

Misconstruals Made Manifest: A Response to Simon Blackburn

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Blackburn's interesting paper makes three principal claims. First, he argues that the semantical antirealist ideas explored in Dummett's and my writings suffer for want of an opponent who is both vulnerable to the arguments developed and interesting. Second, he asserts that Dummett's overarching ambition, to use (the resolution of) issues in the theory of meaning to illuminate traditional metaphysical controversies concerning realism, is misconceived — both in the assumption that an underlying unity in such controversies is to be expected across different subject matters and in the cardinal role assigned to the philosophy of language. Rather the issues between realists and antirealists vary with the regions of discourse — science, mathematics, modality, probability theory, morals, etc. — about which they are in dispute. There is no overriding debate in the philosophy of language, and no talisman is provided thereby for use in the debates which there are, nor "even a set of arguments playing any useful role in their solution."¹ The debates " . . . are many, although they each require their own geography, for the shoe may pinch in different places, in the theory of morals, of possibility, probability, cause, or mind."² Third — and somewhat surprising in company with the second claim — Blackburn does wish to commend a certain overview of these debates: it is one in which the realist is someone who believes that " . . . reference to a genuine order of objective facts is necessary to explain some aspect of our practice,"³ and thus stands opposed to a character, Blackburn's *quasi-realist*, who holds that all aspects of the discourse in question can be conservatively explained without invocation of the idea of such a "genuine order of objective facts" to which we should think of the assertions within it as owing truth-conditional allegiance.

I have some qualified sympathy with Blackburn's second claim. In the Preface to *Realism, Meaning and Truth*,⁴ I counseled caution both about Dummett's global identification of realism with belief in the appropriateness

of a certain sort of truth-conditional theory of meaning and about the weaker thesis that these traditional metaphysical issues are generally amenable to relocation in a meaning-theoretic setting. But, as urged in the Introduction to that book, it is unquestionable—or seems so to me—that, in an important class of cases, the metaphysical realist must offer up hostages to be redeemed by meaning-theoretic fortune. Not every realist, about whatever subject matter, is happily identified with Dummett's realist; but many kinds of realist that there actually are, about discourses as various as mathematics, science, history, and intentional psychology, should have the keenest interest in the debate about Dummett's realist—for their philosophical survival may depend on its outcome.

In saying that, I am presupposing, of course, that there *is* a debate about Dummett's realist, whose outcome is still uncertain—Blackburn's parade of notional strawmen and putative hardmen notwithstanding. Setting out its main lines will be the primary business of this essay,⁵ and I have little space to attempt anything further. There is much in Blackburn's paper which I will not be able to engage. But I cannot resist a few, very general questions and comments about the "quasi-realist" alternative which Blackburn champions. So I will begin with those.

I: QUEASY-REALISM

What exactly is the recommended format for a demonstration that it *is* possible to explain the functioning of a discourse without invoking the idea of a "genuine order of objective facts" to which its apparent assertions (mis)correspond? In particular, is it necessary to provide an account of the discourse by whose lights its apparent assertions are portrayed as *only* apparent? This seemed to be so in *Spreading the Word*. There, the quasi-realist program for moral discourse explicitly undertakes an expressive, *ergo* nonassertoric construal of moral 'assertions' in general, including forms of construction, such as the conditional, which are regarded as problematical precisely because they seem to demand that (some of) their constituents be apt for assertion. But if this is the way that matters are supposed to go, then Blackburn's confident advocacy would seem to prejudge the satisfactory resolution, from his point of view, of a clutch of difficulties to which he has, so far as I am aware, no published effective response. To date, for instance, he has produced no satisfactory account of the validity of moral *modus ponens*, patterns of inference, like

Stealing is wrong;
If stealing is wrong, so is encouraging others to steal;

Encouraging others to steal is wrong.

The *Spreading the Word* proposal has the effect that someone who accepts the premises but rejects the conclusion of such an inference is guilty only of a *moral* shortcoming,⁶ while the modified account in "Attitudes and Contents"⁷ implicitly surrenders, as Hale has demonstrated,⁸ the expressive construal of

moral 'assertions'. But in the absence of any account of so simple an inference pattern, there is simply not the slightest reason to believe that the quasi-realist has the resources for a satisfactory construal of moral argument.

There is, in any case, a very familiar kind of methodological peculiarity about this particular version of the quasi-realist proposal. Success could only consist, it seems, in establishing rules of transformation between ordinary, apparently assertoric moral discourse—to stay with this particular battleground—and a discourse in which no genuine assertions were made. But now a simple dilemma arises: Are the rules of transformation somehow guaranteed to be content-preserving? If not, nothing has been shown. If so, how is it supposed to be clear that no genuine assertions are made in the *reductive* discourse? If apparently assertoric syntax can mislead, so can apparently non-assertoric syntax. So in which direction does the significance of the transformations run? The question could only be answered in the light of an *independent* account of genuine assertoric function. But if we had one, why couldn't we apply it directly to moral discourse—what possible purpose is served by laboring for a putatively expressive reconstrual, no matter how ingeniously, if its significance must remain in doubt until an independent demonstration is to hand that moral discourse has no genuinely assertoric function?

This is only an adaptation of a difficulty which a large class of reductionist proposals have to meet. It is most familiar, of course, in the context of ontological reduction.⁹ So far as I am aware, Blackburn nowhere explicitly addresses it. I do not present it as insoluble. But at least it is clear that a response which conserved the *Spreading the Word* conception of the quasi-realist program would have to establish a robust distinction between assertoric syntax—sentences' susceptibility to embedding within negation, the conditional construction, and operators of propositional attitude—and genuine assertibility. I see no cause to believe that any such distinction can be drawn which is suitable for Blackburn's purpose.¹⁰

The broad alternative is to drop the *Spreading the Word* conception, and to allow that any discourse which possesses the right kind of overt syntax and whose use exhibits sufficient discipline—minimally, there have to be recognized standards of proper and improper use of its ingredient sentences—is genuinely assertoric, and hence truth-value bearing¹¹ (*alethic*). This is not to surrender all vestige of quasi-realist *motif*—the program remains of making out a distinction between alethic discourses in accounting for which we need to invoke the idea of "a genuine order of objective facts" and alethic discourses for which that is not so. Blackburn himself has recently shown some sympathy for this redirection¹² and it is one to which I myself am sympathetic. But now it needs to be recognized that the major part of the work is to supply definite content for the type of phrase, like that just quoted, which too often passes for a formulation of what is in dispute in particular cases but is evidently incapable of discharging that role. Until that is done, it is utterly unclear what is really at issue about morals, or any of the other problematical

discourses, or how it might competently be debated. One great merit of Dummett's overall interpretation of realist-antirealist disputes is its very clear response to this need. One may question whether Dummett's proposal is appropriate in every such dispute. But it is no easy matter to do better, or to elicit from Blackburn's paper any proposal approaching the same degree of clarity.

One distinction which Blackburn's phrase might conjure, and which I believe is at least part of his meaning, is that between discourses which respectively pass and fail the Best Explanation constraint.¹³ A discourse passes the Best Explanation constraint if mention of states of affairs of the sort which it putatively describes features ineliminably in the best explanations of our forming the beliefs attested to by our assertions within it. This idea has, of course, been extensively discussed, particularly in the context of its apparent bearing on science and morals.¹⁴ My own view, which I cannot attempt to substantiate here, is that it is doubtful whether the requisite notion of *best* explanation can easily be clarified—at least if the target comparison is to be to the disadvantage of morals—and that the important consideration in the vicinity is not whether e.g., moral facts need to be adverted to in the best explanation of moral belief but whether they enjoy a sufficiently *wide cosmological role*—whether they have enough of a part to play in the explanation of things *besides* our moral beliefs—to give substance to the idea that our moral beliefs *respond* to them.¹⁵ However that may be, the fact is that if such are to be the issues between the realist and the quasi-realist, Blackburn ought not to write as though he is offering a new perspective. That there is a crux, on this point, for our intuitions about objectivity is already widely believed.

The suggestion that alethicity need not be at stake in such cruces, if that is indeed the direction in which Blackburn is now moving, seems to me to be important and correct. So too does the emphasis on the diversity of issues at stake in realist-antirealist debates. But Blackburn errs, in my opinion, when he writes—dubiously consistently, as noted—as if this diversity precluded any useful overall perspective. The right picture, it seems to me, is rather along the following lines. Sometimes alethicity is at stake, and antirealism takes the form of irrealism. When that is so, the issue concerns whether the discourse in question can be established in such a way as to conform to the somewhat minimal constraints of syntax and discipline which the applicability of a truth predicate calls for. This is, to give a single instance, precisely what is at issue over 'private language'. More often, however, alethicity is not—or ought not to be—at stake. It is not the issue, in particular, in any of the cases which Blackburn cites as prospective material for quasi-realist treatment (whatever exactly such a treatment would now consist in). What has been or may be at issue in such cases is indeed diverse: the prospects for convergence of opinion, the question whether divergence of opinion has to be attributable to something worth describing as cognitive shortcoming,¹⁶ the questions to do with Best Explanation and Wide Cosmological Role, issues concerning whether the relation between *best* opinion—opinion formed by cognitively ideal subjects in cognitively ideal circumstances—and truth is, broadly, a relation of *consti-*

tution or of *tracking*, and indeed the question whether truth for the discourse in question is correctly taken to be evidentially unconstrained—any of these five issues and, no doubt, others can provide a *relevant* focus of debate. But they provide a relevant focus because, in each case, should the decision go in favor of the realist, the truth predicate takes on characteristics which go beyond anything demanded merely by its role in alethic discourse, and which are related in germane ways to the basic realist intuition of truth as a matter of a substantial correspondence between our thought and a domain of independent truth-conferring states of affairs.

It is clear enough, for instance, that we are committed so to regarding the truth-conferrers in the case of any discourse which, we suppose, satisfies the Best Explanation constraint; if states of affairs feature in the best explanation of our having certain beliefs, there is no question of regarding them merely as a *reflection* of the truth of those beliefs—something to which we are committed only and purely by holding the beliefs in question. Similarly, should best opinion in a particular discourse turn out to stand in a tracking relation to the truth, rather than in a constitutive relation, we are forced to think of truth for that discourse in a way which contrasts it with ideal assertibility, and of our most refined standards of acceptability as means of *access* to truth, which is constituted independently. By contrast, there is nothing in the alethicity of a discourse as such—before any of these matters are investigated—to frustrate the construal of its truth predicate in terms of assertibility.¹⁷

Inevitably, these remarks are very compressed. I am under no illusion that they provide an argument for the overview I am recommending. But maybe they serve to suggest a strategy of some promise. What is very immediate is that the issue of the evidence-transcendence of truth fits in perfectly. There is no clearer way of giving content to the realist image of thought in confrontation with an independent world: that *has* to be the way to conceive of the truth-conferrers if truth can clash with, or float free from the deliverance of all accessible evidence. To demonstrate that our understanding of a particular discourse is informed by such a conception of truth is not, of course, to show that what, in so understanding it, we take to be possible really is possible. Thus Dummett's realist cannot *win* by meeting his opponent's 'manifestation challenge'—he merely deflects an assault. But a demonstration that the challenge cannot be met is another matter. For it is surely absurd to suppose that the world might undetectably confer truth and falsity upon certain of our beliefs if nothing in our understanding of them involved any conception of how that might be so. Take it, then, that any such conception must be manifestable, and the dialectical point of the 'manifestation challenge' is evident enough.

To be sure, the overall picture I have outlined would not allow us immediately to write off realism about a discourse for which the manifestation challenge proved unanswerable. The possibility may remain of giving substance to and justifying a realist view of it in one of the other ways briefly canvassed. Equally, it may not—evidence-transcendent truth may be too central a com-

mitment of the realism in question to allow of retrenchment to a view which dispenses with it yet remains realist in the same spirit. That is the situation of the kind of mathematical Platonism which stands opposed to mathematical Intuitionism as Dummett has interpreted it. And it is also, I would surmise, the situation of scientific realism if some appropriately nontrivial version of the Underdetermination thesis does indeed hold globally. In any case, the rightful place in the overall agenda belonging to the issue between Dummett's realist and his antirealist is, *pace* Blackburn, incontrovertible.

II: THE MANIFESTATION CHALLENGE

A head-on response to Blackburn's paper would identify one of his characters – the Teller, Surveyor, Theorist, Anti-reductionist, Insulationist, or Non-Guarantor – with the Real Realist, and proceed to explain why that character was indeed vulnerable to antirealist criticism. But there is, of course, absolutely no reason why such a response should be appropriate. To think otherwise is to mistake the point of calling the various antirealist lines of thought "challenges." A philosophical challenge consists in an argument that a number of beliefs, which are held individually to be attractive, are, if not outright inconsistent, at any rate in tension with each other. In the cases with which we are concerned, 'antirealism' is the label associated with certain specific responses to such a putative tension. But the ingredients in the tension are multiple, and it is therefore to be expected that someone to whom the recommended responses are unattractive will have options; at the least, there will be the option of trying to make out that there is in reality no tension. The character whom the antirealist is 'anti' can thus be anyone who, for whatever reason, either disputes the reality of the tension, or favors a nonrecommended response to it. It is, actually, easier to characterize the realist – for the purposes of this debate – than Blackburn manages to make it seem, and I will do so below. But the substantive questions are whether the tensions felt by the antirealist are genuine, and whether, if so, there are defensible responses besides those 'recommended'.

What in these terms are the beliefs which combine to set up the 'manifestation challenge'? Essentially, they are three. The first is the broadly Wittgensteinian conception of meaning and understanding according to which understanding an expression is knowing its proper use, and such knowledge consists in a complex of practical abilities. The Wittgensteinian idea is familiar (and vague) enough to strike most people now as a harmless platitude. But it has implications of importance. One is its repudiation of the idea of understanding as a kind of *interior informational state*, the source and explanation of competent use. Another is that *practical* abilities, in the spirit of the Wittgensteinian conception, are essentially abilities to perform appropriately in public: to perform in ways which may be publicly appraised as coming up to scratch, in the prevailing circumstances, or not. Now, possession of a publicly appraisable ability need not, in the general case, imply any capacity of self-

appraisal, nor any capacity to recognize if or how prevailing circumstances are apt for its exercise. It is possible to be a performer without having the concepts of the critic—indeed, without having any concept of the circumstances to which the performance is a response. But it is different with understanding: the ability to appraise one's own and others' uses is here an essential ingredient in the original ability. The performance abilities that constitute an understanding of an expression do not count unless associated with the ability to *evaluate* one's own and others' performance with that expression. So understanding, if it is to be viewed as a practical ability at all, has to be seen as a complex of *discriminatory* capacities: an overall ability intentionally to suit one's use of the expression to the obtaining of factors which can be appreciated by oneself and others to render one's use apt.

A normal understanding of a declarative sentence, in particular, will involve a wide range of performance abilities: the ability to discriminate, *modulo* other germane beliefs, between what constitutes favorable, unfavorable, and neutral evidence with respect to it; the ability to recognize its inferential ancestry and progeny; the ability to construct explanations which use it, or bear on why it might be true or false; the ability appropriately to deploy ascriptions of propositional attitude which embed it; and so on. But each of these is essentially an appreciable—that is, manifestable—ability, which is also—since such appreciation is part of understanding—a *recognition*al ability, an ability to recognize whether and, if so, what in a prevailing context renders a particular use of the sentence appropriate. Thus the slogan: knowing the content of a statement is a complex of manifestable, recognitional skills.

Call this first Wittgensteinian ingredient the Manifestability Principle. The second ingredient is the thesis that what constitutes an understanding of any declarative sentence is a knowledge of its truth-conditions, a knowledge of how matters have to stand in order for it to be, respectively, either true or false. The Manifestability Principle and the Truth-Conditional Conception are not in overt tension exactly, although someone who wishes to endorse both at least has some explaining to do. The Manifestability Principle bids us view the understanding of a declarative sentence as a complex of abilities, and the Truth-Conditional Conception seems to superimpose a unifying frame, to postulate a thread which runs through the evidence-sifting, inferential, and other abilities involved in understanding the sentence and somehow binds them together. Knowing the truth-conditions of the sentence has to be a state which somehow guarantees possession of these various abilities, and the question must therefore arise how the guarantee is sustained.

It is when the third ingredient—the thesis that truth is unconstrained by the availability of evidence (Evidence Transcendence)—is introduced that a real tension is generated. For if truth in general is evidentially unconstrained, then—depending on its subject matter—knowing the truth-conditions of a sentence may require an understanding of how it could be undetectably true. And how could that knowledge consist—as the Manifestability Principle requires

it must—in any ability whose proper exercise is tied to *appreciable* situations? How can knowing what it is for an unappreciable situation to obtain be constituted by capacities of discrimination exercised in response to appreciable ones?

I take it as obvious only that this is a good question, not that it does not have a good answer. But suppose it does not have a good answer. Then we ought to reject one or more of the ingredients. What is characteristic of any antirealist response to the manifestation challenge is that it will hold the first ingredient to be inviolable. There is, in the antirealist view, simply nothing for understanding to *be* if it is not conceived as by the Manifestability Principle. Now, there is, of course, logical space for a denial of that—Blackburn's Surveyor, for instance, occupies this space. But occupancy of the space is not the adversarial target of the challenge. On the contrary, the whole argument *pre-supposes* that nobody ought to want to be there.¹⁸ In any case, Blackburn never suggests that this is a space which he personally would favor occupying, or that it is a response to the challenge worth taking seriously.

The antirealist, then, at least as far as the Manifestation Challenge is concerned, is someone who suspects that there is an irreconcilable tension between the three ingredients, and maintains that no satisfactory response to it can proceed via rejection of the Manifestability Principle. His or her options are therefore two: rejection of the Truth-Conditional Conception of statement understanding, or its retention subject to the constraint that the 'truth' in 'truth-conditions' denote an evidentially constrained notion. Many of Dummett's and my own earlier discussions of these matters proceeded on the assumption that truth is nothing if not classical (evidence-transcendent) and hence that the Truth-Conditional Conception has to be supplanted by something in which warranted assertion, or perhaps verification, plays the central role. It is therefore understandable that Blackburn's discussion should proceed on the same assumption—more specifically, on the assumption that antirealist semantics has to be assertibility-conditional.¹⁹ But, if understandable, it is an assumption which he should nevertheless have avoided. For the bifurcation in the antirealist's options is explicit in the Introduction to *Realism, Meaning and Truth*²⁰ (henceforward, "the Introduction") and the prospects for a truth-conditional version of antirealist semantics are the center of attention in chapter 9, in which the play is made with the notion of superassertibility to which Blackburn refers.²¹

When the issue is set up in the way I have been describing, it is clear that Blackburn has heavy-weathered the question, Who is the realist? Realism about a given discourse, for the purposes of the manifestation challenge, is simply the combination of views (a) that the proper account of our understanding of its statements is evidence-unconstrained truth-conditional, and (b) that the world on occasion exploits, so to speak, this understanding—does on occasion deliver up undetectable truth-conferrers for those statements.²² And, to repeat, it is worth describing such a view as "realism" because of the sharp separation which it imposes between the statements' being true on the one

hand and their meeting our most refined criteria of acceptability on the other. None of the characters in Blackburn's parade is described as holding exactly this realism, though—if (b) is assumed—the Insulationist and the Non-guarantor will presumably do so.

Blackburn's claim, to be fair, was that it is difficult to find a *vulnerable* target for the manifestation challenge. Since there simply is no challenge if the Manifestability Principle is rejected, and since Blackburn himself shows no inclination to reject it, his thought has accordingly to be that there is no real tension: that it is consistent with accepting the Manifestability Principle to hold (a). So one real target is the realist as *Compatibilist*: a realist who aspires to a portfolio which contains (a), (b), and the Manifestability Principle. Is this a vulnerable target, or can such a combination be made coherent?

III: COMPATIBILISM

I have no general, conclusive proof that it cannot. But Blackburn, for his part, simply fails to confront the issue squarely. In order to see what confronting it squarely would involve, consider the example discussed in the Introduction,²³ of applications of simple predicates of taste—"sweet," "salty," "bitter," "sour," "spicy," and so on. What is it to understand statements of the form, "This is F," in which 'F' is one of these adjectives of taste and the demonstrated object is one of a number of food and drink samples placed in easy reach? What abilities are associated with such understanding? Well, there will typically be a number of "neighborhood abilities," in Blackburn's useful phrase: the abilities, for instance, to reason to and from such statements on the basis of collateral information, and to handle successfully more complex sentences, for instance, ascriptions of propositional attitude, in which descriptions of taste occur as embedded clauses. But in this instance, at least, there is an ingredient ability which is plausibly regarded as fundamental: the ability to recognize the tastes of the various samples by tasting them, and to report such recognition by using the statements in question.

That "This is salty" expresses a truth is a state of affairs which, in appropriate circumstances, may be verified to obtain by tasting the demonstrated substance. So much is uncontentious, and quite neutral on matters like the defeasibility of simple descriptions of taste or the question whether they somehow typify a class of judgments which might play a foundational role in some semantic or epistemological project. Simply: there is such a thing as the ability to discriminate tastes by tasting, and it is an appreciable, recognitional ability. Since to exercise it is to recognize whether or not the truth-conditions of sentences of the sort in question are satisfied, it is perfectly appropriate to regard it as amounting to a knowledge of their truth-conditions.

This ability unquestionably constitutes one aspect of our understanding of the sentences in question. Is it just one aspect, though? It is tempting to say more: *viz.* that this recognitional grasp of the truth-conditions of such judg-

ments constitutes the core of understanding them, so that if someone does indeed have this grasp, but apparently lacks some of the neighborhood abilities, we are obliged to locate the deficiency in understanding—if that is what it is—elsewhere. Conversely, we are strongly inclined to say that someone who proved unable to acquire the core recognitional abilities could have no real understanding of the content of such statements, even if that person was rather successful at acquiring the neighborhood abilities—rather as someone whose vision was monochromatic might acquire grasp of a good stock of proxy-grounds for claims about color.

If these ideas are defensible, then, in the case of such judgments, the Manifestability Principle and the Truth-Conditional Conception can be made to cohere perfectly. Grasp of such judgments' truth-conditions will be a manifestable, recognitional skill, and there will be a case for regarding it as constitutive of an understanding of them. But what is here conspicuously lacking, of course, is any place for the third ingredient in the original tension: the Evidence-Transcendence of truth. It is possible—if it is possible—to bring the Manifestability Principle and the Truth-Conditional Conception together in the fashion sketched only because 'grasp of truth-conditions' can here be *identified* with a recognitional ability; and it can be so only because we conceive of the states of affairs which confer truth and falsity on these judgments as, by their very nature, detectable. It would be different if we were concerned with a type of judgment whose truth-conferrers we conceived as merely sometimes detectable, but on other occasions inaccessible to us. For to grasp the truth-conditions of such judgments could not be identified merely with the ability to recognize that they were satisfied in the favorable kind of case; it would be necessary, in addition, to understand what it would be for them to be satisfied unrecognizably. And the problem would then be to construe that understanding as the Manifestability Principle requires.

Blackburn's patter about "men of straw" and "cracked instruments" notwithstanding, I believe that most people would be instinctually drawn to the idea that the role played by grasp of truth-conditions in the taste example is in no way special—that what is special is only that here we can find a distinctive practical ability for grasp of truth-conditions to be. That is: when, as in the examples, statements about the remote past, counterfactual conditionals, putative general laws, and so on, on which the debate has tended to concentrate, the 'neighborhood abilities' are all the practical abilities that there are, our instinct is to think that there is something more: precisely, the old 'interior informational state', serving to inform the exercise of the neighborhood abilities and to bind them together. The thought is that understanding a statement is *always* like that in essentials; what distinguishes the taste example is just that, quite unusually, the core of understanding here steps forward to show itself on the surface. As I say, I believe that this is our instinctual view. But it does occasionally surface in professional philosophy. A very clear contemporary expression is due not to a strawman but to Strawson:

A rational speaker's grasp of this language is *manifested* in, *inter alia*, his responding in certain ways to the recognizable situations with which he is and has been confronted. . . . 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, 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 question—whether the rational speaker's response can be so governed—is just the question at issue.²⁴

How can we interpret the emphasis on “governed” if it is not that Strawson intends that the understanding should be thought of as something detached from the neighborhood abilities from which they flow?

However that may be, Blackburn is, as noted, agreed that this noncompatibilist direction is not the way to go. But then, what is the way to go? So far as I can see, there is only one: the compatibilist line has to be that the connection between understanding and grasp of truth-conditions is *platitudinous*.²⁵ And such is, in effect, Blackburn's proposal. One could spell the thought out like this. To understand a statement is to know what it says, which will be that a certain state of affairs obtains. But it is *a priori* and common knowledge, that when *S* says that *P*, it follows that *S* is true if and only if *P*. So the obtaining of the relevant state of affairs has to be conceived, by one who understands the statement, as necessary and sufficient for its truth. Hence, whatever abilities constitute the understanding of a statement, we cannot but acquiesce in its description as “grasp of truth-conditions.” In particular, if only ‘neighborhood abilities’ are available, then *they* constitute a knowledge of the statement's truth-conditions.

The antirealist who favors responding to the manifestation challenge by “dethroning truth and falsity from their central place in . . . the theory of meaning”²⁶ presumably has some work to do in response to this line of thought. Not so, though, the antirealist who favors retention of the Truth-Conditional Conception, *modulo* an evidentially constrained conception of truth. And the staring fact is that the line of thought does absolutely nothing to dissipate the tension to which this antirealist is responding. *Identifying* grasp of a statement's truth-conditions with possession of a network of practical, discriminatory abilities—the ‘neighborhood abilities’—simply makes it the more puzzling how, in grasping those truth-conditions, we are somehow guaranteed to understand the possibility, in the case of a suitable example, that those conditions be satisfied undetectably. There is absolutely no progress. The question remains: how, specifically, is the idea that statements of a certain kind can be unrecognizably true or false on display in our ordinary evidential, inferential, explanatory, and other practices with them? The ‘neighborhood abilities’ are all appreciable, recognitional abilities. Let it be a platitude, or a consequence of platitudes, that they compose a knowledge of truth-conditions; the question

is, how do they compose a knowledge of (potentially) *evidence-transcendent* truth-conditions—how would they differ if, for whatever reason, we thought of truth as essentially evidence-constrained?

Blackburn resurrects the charge, first made in *Spreading the Word*,²⁷ that the demand for manifestability is ill-conceived until we have specified the powers of the intended audience. I discussed this charge in the Introduction, but although Blackburn refers to that discussion, I do not seem to have succeeded in making its point clear. Summarily: there is no problem at all about specifying the powers of the intended audience—to manifest my understanding of a statement, I need an audience who *understand* that statement. This whole debate is taking place with respect to regions of discourse which all the protagonists are presumed fully to understand. The question is: what can someone do, in using a particular statement, to rightly convince an audience, who understand that statement, that the proper description of his or her understanding combines all three elements in the original tension? Blackburn's reply then comes to this: maybe nothing can be done unless the *audience's* understanding already combines those elements. But this offers no assurance whatever in a context in which their combinability is already *sub judice*. Besides, if Blackburn is right, the chances are that his antirealist opponent provides a 'suitable audience', *malgre soi*. So why not just answer the question? Let us have a description—appreciable by anyone who understands whatever kind of statement is giving rise to the problem—of what specifically, in the exercise of an understanding of such statements, manifests the fact that it consists in grasping a potentially evidence-transcendent truth-condition.

It is important not to mistake what is being requested. The question is not—at least in the first instance—how one might manifest the *belief* that one's own understanding was realist. Presumably it would be allowable to *say* that it was. The issue rather concerns what in one's use of the relevant class of statements would manifest the fact that this belief was *true*.²⁸ In the nature of the case, then, one is looking for evidence in linguistic practice apart from the mere protestation of realism. Someone could *profess* a conception, for instance, which allowed that the comic quality of a situation could be evidence-transcendent. "For the humor of a situation to be inaccessible to us," they might claim, "is only and purely for the situation relevantly to resemble situations whose comic quality is apparent to us, but without the resemblance being apparent." Compare: for someone to be unbreakably stoically in pain—a Putnam X-worlder²⁹—is just for it to be with them as it is with others who are in pain and, one way or another, can be brought to show it; it is just that this subject cannot be brought to show it. Such a possibility strikes us (doesn't it?) as an absurd misrepresentation of our understanding of discourse about the comic; we have no conception, surely, of what comic quality could consist in if it is allowed to transcend any elicitable human response. But *showing* that is so would require, precisely, a demonstration that the best account of our understanding of statements about the comic, as manifested in our use of them, left no space for the alleged possibility.

So too for any philosophy of mind which would allow inscrutable stoicism to be a possibility: the prior question is whether we actually understand ascriptions of sensation, and of mental states in general, in such a way that evidence-transcendent truth-conferral makes sense. And that is a question which can be settled only by reference to the verdict on the matter of the best account of our use of discourse concerning the mental. Making good the compatibilist response, when understanding is regarded as platitudinously truth-conditional, has to consist in finding something in the overt nature of the 'neighborhood abilities'—apart from mere professions of realism—which is best explained by viewing the 'truth' that is thereby platitudinously linked with understanding as (potentially) evidence-transcendent. The story could concern, perhaps, our acceptance of a particular kind of evidence, or inference pattern; or it might be that the use of certain embedding contexts was hard to explain otherwise.³⁰ I am far less confident than I was ten years ago that such a story can never be told. But to meet the manifestation challenge is to tell such a story, and Blackburn's paper contains no clear response to this simple and utterly legitimate demand. Indeed, except in his discussion of what he perceives as the shortcomings of the assertibility-conditions approach to our understanding of undecided mathematical statements, he never so much as gets down to cases.

Let me stress again that the manifestation question only concerns the character of our understanding. The question is: Have we assigned meaning to the statements in a certain discourse in such a way that there is space for the world to deliver up evidence-transcendent truth-conferrers for them? So an affirmative answer is not yet a commitment to realism.³¹ Someone might give an affirmative answer and hold that, for independent reasons, there is no reality to which the discourse answers at all. What we are exploring, in the issue about manifestation, is whether a *necessary* condition is satisfied for the appropriateness of a certain kind of realist view: the view that holds that, in the discourse in question, truth and optimal justification extensionally diverge, and hence that we have to think of the domain of states of affairs in which the truth-conferrers are to be found as constituted independently of our cognitive activity.

IV: REVISIONISM AND HOLISM

If the whole antirealist polemic were provided by the manifestation challenge, as described, it might seem very unclear how there could be any support for the revisionist philosophy of logic which Dummett has famously advocated. For surely one cannot sensibly urge both that it is moot whether anything in one's practice of a discourse of a certain kind manifests understanding of a certain character and, in the same breath, urge revision of aspects of the practice which, it is claimed, would only be appropriate *if* the understanding were of that character. Either, it seems, the case for revision must be inconclusive

—because the relevant aspects of the practice could as well be sanctioned in other ways—or else it is ill-founded, those very aspects providing the requisite distinctive manifestation that one’s understanding of the discourse has the character in question.

One answer would be that no difficulty need arise if the Dummettian revisionist can provide an *independent* argument that understanding cannot be evidence-transcendent truth-conditional—perhaps from considerations to do with concept-acquisition. But in that case there would be no purpose to the argument about manifestation. The ground for saying that the problematical understanding could not be manifest in practice would be that it could not in any case be *possessed*; and that would directly provide motive enough for revision of aspects of practice which seemed to depend upon it. So the question remains: How can the manifestation challenge contribute, as Dummett evidently intends that it should, to a revisionary philosophy of logic?

The answer is that revisionism, if it is to be based on the manifestation challenge, needs *molecularism*: it needs the claim that the dubious kind of understanding, if it were not to be dubious, would have to be manifest in our practice within a *fragment* of the discourse where it is, at least *prima facie*, not manifest. Only then can it coherently be argued that aspects of the discourse outside that fragment, in whose practice the dubious conception is reflected, involve malpractice.³² Dummett, I hasten to say, has never been under any illusions about this, and has always taken an explicitly molecular view, believing that anything else will lead to an incoherent form of holism.

I myself am far from persuaded whether that is so; and somewhat skeptical also about the possibility of making good the presupposition that our understanding of the statements in a discourse may be fully on display in advance of any consideration of the way we use certain contexts which embed them.³³ But the point I want to emphasize here is that it is in this context that the issues to do with holism arise. Blackburn represents Dummett as invoking the specter of meaning-holism in response to the extension of ‘grasp of truth-conditions’ to cover all the ‘neighborhood abilities’.³⁴ I suspect that Dummett would, rightly in my view, offer no objection to so using ‘grasp of truth-conditions’. In any case, the issues to do with holism are properly located elsewhere on the map.

V: THE ARGUMENT FROM NORMATIVITY

I have here concentrated on considerations to do with the manifestation of understanding, because Blackburn concentrates on them. Understandably, since the suggestion was not developed in *Realism, Meaning, and Truth*, he makes nothing of the fourth antirealist argument which I briefly canvassed in the Introduction—that which ties the issues concerning evidence-transcendent truth-conditions to what have come to be known as ‘the rule-following considerations’. The key thought here is that, since the relation which obtains

between a statement and its truth-conferrer is an *internal* relation – it being an essential characteristic of that statement to be rendered true by that state of affairs and an essential characteristic of that state of affairs to render true any statement with that content – belief in evidence-transcendent truths is a commitment to belief in unratifiable internal relations. And that belief can be sustained only on the picture of rules and rule-following which embodies the “myth of super-rigid machinery” on which Wittgenstein targets his discussions. My own belief is that this is probably the most powerful of the weapons in the antirealist’s armory, although I cannot of course go into its details here. But note that it bites in a rather different place to the manifestation challenge. The target of the latter is whether anything in our understanding of a discourse prepares for the possibility that the world might confer truth-values upon its statements undetectably; but the conclusion of the argument from rule-following is to the effect that, even if our understanding of a discourse is so prepared, the world cannot ever actually *bring about* a determinate undetectable truth. For a statement’s being undetectably true could only consist, to repeat, in the obtaining of an unratifiable internal relation.

Blackburn does, however, have some things to say about what, in the Introduction, I called the Argument from Normativity. In rough outline, the argument runs like this. Only sentences with assertoric content are apt to be true. And, trivially, for a sentence to have assertoric content is for its content to equip it for use in accordance with whatever constraints assertions distinctively have to conform to. Accordingly, since truth is normative of proper assertion – is that at which assertion is, properly, essentially aimed – it is a condition of a sentence’s having assertoric content that it may in certain circumstances be used as an *attempt* at the truth. But, for reasons to do with the nature of intention which were outlined in the Introduction,³⁵ there is no aiming at the truth by the use of a sentence whose truth, it is known – if it could be true – would transcend all possible evidence.

As Blackburn in effect argues, the argument bears directly only on his realist as Insulationist – a realist who believes that, in the nature of the case, the truth-values of the statements in a certain region of discourse are beyond human ken. For in that case, whatever is regulating proper practice in the discourse in question, it cannot be the aim of truth so conceived; and the ‘grasp of truth-conditions’ which platitudinously constitutes understanding of those statements cannot be grasp of conditions of insulated truth. Blackburn does not quarrel with the point about intention, and acknowledges that “insulationism is tempting and worth fighting against.” Nevertheless, he finds the argument unconvincing:

Truth may indeed be a norm governing assertoric discourse, but . . . this may not be its only role. The concept appears to figure in thoughts like “there may be truths about which we shall never be able to reason”, or “there may be truths accessible only to minds alien to ours” and a

proponent of the normativity argument will need to wrestle with the stubborn appearance of intelligibility in such thoughts.³⁶

Well, but are the allegedly possible truths to which these putatively intelligible thoughts advert at least to be expressible in our language? They had better be: it would be a stupendous *ignoratio elenchi* to reproach an argument which — like all the arguments for semantic antirealism — is concerned with the proper account of truth and truth-conditions for assertoric discourses which we understand for its failure to foreclose on realist sentiment which takes refuge in the ineffable. Assume, therefore, that Blackburn is not doing that, and that the ‘stubbornly intelligible-seeming’ thoughts refer to possible truths which we would have the means to convey by intelligible assertion. In that case, the argument was that it is a constraint on the means of conveyance that it be possible to use the relevant sentences to aim at the truth. So can we so aim in the putative cases in question? Not, according to the considerations about intention, if we *know* that the sentences in question, if they express truths at all, express truths which we cannot reason about and which cannot be accessible to minds like ours. But if our knowing that is not part of the scenario, then the supporter of the intelligibility of the thoughts in question cannot be Blackburn’s Insulationist. The position calls, rather, for the realist as Non-Guarantor.

The Non-Guarantor holds not that truth and falsity within a given discourse are *a priori* inaccessible to us, but only that they may be. Is this position engaged by the argument from normativity? Blackburn fails to see that it can be, arguing that if truth for the statements of the discourse is merely potentially evidence-transcendent, then we can surely try for it, even if, *de facto*, we cannot actually succeed. But if I seemed to suggest to the contrary, I shouldn’t have. The argument, as against the Non-Guarantor, is not that we cannot aim at truth in regions of discourse where we are prone to conceive of truth as potentially inaccessible, but rather that it is not that notion of truth at which we should be regarded as aiming. One case for saying so, sketched in “Truth-conditions and Criteria,”³⁷ is to the effect that there is simply no difference between aiming at a potentially evidence-transcendent objective and aiming at the realization of a situation in which there is evidence that the objective has after all been attained. This argument brings the issue back into the area of manifestability: the claim is that, as far as the pattern assumed by my linguistic practice is concerned, it is all the same whether I am aiming at a species of truth which may be associated with favorable evidence but may also be inaccessible in any particular case, or at a species of truth which, I conceive, must issue in the availability of favorable evidence whenever it applies. Either way, the constraints on proper assertion will be the same.

In the Introduction, however, I tried to tackle the Non-Guarantor somewhat differently.³⁸ To understand a statement as associated with potentially evidence-transcendent truth-conditions would have to be — assuming sufficient

expressive resources in the language—to understand what it would be for a statement which averred that the former *was* undetectably true to be itself true, *a fortiori* undetectably so. But the possible truth of such a statement requires its possession of assertoric content, and therefore, it was supposed, its serviceability under certain circumstances for an *attempt* to speak the truth. And, so it was argued, there is no attempting anything if one has no beliefs about how to succeed, no intelligible motive for success, and if success will have no discernible consequences. So we cannot attempt the truth by the use of any statement which, like ‘S is undetectably true’ can only be true by being so undetectably. The consequence would be that such a statement lacks genuine assertoric content, and hence is not itself in the market for truth, so that our understanding of the original S was misrepresented when portrayed as involving its association with potentially evidence-transcendent truth-conditions.

One difference between this argument against the Non-Guarantor and the original directed against the Insulationist is that the point about intention may seem slightly less secure in the former case, where failure at least—in the form of S’s turning out *detectably* true or false—can have discernible consequences. But I do not think that this is an important difference. At most, it can reinstate the *avoidance of detectable failure* as an attemptable objective; and avoiding detectable failure is not, in the examples we are concerned with, the same thing as success. In any case, the obligations of an opponent of these arguments are quite clear: reason must be found to reject either the proposed constraint on assertoric content, or the considerations about intention. Again, there is obviously much more to say, and I am by no means confident that it will go the antirealist’s way. For instance: Can statements of, by the lights of the argument, dubious assertoric content (‘S is undetectably true’) sustain determinate logical relations with statements (‘S is detectably true’) for which the argument occasions no difficulty? But this is not an occasion when I can pursue these issues. My purpose in this section has been only to clarify the normativity argument somewhat and to scotch the impression given by Blackburn that I had made no distinction between the Insulationist and Non-Guarantor as far as the bearing of the argument was concerned, believing that the *de facto* unavailability of evidence for the truth of a statement would be as much an obstacle to the possibility of using it with the aim of truth as would the knowledge *a priori* that no such evidence could be available.³⁹

Notes

1. See p. 46 of Blackburn’s “Manifesting Realism” in this volume.
2. See p. 45 in this volume.
3. See p. 45 in this volume.
4. Wright, *Realism, Meaning, and Truth* (Oxford, 1987), ix.
5. It is, in a way, disappointing to have occasion to do so. I had hoped that the Introduction, in particular, to *Realism, Meaning, and Truth* might have set the issues in a somewhat clearer light than Blackburn’s discussion reflects. But there are no

canonical formulations of these matters, and none, I am sure, in *Realism, Meaning, and Truth* that cannot be improved.

6. See p. 33 and note 19 of my "Realism, Anti-realism, Irrealism, Quasi-realism," in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 12 (1988):25-49. Other problems besetting the *Spreading the Word* proposals for an expressive construal of moral discourse are raised by Bob Hale in "The Compleat Projectivist," *Philosophical Quarterly* 36 (1986): 65-84, and G. F. Schueler, "Modus Ponens and Moral Realism," *Ethics* 98 (1988): 492-500.

7. Simon Blackburn, "Attitudes and Contents," *Ethics* 98 (1988): 501-17.

8. Bob Hale, "Can There Be a Logic of Attitudes?" in *Reality: Representation and Projection*, edited by John Haldane and Crispin Wright (Oxford, 1990).

9. See W. P. Alston, "Ontological Commitments," *Philosophical Studies* 9 (1958): 8-17, and my *Frege's Conception of Numbers as Objects* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J., 1983), chap. 1, section v.

10. One such possible but, for Blackburn's purposes, unsuitable distinction is proposed in the concluding section of the present essay—unsuitable because it engages only 'assertions' which are apparently apt for undetectable truth and so has no bearing, presumably, on moral assertions. For further misgivings about the kind of distinction Blackburn needs, see "Realism, Anti-realism, Irrealism, Quasi-realism," and also my "Anti-realism: The Contemporary Debate—Whither Now?" in *Reality: Representation and Projection*, edited by John Haldane and Crispin Wright (Oxford, 1990), and the Introduction to my *Realism, Rules, and Objectivity* (London, forthcoming).

11. Since it is by way of a platitude that to assert a sentence is to present it as true.

12. In the Nelson Lectures at the University of Michigan, September 1988.

13. Cf. "Realism, Anti-realism, Irrealism, Quasi-realism," 40-42, and "Anti-realism: The Contemporary Debate—Whither Now?" section IV.

14. See, for instance, Gilbert Harman, *The Nature of Morality: An Introduction to Ethics* (Oxford, 1977), chap. 1; David Wiggins, *Needs, Values, Truth* (London, 1987), essay IV, "Truth as Predicated of Moral Judgments," sections 9 and 10; Nicholas Sturgeon, "Moral Explanations," in *Morality, Reason, and Truth*, edited by David Copp and David Zimmerman (Totowa, N.J., 1985), 49-78.

15. For more on this see, again, "Anti-realism: The Contemporary Debate—Whither Now?" section IV, and *Realism, Rules, and Objectivity*.

16. The question of *Rational Command* as it is styled in "Realism, Anti-realism, Irrealism, Quasi-realism."

17. Or, more specifically, in terms of *superassertibility*. See *Realism, Meaning, and Truth*, chap. 9, and "Anti-realism: The Contemporary Debate—Whither Now?" section II.

18. That is not to say that only men of straw—or their progeny—are to be found there. Cf. the passage from Sir Peter quoted below. If it seems to us obvious nowadays that there is nothing to be made of understanding if it is conceived contrary to the Manifestability Principle—for instance, as an interior representation of correct use—it is largely owing to the assimilation into the general philosophical consciousness of the critique of such ideas in the *Philosophical Investigations*. And the target of this critique was not the views of some imaginary Aunt Sally, but an extremely natural and influential lay-philosophical misconception.

19. It is still, of course, an egregious error to attempt to make capital out of the supposed consequence of such a semantical approach that statements—like the "old campaigners"—which are *a priori* insulated from all rational assessment, and hence have no conditions of warranted assertion, are therefore meaningless. Meaningless sentences to be sure, do not have conditions of warranted assertion. But Blackburn argues as if the converse were evident (p. 41). And the fact is that the antirealist has as much

title as anyone else to treat it as a criterion for understanding one of the old campaigners—for instance, if it indeed comes into that category, “Everything is uniformly increasing in size”—that someone be able e.g., to explain why, in view of the meanings of its constituent expressions and their manner of combination, nothing could count as evidence for its truth.

20. *Realism, Meaning and Truth*, 36.

21. P. 40 in this volume.

22. Strictly, it might be enough if, even if the world never actually so delivered, its failure to do so was merely contingent. Note that Dummett’s original formulations of realism, in which the view is characterized as essentially the endorsement of a bivalent truth-conditional semantics, thereby involve, for suitable discourses, a rolled-into-one version of the semantic and worldly aspects which I have separated as (a) and (b).

23. *Realism, Meaning, and Truth*, 17f.

24. P. F. Strawson, “Scruton and Wright on Anti-realism Etc.,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 77 (1977): 15–21, esp. 16.

25. This is the line pursued by John McDowell in “Anti-realism and the Epistemology of Understanding,” in *Meaning and Understanding*, edited by H. Parret and J. Bouveresse (Berlin, 1981), 225–48, see especially pages 229–31. For further references and discussion, see the Introduction, 18 f.

26. Dummett, concluding paragraph of “Truth,” in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 59 (1959): 141–62.

27. *Spreading the Word*, 65–66.

28. The situation is dialectically somewhat subtle, however. Suppose we recoil from the idea that a subject’s possession of a belief could be manifest only in its avowal; then it might be a condition of so much as believing—genuinely believing—that one’s understanding of a class of statements was realist that one behave in ways which would supply the materials for a direct response to the manifestation challenge, and thereby establish the belief as true.

29. Hilary Putnam, “Brains and Behavior,” in his *Language, Mind and Reality: Philosophical Papers*, vol. 2 (Cambridge, 1975): 325–41.

30. Relevant problems here are posed by the so-called Paradox of Knowability; see the Appendix, “Could Thatcher be a Master Criminal?” to chap. 9 of *Realism, Meaning, and Truth* for discussion and references. More recent references include a series of discussion notes by Timothy Williamson, including “On Knowledge of the Unknowable,” *Analysis* 47 (1987): 154–58; “On the Paradox of Knowability,” *Mind* 96 (1987): 256–61; and “Knowability and Constructivism,” *Philosophical Quarterly* 38 (1988): 422–32.

31. This distinction is well emphasized in Michael Luntley’s *Language, Logic, and Experience* (San Pablo, Calif., 1987).

32. For detailed discussion of the issues here, see Neil Tennant’s *Anti-realism and Logic* (Oxford, 1987), sections 6–10.

33. See *Realism, Meaning, and Truth*, chap. 10, “Anti-realism and Revisionism,” for elaboration of these misgivings.

34. P. 35 in this volume.

35. *Realism, Meaning, and Truth*, 24–26.

36. P. 41 in this volume.

37. Section IV; *Realism, Meaning, and Truth*, 58–61.

38. *Realism, Meaning, and Truth*, 24.

39. Simon Blackburn presented an ancestor of “Manifesting Realism” as a Nelson Lecture at the University of Michigan in September 1988. When I learned that it was destined for the present volume, I was very keen that something by way of reply should

appear alongside it. I am extremely grateful to Howard Wettstein for being willing to publish the present, inevitably very hastily drafted effort, and to Bob Hale and Stephen Yablo for very helpful criticism at short notice.