleable, then it cannot be denied that the malleability of X makes my assertion true. A set of conditions cannot be merely confirming evidence, and also constitute the content of what was said.

Nor will it be more efficacious to construe our interpretation as made up of conditions of "acceptance". Again, if we mean to contrast conditions of acceptance with conditions of truth or verification, we still have the latter in the background; we have neither eliminated them, nor dissolved their tie with statement content. If, on the other hand, we are serious in taking our so-called "conditions of acceptance" to specify statement content, we are thereby precluded from regarding them as conditions of acceptance rather than of truth.

Thus these verificationist moves are to no avail. When we identify statement-content in terms of test, verification, or confirmation conditions, we do not evade realistic truth conditions; rather we introduce certain restrictions on what can be asserted, thereby generating parallel restrictions on what it takes to make statements true. When all the smoke has cleared it is still a matter of what is talked about being as it is said to be.

The language-game, and other relativistic approaches such as Quine's "ontological relativism", may seem to provide a different way out. Instead of trying to get away from interpreting statements in terms of the familiar machinery of reference, predication, and truth, we simply hang onto all that, but regard it, in each instance, as relative to a certain language-game (paradigm, scheme of translation). In a normal utterance of 'snow is white', we are, indeed, referring to snow and predicating whiteness of it; and so

what we say is true iff snow is white. But this is all relative to the “commonsense physical world language-game”. We can only pick out a referent, identify a property predicated, and adjudge truth, by the standards internal to that language-game. There is no way in which we can raise the question, absolutely, as to what is referred to in that statement, or as to the conditions under which it is true. All such semantic notions exist only in relativized forms. When we try to drop the qualification the concept dissolves.

But what does it mean to say that ‘snow is white’ is true in the commonsense physical world language-game, rather than just true tout court?

(1) There is an innocuous interpretation according to which it is in L that S is true, because L is where S is. That is, S is constructed from the conceptual resources of L; that statement-content emerges from that conceptual practice. Clearly on this interpretation ‘S is true in L’ will be true for some L, for any true statement, S, assuming that every statement can be assigned to at least one language-game. But this is innocuous because the relativity does not affect the notion of truth. On this reading ‘S is true in L’ is just a conjunction of ‘S is in L’ and ‘S is true (tout court)’.

(2) It could mean -- we’re just pretending, rather than claiming that S is really true, as in ‘It is true that Bunter is Lord Peter’s butler in Dorothy Sayer’s mysteries.’ But presumably this is not what is intended, for this reading depends on a contrast with “really true” (absolutely). Not to mention the fact that a Sprachspielist would not be prepared to assimilate all language-games to fiction.

(3) What is left to us? Only the obvious, straightforward suggestion that ‘S is true in L’ means – ‘S passes the tests of L for being true’. But the second occurrence of ‘true’ has to be taken as employing the verboten absolute concept. For if we try to make that occurrence express a relativistic concept of truth in some L, that will require a similar explanation, and an infinite regress looms.

These all too brief considerations indicate that notions like ‘true’ and ‘refers’ stubbornly resist relativization. Once admitted,

they point inevitably to what there is, whatever webs of thought we weave.

## 4

The non-realist interpretations that emerge from currently fashionable modes of thought have all backfired. The moral I draw from this cautionary tale is that most non-realists have seriously underestimated the magnitude of their task. They have failed to appreciate how violent a break is required with our customary ways of viewing thought and discourse. They have failed to grasp the central point that if they are to abandon the realistic concept of truth, they must give up thinking of our thought and discourse in terms of reference, and the other semantic notions based on that – saying this or that of what is referred to, quantification over what is (or could be) referred to, and so on. They have supposed that they can continue to construe discourse in these terms, while attaching a relativistic rider to these semantic notions, or by substituting some specially tailored propositional content for the more familiar ones. But it just doesn't work. To repeat the main point once more, so long as we think of our utterances as being about something(s), there is no escape from the realistic truth formula. So long as it is correct to say that you are talking about this container, or dogs, or the quality of mercy, then there is no escape from the recognition that what you say is true iff what you are talking about is as you say it to be. If, on the other hand, it could be made out that it is a mistake to think of statemental utterances as being about anything, then clearly the realistic truth concept does not apply. If there is nothing I am talking about, my utterance can hardly be evaluated in terms of whether what it is about is as I say it to be. If the non-realist is to make her position stick, she will have to find some adequate non-referential account of statemental discourse.

How might this be done. Well, there is the Bradleian idea that the aim of thought is to develop a comprehensive, coherent system of concepts, where this aim is so conceived that if it were fully realized the system would be Reality as a whole. Here the relation with reality is not secured by way of reference to parti-

cular objects in each judgment (belief, statement), but rather by way of the fact that Reality is what would constitute the complete fulfillment of the aim of thought. Whether this is a radically non-referential conception depends on whether we can understand the incomplete stages of this quest without thinking of ourselves as referring either to the concepts themselves, or to their extensions or instances. A still more radical alternative would be an explicitly non-intentionalistic account of speech as complexly conditioned behavior, as in B. F. Skinner's book, Verbal Behavior. Whether this is really a radically non-referential account will depend, inter alia, on whether the account itself can be an account of speech without itself being about something, viz., speech.

Obviously I can't discuss these putatively non-referential accounts at the tag-end of this paper. I shall have to confine myself to the following remark. Even if doubts of the sort just expressed could be stilled and one or more such accounts could be formulated without embodying or presupposing references at some point, the question would still remain whether reference is being sold at too dear a price. We would have to give up such cherished ideas so that we can pick out objects of various sorts and characterize them, correctly and incorrectly, and that in the course of this enterprise we sometimes communicate information about the world that guides our behavior as well as satisfies our intellectual curiosity. Unless the arguments against realism are considerably stronger than I found them to be earlier in this essay, the game, clearly, is not worth the candle.

#### IV

Yes, Virginia, there is a real world. Not, or not only, in the hearts and minds of men. Not, or not only, in the language-games we play, in the schemes of translation we devise, or in the epistemic standards we acknowledge. But in that ineluctable, circumambient web of fact to the texture of which we must needs do homage, lest, though we speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not truth, our logos is become as sounding symbols or as tinkling paradigms.

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>I take this to be simply a slightly more explicit formulation of the view classically expressed by Aristotle in Metaphysics (1011b, 27) as “. . . to say of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not, is true”.

<sup>2</sup>See his “Realism and Reason”, Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association, Vol. 50, No. 6, p. 485.

<sup>3</sup>To be sure, Hegel’s philosophy as a whole contains elements that are incompatible with realism in my sense. Here I am only concerned with the Hegelian or “absolute” version of the particular thesis that reality is basically spiritual in character.

<sup>4</sup>Essays on Truth and Reality, (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1914), p. 1.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 223.

<sup>6</sup>The Nature of Thought (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1939), Vol. II, p. 264.

<sup>7</sup>“How to Make Our Ideas Clear”, in Collected Papers, ed. C. Hartshorne & P. Weiss (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1934), p. 268.

<sup>8</sup>Pragmatism (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975), p. 97.

<sup>9</sup>Reconstruction in Philosophy (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1920), p. 156.

<sup>10</sup>Op. cit.

<sup>11</sup>This last is Rorty’s picturesque way of saying, “taking it as involving an immediate awareness that p, or as involving the fact that p’s being directly presented to consciousness.

<sup>12</sup>Hence the well-advised tendency of some anti-realists to renounce the concept of knowledge for justified belief, or warranted assertability.

<sup>13</sup>In This connection we may note that the verifiability criterion forces us into a caricature of the process of scientific inquiry. Often this involves generating some hypothesis ('Electric current is a flow of tiny particles') and then looking around for some way to test it. Free of verificationist blinders, it seems obvious that this process is guided throughout by our understanding of the hypothesis we do not yet see how to test. (We haven't yet found a promising way of imbedding it in a larger system that will generate directly testable consequences.) But verificationism would have it that what we were doing was looking for a meaning to bestow on a certain sentence! And if that were what we were doing, why should it matter which of indefinitely many empirically respectable meanings we chose?

<sup>14</sup>We might also note that though this argument is found principally in the writings of Sprachspielists, it does not in any way depend on the multiplicity of language-games. These truisms would be equally true if our discourse were restricted to a single language game.

<sup>15</sup>It may be suggested that I should have taken "redundancy" or "disappearance" theories as equally obvious alternatives for the anti-realist. These theories deny that the statement 'It is true that S' has any more "cognitive" or "assertoric" content (makes any further truth claim!) than S. The function of 'It's true' is simply to endorse someone else's statement that S, or to assert that S in a specially emphatic way, or the like. But the relation of the redundancy theory to realism is unclear. It does look anti-realist; if we aren't asserting anything (over and above S) in saying 'It's true that S', then we aren't asserting, among other things, that what S is about is as it is said to be in asserting S. Nevertheless the opposition might be only skin deep. If the redundancy theory is merely a view as to how the word 'true' or phrases like 'It's true' are used, then it is quite compatible with the view that realism is right about the primary aim of thought, and about the most

fundamental dimension of evaluation of statements; the disagreement would only be over whether the word 'true' is properly used to express this.

<sup>16</sup>We might also raise questions about the status of epistemic principles like 'The ultimate scientific theory must satisfy the following constraints . . . '.

<sup>17</sup>This realist rejoinder is reminiscent of a variety of *tu quoque's* in which one who denies that there are X's is charged with assuming X's himself. Thus the sceptic who denies that anyone knows anything is charged with himself claiming to know something – viz., that no one knows anything. Again, the mechanist or behaviorist who writes books to prove that men are not actuated by purposes, is charged with displaying an example of what he is claiming not to exist. It is generally true in these cases that the denial of X's on a first level is held to involve the admission of X's on a higher level.

<sup>18</sup>The use of The Tarskian paradigm is not inadvertent. Unlike those who see the whole Tarskian treatment of truth as a series of technical gimmicks, I feel that Tarski's criterion of adequacy embodies a fundamental feature of our concept of truth. But I read it somewhat differently from many other admirers. The fact that 'S is true *iff* S' is a conceptual truth is often taken to show that the former doesn't say anything more than the latter, and that truth-talk is eliminable. But in opposition to this reductive reading, I prefer to concentrate on the other direction of equivalence and give it an inflationary reading. That is, the notion of what it takes for the statement to be true is already embodied, implicitly, in the statement-content; in explicitly saying that S is true we are just bringing to light what is already embedded in the first-level statement.

<sup>19</sup>This contention can be rerun for the question "What is it to understand a given statement or to know what statement is being made on a given occasion?" For what one has to know to know that, is precisely what we have been calling statement-content. So again we cannot say: "In order to know what statement P asserted at t, what we have to know is that P referred to

snow and said of it that it was white; and yet the truth of what P said does not ride on whether snow is white”.

<sup>20</sup>Hilary Putnam considers an interpretation like this in the second of his John Locke lectures, Meaning and the Moral Sciences, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978).

<sup>21</sup>To be sure, the mid-twentieth century advocates of this mode of interpretation were not concerned to reject a realist theory of truth, and rightly so, as we shall see. Nevertheless their verificationist brand of statement-interpretation might well appear attractive to an anti-realist who is grappling with the problem currently under consideration.

<sup>22</sup>See his Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation, La Salle, IL.: Open Court, 1946, Ch. VIII.

<sup>23</sup>Of course there are many alternative ways of stating verification conditions for statements. They may be stated in terms of what would have to be experienced in order to verify it, or, as with Lewis, in terms of the experiencing of it. On the former alternative the conditions may be phenomenalistic or physicalistic. They may or may not be such as to provide a practicable possibility of complete verification or falsification. And so on.

<sup>24</sup>It must be admitted that conditionals, especially subjunctive conditions, pose special difficulties for the determination of realistic truth conditions. But these are problems that arise for any view that allows conditionals (and how can they be avoided?). It is just that subjunctive conditionals loom much larger on the view under discussion.

<sup>25</sup>A similar point is made by Hartry Field in “Quine and the Correspondence Theory”, Philosophical Review, Vol. LXXXIII, no. 2, April, 1974.