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Author(s): Crispin Wright

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Comrades against Quietism: Reply to Simon Blackburn on Truth and Objectivity

CRISPIN WRIGHT

Simon Blackburn would like to turn what he views as the prevailing tide of metaphysical opinion—the “pragmatist”, “internal realist”, “minimalist”, “deflationist”, or “quietist” tide of what he nicely describes as the “denial of differences, the celebration of the seamless web of language, the soothing away of distinction”.¹ While a little unsure of my welcome—and doubtful, actually, how strong the current against us really is—I am happy to join him in the water. *Truth and Objectivity* is dedicated to explaining the kinds of distinction which are rejected by the trend Blackburn deplores. The whole project of the book is the cartography of “contour”—the characterization of dimensions in which different areas of our thought and discourse might vary and, by so varying, give point to “realist” and “anti-realist” thoughts about them.

Blackburn acknowledges this (if maybe a little grudgingly). However he claims a “more contoured” vision of the metaphysical landscape than mine. I think the image misrepresents our main differences. For while—although contesting some of the details—he broadly applauds the contrasts emphasized in my book, it is not as if there are then *additional* discriminations which he would have me make. His complaint is not that I draw too few distinctions, but that I draw the wrong distinctions—or mischaracterize distinctions which we agree should be drawn. For instance, he wants to prevent the territory traditionally occupied by expressivist anti-realist proposals from being swallowed up by the minimalism about truth and truth-aptness advanced in *Truth and Objectivity*, to reserve space for the idea that the “propositional surface” of moral language, or conditionals, or talk of probabilities, for instance, may serve to mask the real nature of what is happening in discourses of those kinds. Yet while he regards expressivism, broadly construed, as giving an account of the workings of certain discourses alternative and preferable to the proposal that they are “qualified by no interesting feature serving to give point to an intuitive realism about [them]—that [they deploy] minimally truth-apt

¹ This paper, like Simon Blackburn’s, is an elaboration of remarks made at an Author-Critics session on my *Truth and Objectivity* held at the Central Division Meetings of the American Philosophical Association at Chicago in April 1995.

contents and that is the whole of the matter” (Wright 1992, p. 142), there do not seem to be other cases where he regards the minimalist proposal as doing better justice to anti-realist intuition than expressivism can. Blackburn thus rejects rather than complicates the *Truth and Objectivity* characterization of a basic anti-realism.² Likewise he rejects, rather than complicates, the suggestion that realism-relevant distinctions may be assisted by the framework of a pluralism about truth. In general, the issue between us is not how many the distinctions are, or how deep they go, but how they should be drawn.

It’s a familiar phenomenon in activist politics that disagreements among closely related factions are often more intensely felt than disagreements with more radically opposed ideas, and are often pursued under the accusation of insufficiency of distance from the latter. This bickering works against political credibility, and I suspect that the proponents of metaphysical contour run a similar risk. Nevertheless an effective opposition to the “soothing away of distinction” has to come equipped with the correct distinctions. So it is worth trying to get these matters right. Hence, while I appreciate Blackburn’s support on many issues, not least in his apposite remarks about Richard Rorty, I’ll concentrate in what follows on our more significant points of theoretical disagreement and on certain misrepresentations (mainly of what he says I said about Wittgenstein) and apparent misunderstandings (mainly in connection with semantic minimalism and its threatened globalization).

I

I’ll begin with a thumbnail sketch of how contour is meant to emerge in *Truth and Objectivity*. One thing which I think has encouraged Blackburn’s “more contoured than thou” self-impression is my use of “minimalism” and its cognates, terms which he associates with the quietist

² He seems to be saying as much himself in his footnote 2

Myself I doubt whether the issue of whether disagreement illustrates a cognitive defect [i.e. whether a discourse exerts Cognitive Command] can be pursued except via the very considerations that suggest expressivism. For instance, to decide whether ground-floor modal or moral disagreement illustrates a cognitive defect somewhere would require discovering whether, instead, it is better seen as indicating a failure of imagination, or sympathy, or of practical or intellectual policy. (Blackburn 1998, p. 158)

So, he suggests, a discourse’s failure of Cognitive Command can be expected to lead us straight to considerations which suggest an expressivist—rather than minimalist—account of it.

opposition. So perhaps it merits emphasis that the minimalism proposed in *Truth and Objectivity* is merely a combination of specific views about what qualifies a predicate as a truth predicate and about what suffices for a discourse to be truth-apt. It involves nothing generally deflationary about metaphysics in general or the realism debates in particular. The combination may, as far as it goes, be congenial to Quietism, but it is a major point of the argument of *Truth and Objectivity* that these views about truth and truth-aptitude do *not* imply Quietism and are, to the contrary, at the service of resistance to it.

The minimalist view about *truth*, in brief summary, is that it is necessary and sufficient, in order for a predicate to qualify as a truth predicate, that it satisfy each of a basic set of platitudes about truth: for instance, that to assert is to present as true, that statements which are apt for truth have negations which are likewise, that truth is one thing, justification is another, and so on. Minimalism about *truth-aptitude*, likewise hastily summarized, comprises the twin contentions:

- (i) that any discourse dealing in assertoric contents will allow the definition upon its sentences of a predicate which qualifies as a truth predicate in the light of the minimalist proposal about truth;
- (ii) that a discourse should be reckoned to deal in such contents just in case its ingredient sentences are subject to certain minimal constraints of syntax—embeddability within negation, the conditional, contexts of propositional attitude, etc.—and discipline: their use must be governed by agreed standards of warrant.

With each of these minimalisms in place, almost all the areas which have traditionally provoked realist/anti-realist debate—ethics, aesthetics, intentional psychology, mathematics, theoretical science, and so on—will turn out to traffic in truth-apt contents, which moreover, when the disciplinary standards proper to the discourse are satisfied, we are going to be entitled to claim to be true. So two traditional forms of anti-realism are immediately under pressure: classical *expressivism*—the denial that a target discourse, although possessed of “propositional surface”, really deals in truth-apt contents—is not going to be an option; and the *error-theorist*, like John Mackie on ethics or Hartry Field on mathematics, though not out of the game straight away, will have his work cut out to make the charge of global error stick—typically, he’ll have to point out some shortfall between the standards of warrant that actually inform the discourse in question and the notion of truth that actually applies therein.

As the last remark implies, minimalism about truth, as I conceive it, in contrast with the deflationary conception of truth which I believe it should supersede, is not committed to the idea that what is involved in truth has to be uniform across all areas of our thought. Any truth predicate, in whatever area, will satisfy the minimal platitudes—that’s what *makes* it a truth

predicate. But the truth predicates in different areas of thought may in addition exhibit differences—differences in, broadly speaking, the kind of circumstance that constitutes their applying, when they apply—which help to fill out and render discussible realist and anti-realist oppositions. That is where the hope of contour surfaces within the framework of the two minimalisms. *Truth and Objectivity* tries to show how that hope might be realized in a variety of different ways.

This potential pluralism about truth seems to have been misunderstood in some quarters. But I do not think it ought to seem too shocking a notion. If it does shock, it may be because it is being received as the suggestion of a kind of ambiguity in the word “true”. But that’s not the point at all. An ambiguous term typically admits of two (or more) quite different kinds of explanation, each of which determines a different extension for it. But if a truth predicate is any that satisfies the minimal set of platitudes—if there’s no more to being a truth predicate than that—then all that can be said by way of explanation of the word, “true”, is enshrined in those platitudes, which explanation is therefore *uniform*. In addition, since the platitudes will certainly be chosen so as to ensure that any truth predicate satisfies the Disquotational Scheme, there won’t be any possibility of a pair of predicates each qualifying as a truth predicate for a single discourse and yet differing in their extension within it.

The kind of plurality that’s envisaged may be brought out by a comparison with identity. Minimally, identity can be characterized as that relation which is universally reflexive and a congruence for an arbitrary property. To that extent, the concept of identity is uniform across varying kinds of object. But that uniformity had better be consistent with our recognizing that what *constitutes* identity is subject to considerable variation depending on the kinds of objects concerned. The identity of material objects is constituted by spatial and temporal continuity; for cardinal numbers, according to Frege’s famous proposal, identity is constituted by the one to one correspondence of an associated pair of concepts; for the directions of a pair of straight lines, identity is constituted by those lines being parallel; and for persons, identity is constituted by—well, it’s notoriously difficult to say, but the case is different from each of the preceding. Identity, one might thus say, is *formally* uniform, but may vary *in constitution* as we consider different potential identicals. Clearly there is space for a similar contention about truth: truth is formally uniform—in the sense determined by satisfaction of the platitudes—but its constitution may vary depending on the type of statement and subject matter concerned.

This is the space that, by pointing to the various cruces—Cognitive Command, Wide Cosmological Role, the Euthyphro Contrast, etc.—discussed in *Truth and Objectivity*, I was trying to fill. Platitudinously, truth

is always correspondence to fact. But what correspondence to fact is may vary, in realism-relevant ways, if the notion of correspondence carries the connotation of substantial representation which the Cognitive Command constraint tries to control, or if the facts concerned have the robustness of Wide Cosmological Role. Likewise if truth in some discourse is—or might as well be taken to be—superassertibility, then, for that area, we must surrender the idea of truth as a matter of fit with external states of affairs of which enduring satisfaction of that discourse's internal disciplinary constraints is merely a symptom, or marker.

II

Blackburn regards the combination of the two minimalisms, about truth and about truth-aptness respectively, as “a much more strange view than it might seem at first sight”. His principal objection is that the combination sets up a tension with what is evidently possible, “that there should be norms of acceptance and rejection of utterances of indicative sentences which exist for other reasons than that those sentences have truth conditions” (Blackburn 1998, p. 159). Among the kinds of sentences which, he suggests, minimalism should countenance as minimally truth-apt but whose use is manifestly governed by non-truth-connected norms are Austinian performatives, like promises, christenings, etc., sentences uttered or written in the course of fiction, and metaphors.

These particular three examples raise many issues which it would be impractical to attempt to treat here.³ However Blackburn's own brisk discussion neglects two considerations which, once noted, make it rather implausible, I think, that a detailed discussion of such cases would uncover any serious difficulties for the minimalist proposal. The first is simply that to hold that a region of discourse deals in minimally truth-apt contents involves—of course—absolutely no commitment to the view that the *only* norms governing indicative utterances within it are ones connected with truth. Nobody is going to deny that the assertion of a truth-apt sentence may be open to criticism for all kinds of reasons besides a failure to be true. Minimalism is perfectly comfortable with this, and puts no obstacles before a philosopher who, for whatever reason, regards the taxonomy of the non-truth-connected norms operative over particular indicative utterances, or the attitudinal psychology involved in operating them, as of special importance. Let him draw what distinctions and note what differences he will. Nothing in the minimalist view of truth and

³ For a little more about the case of fiction see Wright 1994.

truth-aptitude stands in the way of the idea that, in making an assertion, one may be doing many other things in tandem so that one's utterance may be subject to other norms of appraisal besides those which govern assertion, and the attitudinal psychology which underlies it may be correspondingly complicated and involve a lot more than just belief.

Second—and perhaps a little less obvious—the minimalist proposal is only concerned with when it is right to think of discourses as trafficking in truth-apt contents. *Truth and Objectivity* could usefully have placed more emphasis upon the point that a positive verdict about a particular discourse in that respect is—contrary to what Blackburn assumes—by no means a commitment to the view that the standard use of (all) its indicative sentences is to *assert* those contents. The most salient cases where the two come apart are indeed precisely the performatives: utterances like “I name this ship the *Marie Celeste*” or “With this ring I thee wed” are certainly associated with truth-apt contents—that is why they are available for embedding in conditionals, propositional attitude constructions, and so on—but their role is, or so one would think, not to assert such contents but to *realize* them—bring about their truth.

Similar distinctions could be applied to the treatment of both fiction and metaphor. Indeed, as I read Davidson's (1978) well-known discussion of the latter, that is exactly what he, for one, did propose: “metaphorizing”, his idea was, should be seen as a distinctive form of speech act—an operation upon a truth-apt content contrasting with the simple assertion of it. (That would explain why the obvious literal inappropriateness of most metaphors is not an objection to them.) A strategically similar proposal about fiction might have it that in fictional contexts the distinctive such operation is *pretended assertion*—where such an utterance is no more a real assertion than a stage murder is a murder—but that what is pretend-ly asserted is, likewise, a straightforwardly truth-apt content (though one which, if it involves fictional names, may fail of truth, it is open to us to hold, through reference failure).

I am not here endorsing these particular suggestions. My point is simply that minimalism is not committed to the idea that any simple indicative utterance associated with a particular truth-apt content has to be thought of as the assertion of that content: again, something quite different may be happening, and the attitudinal psychology associated with the performance may be non-doxastic in consequence. Blackburn writes as though minimalism had to be inhospitable to the thought that “commitment in some areas is not a simple matter of belief, but more to do with endorsement of invitations to think of things in a certain light (metaphors), movements of thought (conditionals), the successful evocation of moods and emotions (poetry), or movements from representation to motivation

(ethics)". If there is merit in any of those suggestions, it can surely be brought out by their development in one of the two ways pointed to: by pragmatic and psychological considerations viewed as supplementary to a basic assertoric account of the sentences which express the "commitments" in question, or by viewing those sentences as the bearers of truth-aptness contents which it is, however, not their standard use to assert. Either way, minimalism should be able comfortably to accommodate the relevant development.⁴

III

En passant, Blackburn throws in his lot with those critics, like Frank Jackson, Graham Oppy and Michael Smith (1994), who have objected—"tellingly" in Blackburn's view—that the position taken in *Truth and Objectivity* depends on focusing only on a selection of the platitudes concerning the notions of truth and assertion, and ignoring in particular equally platitudinous connections of those notions with *belief*. The thought is, familiarly, that one may be forced to look below the propositional surface of, for example, ethical discourse if one takes it as a platitude that assertion is the profession of belief but also accepts, with Hume, that no belief can be, in and of itself, a motivational state, and regards it as clear that whatever is professed by an ethical "assertion" is such a motivational state.

This is again a line of thought which warrants a more elaborate discussion than I can venture here. It might seem that the only clean way to

⁴ The foregoing brings out that it is important to distinguish two broad forms of expressivist proposal. One—what I have called classical expressivism—holds that no truth-evaluable contents are expressed by e.g. any ethical sentences. This is the view that is squeezed out by minimalism. But a second form of proposal, just urged to be consistent with minimalism, would be not that the relevant discourse does not deal in truth-evaluable contents at all, but that the characteristic use of its (simple) indicative sentences is, rather, not to assert such contents. This second form of claim seems to be exactly what is wanted in the service of some traditional expressivist views, for instance, in order to give the best run for its money to the kind of non-assertoric thesis about avowals (certain first-person psychological ascriptions) sometimes thought to have been proposed by the late Wittgenstein. For more on this, see my (1997). But I doubt that it should seem terribly attractive to those drawn towards ethical expressivism. The effect would be that even if "Stealing is wrong" were not itself typically used to make an assertion, it would be reckoned to be associated with a content which was nevertheless in principle *apt* for assertion, which could be hypothesized to be true, presented as the antecedent of a conditional, reasoned from, and so on. So questions would have to be allowed about what kind of content that was, what it would be to be justified in taking it to be true, etc.—questions whose principled avoidance was precisely one of the attractions of classical ethical expressivism.

dispose of the objection would be to controvert one of the latter two claims: to argue directly that certain kinds of belief are intrinsically motivational after all,⁵ or that the attitudes expressed by sincere ethical claims are, appearances notwithstanding, not *intrinsically* motivational.⁶ However to accept a challenge to pursue those issues would be to acknowledge that the minimalism of *Truth and Objectivity* is hostage to such unfinished business. And that I do not acknowledge (even if either hostage might well be redeemed). The correct response is rather that, in so far as the questions whether a belief can be, in and of itself, a motivational state, and whether the states professed by ethical utterances are indeed intrinsically motivational, are taken to be open and philosophically substantial, to that extent it is simply *not* a platitude that the assertion of any minimally truth-apt content is a profession of belief. Or rather: for one who accepts that those issues are open, *belief* is not the notion in terms of which to articulate the platitude which lurks in the vicinity. However we can easily find an alternative expression by taking over for the purpose a term to which Blackburn conveniently—and rather revealingly—often has recourse: *commitment*. For Blackburn's "commitments" are typically expressed by indicative sentences; they may be argued for and against, reasoned to and from, accepted, doubted and entertained. So the notion ought to give us all we need. The relevant platitude is thus, in effect, that the assertion of a minimally truth-apt content is the profession of a commitment. Since Blackburn's view is that only some commitments are really *beliefs*, he therefore owes an account, which I do not know that he has anywhere attempted to provide, of what is distinctive of the narrower class. However, the minimalist has no reason to reject out of hand the suggestion that such a worthwhile distinction may exist, and can with good grace accept Blackburn's annexing of the term, "belief", to the narrower class, if it exists, as a conceivably well-motivated linguistic reform. We can wait and see how well motivated it is. It remains that ordinary practice does not scruple to use "belief" where Blackburn prefers his term of art and that it is only with the more generous notion that there is the platitudinous connection with assertion which this line of objection wholly misguidedly seeks to exploit.

⁵ This is a view often taken to be defended by John McDowell (see especially McDowell 1978).

⁶ Michael Smith (1994) himself eventually takes such a view.

IV

Blackburn's second principal disagreement with the framework of *Truth and Objectivity* concerns the *location* of the contour. For Blackburn, the relevant plurality is not among ways in which truth may be constituted in different regions of discourse, but among the *bearers* of truth—the realism-relevant distinctions are to be made by seeking out variety among kinds of *propositions*. Thus Blackburn's "quasi-realist" about ethics who is also realist about, say, theoretical physics holds not that their respective truth predicates differ: that truth in ethics, say, is broadly, a matter of superassertibility while truth in physics is a matter of relation to robust external matters—a relation of which enduring satisfaction of best empirical-theoretic methodology is at best an indicator—but rather that there is a key distinction between ethical and theoretical-physical propositions, a distinction which can peacefully coexist with their both being satisfiers of some *uniform* notion of truth.

That *sounds* as if it could be a real theoretical contrast. But on closer inspection there are difficulties in seeing how it could be stable; and I doubt in any case if it gets to the heart of our differences. The problem is to understand what *kind* of distinctions among types of proposition, of the sort that Blackburn wants to draw, might be constitutive of realist/anti-realist contrasts yet go unreflected by systematic differences in what makes for their *truth*. If the suggestion that ethics and theoretical physics traffic in different kinds of proposition is to be anything germane to the respective causes of anti-realism about ethics and realism about theoretical physics, for example, then it surely has to import the idea that the two kinds of proposition relate in different ways to the real world (that is, the austere physical, non-intentional, non-modal, value-free world which, in Blackburn's implicit underlying metaphysical picture, acts as a boundary on all genuine literal description). In brief, using Blackburn's shorthand, I don't see how he can avoid saying that the truth of a q-proposition is a very different kind of circumstance from the truth of a d-proposition. Yet once that point is acknowledged, it is hard to see how the insistence that a uniform truth predicate applies to propositions of both kinds can be intelligible except under the aegis of something very close to the minimalism about truth canvassed in *Truth and Objectivity*.

The converse direction of implication is also plausible. If Blackburn's preferred form of distinction at the level of propositions—the "Ramsey Option", as he calls it—seems to demand reflection by distinctions in what the truth of his various kinds of proposition consists in, it also seems clear that someone who accepts the *Truth and Objectivity* framework can agree that a discourse's surmounting or stalling at the cruces of Cognitive

Command, Wide Cosmological Role, etc., should be expected to have implications for the kind of contents—the propositions—in which it deals.

Thus this particular alleged difference between us seems fugitive: it simply isn't clear what the "Ramsey Option" really comes to—not if it has to be something antithetical to the proposals of *Truth and Objectivity*.

V

In my view, the most significant contrasts between the ways Blackburn and I like to view these matters concern not the vehicle of realist/anti-realist contrast—kinds of truth versus kinds of propositions—but our respective conceptions of what can be taken for granted and what needs to be explained. On my view, truth-aptitude is relatively easily earned; and once a discourse is recognized as truth-apt, the default view should be that claims to truth within it are justified by satisfaction of its proper standards of warrant. (To stress: that's the *default* view—it can be defeated by, *inter alia*, enforcing a contrast between truth and superassertibility within the discourse in question.) For Blackburn, on the other hand, those of our discourses—including comedy, ethics, aesthetics, probability—which possess propositional surface collectively overfill the Cup of Reality. And it is his unspoken assumption that it is only in so far as a discourse serves to depict what is within the Cup that its propositional surface may be regarded as unproblematic. So Blackburn finds a *standing puzzle about the presence of propositional surface in a wide range of discourses*—all those, the breadth given to the quasi-realist programme would suggest, which are not depictive of the fully physical, non-intentional, non-modal, value-free World—and a standing philosophical obligation to construct some kind of response to that puzzle. From this standpoint, *Truth and Objectivity* will seem guilty of an egregious oversight: to someone working within its framework, a wide sweep of philosophical problems will be simply invisible.

I think that in the course of the development of this outlook since the publication of *Spreading the Word* (1984) it has become increasingly unclear what it would be to *address* the alleged puzzles which thus provide the *raison d'être* of the quasi-realist programme—puzzles of propositional surface supposedly extending beyond its proper home. Consider the idea that ethical discourse, for instance, is not genuinely descriptive, and hence that its propositional surface is problematical. For someone so convinced, a natural response might be to wonder whether the propositional surface is not au fond *incidental*—whether ethical thought,

qua ethical, could in principle receive clothing of a quite different kind. That suggestion has the merit of relative clarity, and it is indeed the form which Blackburn was at first content to give to his proposal. The resulting programme is the familiar—and technically interesting—one of trying to show how ethical thought, diagnosed as, for example, expressive of attitude, rather than descriptive of the world, could in principle assume a non-propositional shape, without compromising any of our ethical activity—including, *par excellence*, ethical reasoning—and how a propositional structure might then be harmlessly, if misleadingly, superimposed upon it, as a *façon de parler*. This was the programme canvassed in *Spreading the Word* and pursued elsewhere,⁷ albeit with significant modifications. But it has become clear that it founders on seemingly decisive difficulties concerning the interpretation of the conditional.⁸ Recently, apparently in recognition of such more technical difficulties, Blackburn has tended to soften the quasi-realist brief: rather than show, for example, how the propositional surface of moral discourse might be consistent with its lacking truth-apt content, the quasi-realist is now charged merely to explain, without recourse to the idea of representation of moral fact, how the emergence of moral thinking in propositional shape is *intelligible*. More generally, philosophy is somehow to explain the presence of propositional surface, in regions where—it is somehow given—there is some incongruity about it, in ways that precisely do *not* presuppose or have to make good the claim that our thinking in these regions could proceed in its entirety without the assumption of propositional surface. But it is hereabouts that I, at least, begin to lose my sense of what the project is about. To sympathize with it, you have to have a feel for (something like) the question: “*How come moral discourse, for example, possesses the syntax and discipline distinctive of minimal truth-aptitude in Wright’s sense?*”. But that’s a question which it seems we might make something of only if we knew of another—non-propositional—surface that ethical discourse, qua ethical, might wear. And that is just what we can’t know unless the original form of Blackburn’s proposal can—improbably—succeed.

Blackburn assumes that propositional surface is a philosophically straightforward phenomenon only in areas where we are in the business of literal description of the World, and his project is to explain how other discourses may still intelligibly and justifiably wear such a surface. The assumption betrays a bipartite interplay which drives all Blackburn’s work on these issues: the interplay between the thought that realism about

⁷ See Blackburn (1984, Ch. 6). For a different tack, see Blackburn 1988.

⁸ See Hale 1986. For revised criticisms in the light of later suggestions of Blackburn’s, see Hale 1992.

a discourse is best explicated as the conviction that it is *literally descriptive*—deals in real representational propositions, as it were—and the idea that, at least as a first approximation, literal descriptiveness is a matter of possession of propositional surface. If both these are allowed to stand unqualified, then of course realism threatens a cheap victory wherever there is propositional surface—and the anti-realist about a particular region is left with no option but to try to make out how propositional surface is there inappropriate—so that a quite different way of talking would be preferable. Blackburn’s conservative alternative seeks to avoid this by qualifying the second component: propositional surface may sometimes be explained in a way that disconnects it from genuine descriptive function (from traffic in real propositions, in the expression of genuinely representational states). Now I of course applaud the project of trying to explain how propositional surface may be disengaged from realist commitment. That is exactly what the minimalism of *Truth and Objectivity* is about. The complaint I have been making is that I do not know what such an explanation might consist in if it has simultaneously somehow to vindicate—to *exculpate*—the propositional surface.⁹ But in any case I regard the first component in the interplay as unfortunate. It *cannot* be a theoretically happy starting point to think of realism in terms of literal descriptiveness, for it is merely common sense that comic discourse literally describes matters of comedy, moral discourse literally describes moral matters, and likewise for any propositionally surfaced discourse where anti-realism ought to be an option. “Literally descriptive” is itself open to more or less deflationary interpretations. The metaphysical hypostasis of the “real proposition” (or “genuinely representational state”) implicit in Blackburn’s conception of realism is something which needs to be explained and justified—not a notion on which to place a theoretical load from the outset.

In general, crucial questions are begged by the quasi-realist starting point. Even if there were an intelligible and necessary explanatory task for quasi-realism to take on—a task which *Truth and Objectivity* would lead us to shirk—the work could start only *after* we had made a distinction between cases where realism is acceptable, and propositional surface consequently unproblematic, and cases where neither is so. So it is presupposed that we already know what realism *is*—what it is to take a realist

⁹ At least not once the *Spreading the Word* paradigm is discarded—the paradigm of showing how an expressivist interpretation can be supplied for an indicative discourse which is conservative of all the inferential and other moves facilitated by its propositional clothing. (It is another matter, of course, whether that clothing would thereby automatically be shown to be inessential—a harmless superimposition. The question would still have to arise why the expressive re-interpretation, rather than a face-value propositional interpretation, was the better reflection of the real nature of the discourse.)

view of an area of thought, how such a view might be justified and what it would be to avoid it. These are issues which are evidently at the heart of the metaphysical question, not things to take a stance on before starting work. That is the most fundamental reason why I prefer my way of looking at the matter to Blackburn's. You cannot so much as motivate the quasi-realist programme in any particular case without a prior decision about what *real*—not “quasi-”—realism consists in, and why it is inappropriate in that case. Those are exactly the kind of questions which *Truth and Objectivity* is intended to help us answer.

VI

Blackburn is keen to confound those quietists who would like to cite Wittgenstein's sponsorship—indeed he would like to make Wittgenstein out as effectively a precursor of quasi-realism instead!¹⁰ So he understandably plays up the passages, which are abundant in Wittgenstein's writings from his middle period onwards, in which, despite the propositional surface of species of commitment, Wittgenstein raises questions about the felicity of notions like “description” and “fact”, and proposes assimilations to or comparisons with non-assertoric modes of utterance. Ethics, mathematics, modal claims, avowals, and the “hinge propositions” of *On Certainty* all come in for this kind of treatment. As Blackburn reminds us, Wittgenstein was tempted¹¹ to take as a motto for the *Investigations* the line of Kent in *King Lear*: “I'll teach you differences”. And at *Investigations* §304 we are urged to “make a radical break with the idea that language always functions in one way, always serves the same purpose: to convey thoughts—which may be about houses, pains, good and evil, or anything else you please.” “Language”, as it occurs in that passage, will presumably bear interpretation as something like: discourse of propositional surface.

The fact is, however, that, these tendencies notwithstanding, Wittgenstein is never prepared to wonder about the propriety of our generosity with propositional surface—the generosity that sets up the alleged quasi-realist puzzles. Readers will recall the gist of *Investigations* §136 and surrounding: propositions are what *we call* propositions and we call something a proposition “when *in our language* [his emphasis] we apply the calculus of truth functions to it”—that is, propositions are what *we* submit to the discipline of sentential logic. If we suppose that Wittgenstein

¹⁰ In this connection, compare the remarks on pp. 6 and 7 of Blackburn 1993.

¹¹ However he didn't: why not?

thought that there was a robust, relatively sharp distinction between areas where propositional surface goes along with genuine literal description and areas where it serves, rather, to mask other kinds of linguistic activity—kinds of activity which are only misleadingly given a propositional surface—then it's going to be hard to avoid saying that there is a tension in Wittgenstein's thinking here which he simply didn't resolve. Perhaps it can be resolved by a quasi-realist rehabilitation of propositional surface in the dodgy cases—whatever exactly that might consist in—but it ought to be a source of discomfort to Blackburn's interpretation that Wittgenstein seems nowhere to appreciate that such a rehabilitative programme is required. He finds *no puzzle* in our generosity with propositional surface. And he applies no criticism to it. He merely cautions us against letting it cause us to overlook differences. §135 contains, indeed, an explicit comparison between the concept of proposition and Wittgenstein's favourite example of a diversity-encompassing concept, the concept *game*. The analogue of the quasi-realist thought, applied to the other term in that comparison, would be that underlying our generosity with the concept *game* is a distinction between cases where the application is most appropriate—cases where, such is the general nature of the activity involved, we are concerned with games in the truest sense—and cases where there is a *prima facie* tension between the actual nature of the activity involved and its classification as a game. But of course the whole point of family resemblance concepts, as Wittgenstein conceives them, is that they work in a way which subverts any such contrast. There is no truest sense of “game”.

It may well seem that Wittgenstein's thinking actually squares much better with the programme of *Truth and Objectivity* than it does with quasi-realism. We begin by recognizing, in a spirit of tolerance, our customary generosity with propositional surface. That's the whole point of the minimalist conceptions of truth and truth-aptness. But then, rather than go quietist, we look for the differences that propositional surface may mask. My formulations of Cognitive Command, Wide Cosmological Role, etc., are attempts to say what at least some such interesting differences may be. But I don't want to overplay the point. Wittgenstein is going to notice differences with a view to undercutting the appeal of certain metaphysical pictures—Platonism in mathematics, for instance. By contrast, the distinctions in *Truth and Objectivity* are offered in an explicitly theoretical spirit which it may well be expected he would have deplored.

I don't want to spend much longer on this—the three pages at the start of chapter 6 of *Truth and Objectivity* to which Blackburn is reacting are really not very important to the development of that chapter—but it needs to be said that his remarks seriously misrepresent their gist, partly as a

result of selective quotation. He quotes my suggestion that you have to overlook a distinction in order to find an *obvious* inconsistency between the passages where Wittgenstein seems to want to look past propositional surface and the passages on which the quietist interpretation draws. His comparing mathematical statements to commands, for instance, might be read as having the purpose of persuading us to deny that mathematical statements are genuine propositions—and then you have the obvious inconsistency with, for example, *Investigations* §136—but it might also be intended in a fashion which is inimical to the idea of any general distinction between cases where propositional surface goes along with real propositionhood, as it were, and cases where it does not—“to suggest”, as I put it, “that there is not the clean distinction to be made between genuinely truth-apt contents and ‘merely grammatical’ assertions which the expressivist needs to work with”. Blackburn cuts the quote off there, ignores the occurrence of “clean” and then dryly remarks

so one would expect evidence of Wittgenstein saying, in effect, that he has had us fooled all along. We thought he was teaching differences, but really he was subverting the differences he seemed to bring up. All along he was warning us against thinking of mathematics in terms of rules, thinking that the difference between description and expression of attitude was important ... there are no such differences! His motto is I’ll teach you samenesses! (Blackburn 1998, p. 165)

But the sentence immediately after the end of the passage Blackburn quoted continues

Rather, the “merely grammatical” notions are the only *general* notions of truth and assertoric content which we have, and beyond them lies only a plethora of differences [NB: *differences*] which we need to notice and describe. A philosophical picture of what’s going on in a discourse may of course be motivated by overlooking differences between it and others. So there will be space for appraisal of such pictures. But there’s no space for debate about the applicability of metaphysically hypostatised notions of truth and assertoric content; and differences which merely call a philosophical picture into question must not be credited with a bearing on the very integrity of the language game concerned. (Wright 1992, p. 203)

VII

The primary concern of chapter 6 of *Truth and Objectivity* is with the line of thought—it doesn’t much matter whether Wittgenstein himself ever took anything like it—which sees some form of irrealism about content as

the proper conclusion of Wittgenstein's discussion of following a rule, and then wonders how such a conclusion can be prevented from ramifying into an irrealism about everything. This seems to me by far the most interesting extant argument for quietism; but how best to formulate it, and whether it succeeds, are still outstanding questions.

The leading question considered in chapter 6 is whether, if minimalism about semantic discourse is accepted—if all talk about the semantics of linguistic expressions is regarded as merely minimally truth-apt and as satisfying no further realism-relevant condition—the same conclusion follows for all assertoric discourse. Two arguments purporting to enforce an affirmative answer are distinguished and discussed. There is what I called the Intuitive Version, and there is a distinct argument due to Paul Boghossian (1989).

That the latter proves objectionable oughtn't to be allowed to obscure the contribution Boghossian's discussion makes to this difficult question. Blackburn remarks that "Wright himself is not now persuaded by [Boghossian's] argument, for complex reasons that I'm not sure bear on its major infirmities". The suggestion that this is something on which I have changed my mind worries me. It makes me suspect that Blackburn himself may have paid insufficient attention to the distinction between the Intuitive Version, and Boghossian's argument. This would also explain some of his, as they seem to me, continuingly unsatisfactory remarks about the role of semantic descent.

Boghossian's argument works with robust—that is, non-minimal, non-deflationary—notions of truth and truth-conditionality, and takes it that the semantic minimalist (his "non-factualist") will consequently be committed to

- (i) For any sentence *S* and propositional content *P*, "*S* has the truth-condition that *P*" is not truth-conditional.

A minimalist about truth and truth-aptitude should not worry about this formulation. (There is no good objection to restricting the word "true" to statements meeting some realism-importing condition, reserving, say, "correct" for the minimalist notion.) The argument then proceeds through two steps

- (ii) For any *S* and *P*, it's not the case that "*S* has the truth-condition that *P*" is true

—a seemingly evident consequence of (i) since presumably only a sentence with a truth-condition can be true. So

- (iii) For any *S* and *P* it's not the case that *S* has the truth-condition that *P*,

which follows from (ii) by disquotatation.

The first point I want to stress—again¹²—is that despite the fact that its conclusion is metalinguistic, this argument is *complete*. You have established global minimalism when you have shown that no matter what declarative *sentence* *S* you consider, *S* is not apt for robust truth as characterized a moment ago, that is, meets no realism-importing condition. There is no need to descend to a claim about the status of the judgement that *S* expresses; we have already said all we need to say about the status of that judgement by showing—purportedly—that the sentence which expresses it is not apt for robust truth. As we shall see, matters stand differently with the Intuitive Version: there, a semantic descent is indeed essential, if the global minimalist conclusion is to ensue. But that is just the respect in which the arguments differ, and which Blackburn seems persistently to miss.

What is wrong with Boghossian's argument? The "complex reasons" for rejecting it which Blackburn feels may not go to the "heart of its infirmities" are easily enough summarized. The first worry to have is about the step of disquotation. Surely the conditional

If *P*, then "*P*" is true,

cannot remain acceptable if "*P*" may be a merely correctness-apt sentence? And if it is not acceptable, then nor is the contraposition of it upon which Boghossian's step from (ii) to (iii) depends.

That is the thought that Blackburn himself is expressing when he says "Once truth is sorted you cannot infer that $\neg P$ from '*S* expresses *P*' and '*S* is not true_d'" (Blackburn 1998, p. 176). So why the additional complexity in my discussion that is not to his taste? It arises because matters are not actually quite so simple. The response assumes that "*P* is true" will be incorrect, or even false, if "*P*" is merely correctness-apt. But what if we stipulated differently? What if we stipulated that "*P* is true" is *correct* (though not true) when "*P*" is correct, and allowed that a conditional is correct if it has a correct antecedent and consequent? Unless there's some further objection to that proposal, the disquotational step can stand.

That's why I took the trouble to show that, if we did accept that proposal, the bump would come up elsewhere in the carpet. Specifically, either we lose the conditional

"*P*" is true \rightarrow "*P*" has a truth-condition,

in which case we lose the step from Boghossian's (i) to (ii), or "*P* has a truth-condition" ceases to be a satisfactory way of expressing realism about (the subject matter) of "*P*" (since it can be *correctly* affirmed of a

¹² It was stressed in *Truth and Objectivity* at p. 222; see in particular note 16 on that page.

sentence, “P”, which is merely correctness-apt). In that second case, Boghossian’s premise (i) ceases to capture the position under consideration.

Blackburn himself proposes to scotch Boghossian’s argument by means of a dilemma. If we go the Ramsey route, distinguishing kinds of proposition, but retaining a single notion of truth, then propositions about content, even though “soft” as viewed by the minimalist, *will* have truth-conditions—in the only sense of “truth-conditions” in town—and Boghossian’s (i) will once again be in a misrepresentation of the irrealist/minimalist view. If on the other hand, we go the way that Blackburn doesn’t recommend, distinguishing minimalist and robust truth predicates, then the objection he wants to make is the one that I just mentioned—the one that needs the additional complexity that he didn’t give it.

Concerning the first horn, I’m not sure, for the reason I mooted earlier, that the “Ramsey route” is a distinct and stable option. However it’s clear that even if it is, there could be no good objection to the introduction of a term “true” to mark the condition of “hard” propositions which are true in the Blackburn/Ramsey uniform sense (whatever that is), while once again reserving “correct” as the corresponding epithet of “soft” propositions. This would not be to invent a difference where Blackburn and Ramsey see none, but would merely be, as it were, an inflection on the truth predicate, comparable to ordinary gender inflections (as when “grandfather” and “grandmother” are used as inflections on “grandparent”). After a similar trick on “is truth-conditional” and its cognates, no soft proposition could be acceptably described as “truth-conditional” (compare: “Agnes is not a grandfather”). So we could then reinstate Boghossian’s (i) as a satisfactory formulation of the semantic minimalist view, for all Blackburn could say to the contrary, and run the argument as before.

Moral: it is *not* the “major infirmity” of Boghossian’s argument that, in its selection of premise (i), it ignores the Ramsey option. Even if that option existed in the form Blackburn likes to think, and even if we take it, we will have to do more than reject the premise of Boghossian’s argument—specifically, we will have to pursue the issues on the second horn of Blackburn’s dilemma—if we are to see the argument for the fallacy it is.

VIII

Finally to the Intuitive Version of the argument to global minimalism. This goes via the apparent platitude that whether or not a statement is true is a function of its content and the state of the world in relevant respects. The thought is then: if matters of content somehow go soft after Wittgenstein’s

discussion of rule-following, then so will all matters which functionally depend upon them, including, therefore, matters of statements' truth. But if all matters of truth are soft, then everything is soft.

Here, unlike in Boghossian's argument, there is indeed an essential play with semantic descent. It comes in the last step. It is one thing to have the conclusion that claims of the form, "P is true", are soft, but quite another matter to go minimalist about the corresponding claims that P.

In his remarks, Blackburn misconstrues a passage in which I was expounding the general gist of this argument as evidence that I myself accept the semantic descent. In fact, I think the issue is fraught. That is why I discussed it in some detail. The worry is whether any apparent increment of objectivity, secured by the semantic descent, could be more than an artifact of creative accounting. If the judgement whether or not "P" is true is made a soft judgement—whatever that means—by dependence on an appraisal of the content of the sentence "P", well, isn't it likewise the case that *all* our judgements, at both object- and meta-linguistic levels, go through an appraisal of content?

Of course that remark only gestures at a concern which, in the chapter, I tried to render more discussible and explicit. Agreeably, Blackburn takes the worry very seriously, and thinks it may help us to assuage it if we make a comparison with what he calls the "Gestalt switch" involved in the movement from third-personal to first-personal perspectives on the indeterminacy of radical translation. Our language, that is, may allow of alternative interpretations, even by the best interpretative method, but the first-personal perspective—our ordinary thinking about what we ourselves mean by particular expressions—does not see the multiple possibilities. In much the same way, if I understand Blackburn's suggestion, we look straight past the involvement of language in our appraisal of object-linguistic claims.

I am not very clear how it would help if this interesting suggestion were right. But in any case, and at the risk of seeming ungrateful, I close by noting what seems to be a conclusive objection to it. Even granting that the indeterminacy of radical interpretation—or if you prefer, the inscrutability of reference—is a fact, it's not so much, it seems to me, that the possibilities of multiple interpretation are somehow passed over when one takes the first-personal perspective as that they are not, from that perspective, so much as *coherently formulable*. It's not that I am ordinarily somehow blind, or anyway persistently inattentive to the possibility that "Cat" in my idiolect denotes undetached cat parts, say, rather than cats: I am thinking in my idiolect when that putative possibility is articulated, and I rightly dismiss it on *purely disquotational grounds*. There is no question but that "Cat" in my idiolect denotes cats, since that claim is

itself formulated in my idiolect. By contrast, there seems to be no parallel difficulty in contemplating the thought that, in appraising the judgement that cats are vertebrates, my first move is inevitably an appreciation of the content of the very words I just used. Thus the sense, if any, in which that move is invisible to me—and how such invisibility would help with the threat of creeping minimalism—is not illumined by Blackburn's parallel.

Department of Logic and Metaphysics
University of St. Andrews
Edgecliffe, 5 The Scores
St. Andrews
Fife KY16 9AL
Scotland
cjgw@st-andrews.ac.uk

CRISPIN WRIGHT

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