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STRAWSON ON ANTI-REALISM

This paper is not self-contained but is a response to the remarks [1] of the Chairman, Sir Peter Strawson, at the *Mind/Aristotelian Society* symposium [2] entitled 'Truth-Conditions and Criteria'. Strawson seemed to me to misdescribe both what was essentially at issue between the symposiasts (Roger Scruton and myself) and, much more importantly, a broad range of features of the topography — motivation, points of vulnerability, and general implications — of anti-realism. And if that were not sufficient reason for a reply, the grateful reception of his remarks by an audience who seemed, by and large, to think that anti-realism could be nothing other than the Positivism of the Thirties, would provide one.

I

Strawson (pp. 15–16) takes it that the main issue between Scruton and myself was whether a Davidson-style truth-theory, conceived as a theory of speakers' understanding, needed any kind of supplementation. Scruton is represented as holding that some such supplementation is required in the case of predicates treated as primitive by the theory[1]; and that the supplement should take the form of supplying an analysis of the criteria — in something intended to be close to Wittgenstein's sense of that term — by reference to which correct application of such predicates would be assessed. Strawson represents me, on the other hand, first as complaining that, if such supplementary analysis is desirable at all, there seems no reason why it should be desirable only in the case of primitive predicates and not also e.g. in the case of quantifiers and singular terms; and, second, as doubting whether in fact such supplementation is required — whether, that is, a truth-theory, if both philosophically and empirically acceptable as far as it went, would not be in effect a complete account of speakers' understanding of the declarative part of the language.

Strawson rejects this doubt. Granted that understanding any declarative sentence is knowing its truth-conditions, it follows that a theory which correctly states the truth-conditions of every declarative sentence in the

object-language *is* a complete account of what anyone who understands the declarative part of the language knows. But it is not so far any sort of account of what, in the case of any particular sentence, possession of the relevant piece of knowledge *consists in*; of what, in practice, the distinctive manifestation of that piece of knowledge would be.

Strawson seems to me quite right to press this distinction. But my principal objection to Scruton's proposals actually proceeded in terms of it. There are some declarative sentences which we should ordinarily take to be the possessors of truth-values but which are such that, even before we find out any facts which we should take to bear on what truth-value they have, we have to acknowledge that our investigations, while at best persuasive, will be in the nature of the case inconclusive. If our understanding even of such sentences is held to be a matter of knowledge of truth-conditions, then of course a truth-theory can aspire to state what, when we understand any particular such sentence, we thereby know. But my objection to Scruton was precisely that to endorse truth-theory that far precludes the belief that by a programme of analysis of criteria the question can then be answered whose legitimacy Strawson thought I had overlooked and which a truth-theory, unsupplemented, cannot answer.

The satisfaction of criteria for the justified assertion of a sentence is, both on Wittgenstein's and — I took it — on Scruton's conception of a criterion, a decidable matter: a situation which, if actual, can be recognised by speakers of the language to be so. Therefore to attribute to someone knowledge of criteria need involve no more than to credit him with a capacity to respond appropriately to the obtaining of certain detectable circumstances; and it would be with the detailed description of such capacities in particular cases that Scruton's supplementary programme would turn out to be concerned. But how can possession of such a capacity, or range of capacities, *constitute* grasp of what it is for a possibly verification-transcendent truth-condition to obtain? How can a conception of a possibly *transcendent* state of affairs be exhausted by a sensitivity to recognisable circumstances? I took it that it could not (and so, implicitly, did Strawson, for he speaks[2] of the rational speaker's responses as being *governed* by the transcendent conception). But in that case the knowledge which Scruton's supplementary work would be concerned with is not the same knowledge as the knowledge which the truth-theory, interpreted as realist, attributes to the object-language speakers.

Let us then sharply distinguish the questions:

What is known by anyone who understands S?

and

What sort of behaviour manifests an understanding of S?

Then my objection was not that a correct truth-theory, if such a thing were possible, would stand in no *need* of supplementation; it was that I could not see how it was possible to construe either Scruton's proposal, or any supplementary programme concerned with the description of responses to detectable circumstances, as an appropriate way to attempt to answer the second kind of question, if a realist truth-theory is regarded as an appropriate way to attempt to answer questions of the first type. And indeed one way of expressing the anti-realist challenge is as the demand for an explanation how a generalised realism can in the end satisfactorily address itself to the second type of question when (possibly) verification-transcendent sentences are involved.

Strawson, then, appears to have mistaken what essentially I was objecting to in Scruton's proposal. That, to be sure, may have been mainly my fault; but it is natural to wonder whether that misapprehension and the assurance that no serious challenge is posed to realism by the considerations which I tried to describe are wholly unrelated,

II

Before it can be clear what the issue between the anti-realist and his truth-theoretical opponent amounts to, Strawson holds,

... we need to know *at least* what is to count as falling within the range of 'recognisable situations'; what is to count as conclusive verification; *whose* capacity in fact or in principle to do the recognising is in question; what importance, if any, to attach to the disjunction: in fact or in principle; and what 'in principle' means.

These are relevant, and very difficult, questions. But if Strawson meant to suggest that until more progress on them has been made, it cannot be clear that there is any anti-realist challenge to answer, then he seems to me mistaken. Certainly, answers are needed to these problems before it can be clear which, if any, are the sentences whose meaning, for realist and anti-realist alike, can be regarded as fixed in terms of truth-conditions. But we

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don't need to be clear about that issue in order to be clear whether there are any sentences in whose case the anti-realist is bound to be dissatisfied with the realist account. It is required only that there are some sentences whose conclusive verification is precluded in the nature of the case, whatever more specific account of the notion of conclusive verification may subsequently content us as correct; sentences for which the claim, "I have conclusively verified S", will be taken *ceteris paribus*, to betray a misunderstanding of S. And that, surely, is the situation of the kinds of example on which discussion of these issues has tended to concentrate: unrestrictedly general hypotheses, many types of subjunctive conditional, many types of description of the remote past and future, many types of description of others' mental states, etc.

The notion of conclusive verification, in particular, may well prove ineluctably obscure — provided, at least, that we want there to be conclusively verifiable sentences. And this, no doubt, would be a serious objection to any version of anti-realism which proposed to cast the notion of verification in the rôle traditionally played by the notion of truth. But the kind of case against realism which I tried to describe in [2] needs recourse to the notion of verification only negatively, in that it requires, to repeat, that there be some sentences with, intuitively, a clear meaning but for which we simply have no use for the notion of verification: sentences such that, whatever the informational context, to claim "I have conclusively verified S", will be regarded as inappropriate. The anti-realist grants, for the sake of argument, that we may legitimately be held to have understood the truth-conditions of all sentences of which we have understood the conditions of conclusive verification; and then challenges the realist to explain why that 'all' should not be strengthened to 'all and *only*'. If 'conclusive verification' were to turn out to be very restricted, or even chimerical, in application, the challenge would simply be generalised: we should have a very wide, or all-inclusive, class of sentences for which it was problematic what grasp of truth-conditions could consist in, how it might be distinctively displayed.

III

Strawson argues that there are at least two important kinds of sentence for which there can be no satisfactory anti-realist account of meaning: ascriptions of sensations to others, and sentences about the relatively remote past.

The orthodox conception of the meaning of 'John is in pain', said of John by someone else, involves that, if true, it is made so by the obtaining of a state of affairs which is, strictly, inaccessible to everyone save John — so for which the speaker can only have indirect *evidence*, including perhaps John's word. If this conception of the truth-conditions of such sentences and their relation to the sentences' content is to be rejected, Strawson asks, with what alternative account is it to be replaced?

There are, Strawson holds, just three possibilities open to the anti-realist. (A): He can deny that such sentences have any conditions of truth at all. Their meaning is fixed, rather, simply by their being associated with certain determinate, empirical conditions of acceptance and rejection; and under-standing them is the practical ability to recognise fulfilment of these condi-tions as such. (B): He can seek to locate *publicly accessible* truth-conditions for such sentences. On this type of view, understanding such sentences will be a matter of possessing a practical grasp of their truth-conditions, of a kind to which the anti-realist has no objection.[3] (C): He can grant that these sentences have truth-conditions, which however have nothing at all to do with their meaning — save, perhaps, for whoever is undergoing the sensation. For other people it is a possibility fully to understand such a sentence without knowing what its truth-conditions are.

Strawson reckons each of (A) — (C) to be decisively objectionable. Here however I propose to leave (B) out of account. For whether or not some behaviourist, or physicalist, analysis of ascriptions of sensation to others can be satisfactorily made out, it seems certain that the general policy which (B) illustrates, viz. looking for a communally accessible truth-condition to do duty for what on the realist view would be a transcendent one, will prove unworkable with other examples (e.g. scientific laws). Moreover, Strawson's criticisms of (A) and (C) in no way depend on the particular example.

Strawson attributes to (C) the consequence

... that someone could have a complete grasp of the meaning of what he said without knowing what he was saying, that is, asserting — an unappealing thought.

But there is a tacit assumption at work here. We get that conclusion only if we presuppose that *what is stated* by an assertoric use of "John is in pain" *has* to be explained by reference to necessary and sufficient conditions for that sentence's truth. And it is to be expected that a C-type anti-realist would dispute that the assertoric content of "John is in pain" was tied in this way to the truth-condition which, for whatever reason, he is conceding it to have.

To (A), which he considers the least unattractive, Strawson imputes the

... unsatisfactory feature that it leaves one with no account of what the speaker in
uttering the sentence is actually doing.

One might have supposed that, for an anti-realist as for the realist, the correct
account of what the speaker who utters "John is in pain" is standardly doing
is: asserting that John is in pain. But this is no good, Strawson says,

... when it has just been denied that there is anything he actually asserts in uttering it
... some alternative account of what the speaker is doing must be forthcoming if a sentence
is denied a truth-value. And the truth is that no remotely plausible account is in this case
available.

But why should (A) be thought to involve denial that there is anything one
actually asserts by uttering this type of sentence? Evidently, Strawson is
presupposing that only sentences which have been assigned determinate
truth-conditions can be used to state anything. And this presupposition is a
consequence of the assumption noted in the case of (C); for if what is stated
by S has to be explained by reference to an assignment of truth-conditions,
then there is no explaining what S states, *a fortiori* no using S to state
anything, unless it is assigned truth-conditions. Strawson produces no argu-
ment for this assumption. And its correctness looks to be crucial for the
prospects of a successful anti-realist account of declarative sentence meaning.
We shall return to the matter shortly.

Strawson's discussion of the example involves two further assumptions,
each of which seems to me arguably wrong. The first is that (A) – (C)
exhaust the anti-realist options. An anti-realism, (D), is conceivable which
differs from (A) in holding that "John is in pain" has a truth-condition – it is
true if and only if John is in pain; and from (B) in holding that no reductive
account is possible, in terms of behaviour or physical states or whatever,
which renders the obtaining of that truth-condition something publicly
accessible; and from (C) in holding that an understanding of "john is in pain"
does involve possession of a conception of what it is for this truth-condition
to obtain; and from realism in holding that a reductive account *is* possible, in
terms of the practical skills regarded by (A) as constitutive of an under-
standing of that sentence, of what it is to possess a conception of what those
truth-conditions are.

Given a version of (A) in which the notion of a criterion was central, it
would be (D) which, it seems to me, most closely approximated to the

position of the later Wittgenstein. Thus: there is no *harm* in speaking of the truth, or otherwise, of "John is in pain"; and understanding the sentence is, if you like, grasping its truth-conditions. But to say that is so far to say virtually nothing; in particular, it remains to be explained what grasping truth-conditions is supposed to amount to. Therefore, since an account of that can be given only in terms of the criteria by reference to which we should determine whether someone undersood the sentence, we come round in a circle. Progress can be made only by specifying the criteria. These have to do solely with responses to aspects of John's behaviour and physical condition. 'Grasping the truth-conditions' is thus constituted by possession of a complex discriminatory skill exercised in response to public circumstances. And it is a dangerous error to think of it, as does the realist, as something ulterior, the formation of a conception of something inaccessible, a conception which informs and governs both exercise of the relevant skill and all other aspects of the use of the sentence, e.g. in inferences.

The other assumption is expressed in this passage:

It is part of what it is now regrettable fashionable to call our general theory of the world that we regard other people as subject to roughly the same range of sensations as we are painfully, or joyously, or indifferently aware of in ourselves. And it is in no way contrary to reason to regard ourselves, as in any case we cannot help doing, as justified in certain circumstances in ascribing to John a particular state of feeling which we cannot in the nature of the case experience ourselves and his being in which is therefore, if such is the standard invoked, necessarily verification-transcendent. The Seas of Argument may wash forever around these rocks of truth; but the rocks are not worn away.

The assumption is that to oppose realism is to call into question these aspects of our "general theory of the world". But it is open to an anti-realist to seek instead to interpret them. Thus the susceptibility of others to the same range of sensations as we ourselves may be viewed as an expression of the existence of a communal vocabulary of sensation, any element of which is applicable to any of us on the basis of communally acknowledged criteria; and the inaccessibility of others' states of feeling may be viewed as an expression of the essential *defeasibility* of other-ascriptions of sensation, the fact that any state of information which warrants such an ascription can always coherently be envisaged as being added to in such a way that the resulting state of information no longer does so.[4] By contrast, the 'privileged access' we are traditionally thought to have to our own sensations may be viewed as an expression of the fact that our grammar of sensation provides

for the possibility of discovering that one did not know what one was saying in making a particular self-ascription, but *not* for the possibility that one understood it and was mistaken.

So viewed, the 'rocks of truth' are not worn away not because they are the erosion-proof basis of the true, realist, philosophy of mind, but because they are platitudinous reflections of features of our mental language – and are thus above the water-line. Naturally, this is only the sketch of an approach, and I cannot claim to know that it would prove satisfactory in detail. What is justified is at least the suspicion that here, as in other areas, we rather too readily tend to assume that opposition to realism is bound to be radically revisionary of our ordinary theories and linguistic practices.

Strawson moves to examples concerning events in the past sufficiently remote to be inaccessible to living memory; sentences like:

> "Lord Anglesey had his leg shot off at Wellington's side",

and

> "Charles Stuart walked bareheaded to his place of execution".

He is concerned with the contrast in available grounds for assertion between the situation of someone making such claims on the strength of an immediately prior, or remembered, observation – e.g. later on the same day –, and our situation who, born when we were, are "debarred from having been in a position to make any such observation", but must rely on historical evidence. The ordinary realist view would be, again, that our assertion of such a sentence is made determinately true or false by a state of affairs to which we cannot now have access. If that view is rejected, then, Strawson asks again, with what is it to be replaced? Do such sentences have any truth-conditions now? And if so, what is the relation of those conditions to their meaning?

The same range of answers, (A)–(C), seems to Strawson to be available. I shall continue to leave (B) out of consideration. And (D), it seems to me, again arguably affords a fourth option.

Contrary to what one might have expected, Strawson does not reaffirm his previous objections against (A) and (C), but charges instead that

... whatever answer is chosen has the consequence that the sentence in our mouths has a different *meaning* from that which it has in the mouths of those who were in fact or in principle ... in a position to recognise that condition as obtaining which the sentence appears to describe.

This outcome Strawson regards as totally unacceptable; in particular,

it must be unacceptable to anyone who rightly cherishes the doctrine that the meaning of a sentence is determined by the meanings of its constituents and the way in which they are combined in the sentence. For he will surely be reluctant to locate an *ambiquity* anywhere either in the constituents or in the construction of these sentences.

It is unclear, however, than an A- or C-type anti-realist would be committed to such a consequence. Each, certainly, will interpret an understanding of such a sentence as essentially a matter of practical knowledge of how circumstances *now* accessible to us have to be if the assertion of the sentence is to be justified. But there is no immediate transition from that conception to the conclusion that each will be committed to construing any *change* in the range of accessible conditions, as a result of the march of time, as a change in the sentence's meaning. What is clear is that the "rightly cherished" doctrine would not be rightly cherished if we were dealing with examples of rather less historical notoriety, say "Strawson once visited the University of Warwick". Here just to understand the meaning of the constituents and the structure of the sentence is not yet enough to provide knowledge of what has to be the case in order for it to be true; we need to know in addition the time of its (envisaged) assertion. This variation of truth-conditions – of what has to be the case in order for the sentence to be true – as a function of temporal context would not ordinarily be thought to introduce any ambiguity into such a sentence. So why, from the point of view of an assertibility-conditions account of meaning, should a systematic variation in assertibility-conditions – of how things have to be if the sentence is to be justifiably assertible – as a function of temporal context be thought to do so?[5] An anti-realist of one of the appropriate kinds can be expected to argue, on the contrary, that grasping the meaning of past-tense sentences precisely involves grasping how their conditions of warranted assertion shift as one's own temporal location shifts.

I do not mean to claim by the foregoing that (A) and (C) can clearly avoid Strawson's unpalatable consequence, but merely that he gives no clear reason why they cannot. However the justice of Strawson's criticisms of (A) and (C) here would follow from his implicit assumption noted earlier, that only by reference to an assigned truth-condition can any explanation be given of what is stated by the assertoric use of a particular sentence, an explanation, that is, of its assertoric content. If that assumption were correct, then plainly no anti-realist account of meaning eschewing all use of the concept of truth

could explain what it was for distinct utterances to effect the *same* statement;
a fortiori it could not succeed in explaining how it was possible for his
Lordship's valet and ourselves to have made the same statement by utterances
of the relevant sentence separated by more than a century. So we are brought
back to the question whether that assumption is correct:[6] can a A- or C-type
anti-realist show that he is entitled to the ordinary ideas that *ceteris paribus*
we make a statement about John by an utterance of "John is in pain", and
that an utterance of the Lord Anglesey sentence today effects *ceteris paribus*
the same statement as it would have effected if uttered on the afternoon of
his Lordship's misfortune?

Here let me merely make a couple of preliminary points about the issue.
First, Strawson proceeds as though it was obvious that the realist was entitled
to the ordinary ideas in question. But the truth of the matter seems to be
merely that he is in a position easily to label, or paraphrase, them. Thus e.g.
for a sentence to have assertoric content is for its use standardly to effect a
claim that an instance obtains of that type of state of affairs determined as
sufficient for its truth; while for the Lord Anglesey sentence to effect the
same statement now as it did in his valet's mouth is simply for its truth-
conditions to have continued to be the same. But no sceptic about the
substance to the intuitive notions would be satisfied by such replies. He
would press now for an explanation of what it is for a sentence to be used to
make a claim in that way, and of what it is for it to retain its truth-conditions
through a large lapse of time. The only way to meet the demand would be to
provide a description of the practical operations of these concepts: a general
account is wanted of how our linguistic practice makes it manifest that any
particular utterance has assertoric content, and, in terms of that account, of
how its particular assertoric content may — if it may — be revealed.
Thereby, in turn, it will be possible to describe what it is for a sentence to
have retained the same assertoric content throughout a large period.

Now it is, of course, quite familiar that these are *enormously* difficult
issues. But until they are solved, the fact ought to be faced that, whether we
are realists or not, we are actually in no position to give the only sort of
explanation of the relevant intuitive notions which counts: an explanation
which reveals them as operative in linguistic practice, and so as falling within
the province which it is the task of a theory of meaning to describe. On the
other hand, could we but give an explanation of the desired sort, it would be

bound to be, I think, the kind of thing which an anti-realist could use to meet the challenge implicit in Strawson's criticisms; for it would proceed purely in terms of discernible aspects of our use of language.

The other preliminary point concerns a train of thought[7] which I suspect captures the hunch of many philosophers who feel that wherever the anti-realist proposes to leave truth out of his account of the meaning of a particular declarative sentence, he won't be able to give a satisfactory explanation of what the sentence is used to state. Suppose we have a version of (A), or (C), in which the notion of a criterion is taken as central. Then the argument is directly to the effect that if all someone possesses is practical knowledge of criteria for the assertion and denial of a sentence, and knows of no truth-condition for it, then he cannot be said to know what, if anything, it states. For consider the situation of someone to whom all we give by way of explanation of the use of S is that its assertion is warranted *par excellence* when such-and-such conditions obtain — though they fall short of conclusive verification of it —; and that its denial is warranted *par excellence* in such-and-such other conditions — which, however, fall short of conclusive falsification of it. Then surely he could justifiably protest that while he now knew well enough how to *use* the sentence in question both in atomic and in a wide range of compound contexts[8], still in a certain sense he did not know what he was saying in asserting the sentence; or what, when its assertibility-conditions were satisfied, and it was thereby reasonable to believe it, he was supposed exactly to believe. Looking at the matter from a realist point of view, the trouble could be expressed as that all the man knows is that the sentence very *likely* states a truth under these circumstances and very *likely* states a falsehood under those; and until he knows under what precise circumstances it actually states a truth, or falsehood, he does not know what it says.

What is certainly right about the argument is this: just to know of *some* particular circumstances that they criterially warrant the assertion of S, and of some particular circumstances that they criterially warrant its rejection, certainly *need* not amount to knowledge of its content. But that is not to say that knowledge of its content is anything more than knowledge describable in just those terms. A sentence which admits neither of conclusive verification nor conclusive falsification must be interpreted by an anti-realist of the kinds in question as a sentence whose assertion or denial is always *defeasible*,

however well justified in the current state of information; whenever, that is, its assertion is warranted, the possibility is left open that subsequent developments may warrant its withdrawal; similarly with its denial[9]. So it is open to him to suggest that knowledge of content comes when the trainee understands not merely that the conditions of assertion, and denial, explained to him are merely criterial in status but also just how things have to develop in any state of information warranting the assertion, or denial of the sentence in order for that situation to cease to obtain.

Thus, for example, it seems perfectly correct to deny that someone knows the assertoric content of "John is in pain" if *all* he knows is, e.g., that it is right to assert it if John displays a certain syndrome of writhings and groans, and right to deny it if John is sitting relaxedly playing cards or watching television; and understands of both these sorts of circumstance that their obtaining gives no guarantee against the assertion, or denial, being nevertheless incorrect. But suppose he has this knowledge: of every state of affairs criterially warranting the assertion, or denial, of "John is in pain", he knows in a practical sense both that it has that status and under what circumstances it would be brought out that its status was merely criterial; that is, he knows the 'overturn-conditions' of any situation criterially warranting the assertion, or denial, of "John is in pain". No doubt we could not know for sure that someone had this knowledge; but the stronger our grounds for thinking that he did, the more baffling would be the allegation that he did not grasp the assertoric content of "John is in pain".

In fact, of course, provided someone had practical knowledge of *all* the types of situation criterially warranting the assertion, or denial, of an *S* of the relevant kind, he would have to have practical knowledge of all the 'overturn-conditions' also. It seems to me, therefore, that the initial plausibility of the argument turned on implicitly interpreting the knowledge possessed by the trainee as not being of that extent. And, naturally, if all he understands are *some* of the criteria for the assertion and denial of *S*, he ought not to be credited with a full understanding of what *S* states.

IV

There is a need sharply to distinguish between

(a)   questions and difficulties to do with the adequacy of the traditional

realist conception of truth to play the central rôle in a defensible account of what it is to understand any declarative sentence, and

(b)   the thesis that this rôle should be played by some other notion — verification, falsification, criteria, or otherwise undifferentiated conditions of warranted assertion, or whatever.

Naturally, if someone thinks that the questions and problems (a) cannot be satisfactorily answered, then he has a strong motive for seeking a satisfactory version of the thesis (b). But he would not be committed to the belief that the search can succeed. The possibility would remain that no satisfactory general account can be given of what it is to understand a declarative sentence; that we shall be able to find what strike us as serious flaws in in *anything* we say here aspiring to the level of generality which the truth-conditional, verificationist, and other conceptions try for. In that case there would be no broadly characterisable type of condition, ϕ, such that a viable general theory of meaning could be developed around the core assumption that the meaning of any declarative sentence is determined by its ϕ-conditions.

I am not suggesting that that is so. But that there is this gulf means that realism cannot acquire any strength by *default*; whatever problems an attempt to vindicate the thesis (b) may encounter, we shall have no better reason just on that account for supposing that realism must be correct, or for thinking that any difficulties which seem to attend it must be resoluble. Therefore if — whether or not he demonstrates as much — Strawson's two chosen types of example do indeed defeat all anti-realist account, no argument for realism can issue from that fact while the gulf just described remains open. And closing it is likely to require meeting the anti-realist challenge head on.[10]

The essential challenge is to explain how man might manifest in his use of sentences of a certain sort that it was governed by a verification-transcendent conception of their truth-conditions. In [2] I took it that one implication of taking seriously the connection between meaning and use is that there is nothing to a man's understanding of language which he will not, in appropriate circumstances, make manifest by the way he uses it.[11] So unless realism can explain how, when by its lights our use of a certain kind of sentence is governed by a verification-transcendent conception, that it is so *shows itself*, it ought to be abandoned by those who would wish to preserve Wittgenstein's insight.

But Strawson sees no difficulty here:

A rational speaker's grasp of his language is manifested, *inter alia*, in his responding in certain ways to the recognisable situations with which he is, and had been, confronted ... but Mr. Wright seems to take it as evident that the rational speaker's response to such situations can in no case be *governed* by a certain kind of conception, a conception of a state of affairs, or of a condition of truth, which for one reason or another, in fact or in principle, is not, or is no longer, or is not for the speaker, accessible to direct observation or memory. But this ... is just the question at issue, and one has the impression that Mr. Wright quite handsomely begs it ... it *is* obvious that, as Wright puts it, 'grasp of the sense of a sentence cannot be displayed in response to unrecognisable conditions' ...

However

it is enough for the truth-theorist that the grasp of the sense of a sentence can be displayed in response to recognisable conditions – of various sorts. There are those which conclusively establish the truth or falsity of the sentence; there are those which (given our general theory of the world) constitute evidence, more or less good, for or against the truth of the sentence; there are even those which point to the unavoidable absence of evidence either way. The appropriate response varies of course from case to case, in the last case being of the form 'we shall never know whether p or not'.

These remarks, it seems to me, are quite unsatisfactory. The anti-realist question was not: do we have any use for sentences for which there is no notion of conclusive verification?, or: how can we manifest our under-standing of such sentences? It was: what in the use which we do make of those sentences for which there is no notion of conclusive verification manifests our alleged grasp of verification-transcendent truth-conditions for them? Given that grasp of the truth-conditions cannot be a recognitional ability, what in our use of such sentences reveals that our understanding of them is anything other, or more, than a grasp of what would be regarded, on the realist view, as the recognisable conditions of their evidential support and disconfirmation? For it is only grasp of that which is clearly manifest in the responses which Strawson describes.

The *prima facie* availability of (D) complicates the issue slightly. For according to (D), it will be remembered, grasping the central core of the assertibility-conditions of a verification-transcendent sentence, and its use in compound contexts, *is* grasping its truth-conditions. So the question, how is the latter grasp made manifest, is already answered. But the essence of the realist view is, as Strawson puts it, that the conception of truth-conditions *governs* the use, that from this conception both our view of what constitutes good evidence for a sentence and our use of it in compound contexts – in

particular, the logic which we regard ourselves as validly applying to it —
flow; it is something ulterior which informs and, in so far as we use language
correctly, vindicates our use of such sentences in both atomic and compound
contexts. In this way it is quite literally the core of our understanding of the
sentence. Whereas, according to (D), that we, e.g., accepted such-and-such as
evidence for a particular sentence and that we also, e.g., accepted Excluded
Middle as valid in application to it, would be essentially independent aspects
of our 'grasp of its truth-conditions'.

The challenge is to explain how a full-blooded realist conception of
truth-conditions in this sense can be manifested in a person's use of his
language; to explain, that is, what, if anything, he could do to distinguish
himself from a man whose competence was completely described by saying
that he had grasped the assertibility-conditions both of the sentence and of
all, or enough, compound sentences in which it was a constituent. One finds
in Strawson's remarks no clear indication of how he thinks this challenge
ought to be met.

If Strawson does not meet this challenge, still less does he make out his
claim that

the conception of verification-transcendent truth-conditions, at least in one or another
of the relatively stringent senses of 'verification-transcendent' which Wright's anti-realist
seems to favour — this conception, and its link with that of meaning, is an essential part
of a general view of the world which is no way contrary to reason and to which we are in
any case inescapably committed.

It would undoubtedly have demanded excess of a chairman's licence to make
that claim good! Let me conclude by recording the suspicion, rather than
arguing, that the implicit epistemology of realism involves in all essential
respects the same difficulties which Wittgenstein exposed in the old idea that
a shared grasp of 'universals' *explains* our propensity to agree in our use of
attributives.[1 2]

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REFERENCES

[1] P. F. Strawson, 'Scruton and Wright on Anti-realism *Etc.*', *Proceedings of the
Aristotelian Society* (New Series), vol. 77 (1976—1977), 15—22.
[2] 'Truth-conditions and Criteria', (papers by Roger Scruton and Crispin Wright),
Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supp. vol. L (1976), 196—245.

NOTES

[1] That is, predicates for which, in case the object-language is a fragment of the language in which the theory is stated, a homophonic axiom will be employed.

[2] p. 16.

[3] Strawson suggests in the relevant passage that the truth-conditions of these sentences on this second type of view will be identified with the disjunction of states of affairs regarded as conditions of their warranted acceptance by the first type of view. In fact, of course, accounts of this second type could take all sorts of other forms; for example, the sort of physicalism described by Hopkins in 'Wittgenstein and Physicalism', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, vol. 76 (1975).

[4] Evidence emerges, e.g., of the insincerity of an avowal; or of the subject's linguistic incompetence; or perhaps the wider context of his behaviour becomes clear in such a way as to require re-interpretation of it. *Whereas* there is only dubious sense in the idea of discovering of oneself that one was insincere on a particular occasion; and *only* the discovery of one's own linguistic incompetence might constitute the enlargement of a state of information which prompted a particular sincere self-ascription of sensation into one which prompted its retraction.

[5] It might seem to be important, and to introduce a disanalogy, that in one way the truth-conditions of such sentences are temporally invariant: this, *whenever* it is uttered, the Strawson sentence is true if and only if a state of affairs of a kind sufficient for its truth is realised at a time prior to that of its utterance. But in *this* sense assertibility-conditions are temporally invariant too: for, whenever the sentence is uttered, it is warrantedly asserted if and only if a state of affairs obtains at the time of utterance of a kind appropriate to justify its assertoric use at that time. Invariance of truth-conditions in this way is rather uninteresting.

[6] The importance of the question is, of course, qualified by the *prima facie* availability of (D), an advocate of which can presumably take over *verbatim* any 'account', as far as it goes, which the realist chooses to give of e.g. what makes it the case that we and Anglesey's valet effect the same statement by utterance of the relevant sentence.

[7] Put to me in discussion by Gareth Evans.

[8] All compound contexts, in fact, whose assertibility-conditions he could correctly construe as a function of those of their constituent sentences.

[9] Proof: for S not to be conclusively verifiable is just for it always to be a possibility that its assertion is wrong, however well justified; likewise, for S not to be conclusively falsifiable is for it to be the case that its denial may always be wrong, however well justified. But the anti-realist will have to interpret this ineradicable two-fold possibility of error *constructively*: the possibility of the assertion's, or denial's, being wrong must be interpreted as the possibility of our being in a position to assert, provided we know sufficiently many facts, that it is (was) wrong. Therefore he must construe the situation of S as suggested: whenever a state of information warrants the assertion of S, it cannot be ruled out that an enlarged state of information may develop which warrants its retraction; likewise for its denial.

[10] Though we cannot, I suppose, exclude all possibility of, as it were, an Olympian demonstration that a theory of meaning *has* to be possible.

[11] This, of course, is the point of the concluding remarks of what I believe is

Dummett's earliest published formulation ('Truth', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, vol. 59 (1958)) of the case for a general anti-realism based on the philosophical theory of meaning.

[12] "Let's not imagine the meaning as an occult connection the mind makes between a word and a thing, and that this connection *contains* the whole usage of a word as a seed might be said to contain the tree." *Blue Book*, penultimate paragraph.