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Pluralism and Realism

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree
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in

Philosophy

by

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2018
The Dissertation of Matthew Evpak is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

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Chair

University of California San Diego

2018
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VITA

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Two kinds of pluralism have recently come to the attention of metaphysicians. Ontological pluralism is the thesis that there are multiple ways in which things can exist; meanwhile, alethic pluralism is the thesis that the nature of truth varies from discourse to discourse. Though it has since taken on a life of its own, alethic pluralism originated with the efforts of Crispin Wright, who advances what he terms a minimalist conception of truth and truth-aptness. Wright’s purpose in developing a minimalist and thereby pluralist account of truth was to clarify the distinction between realist and antirealist commitments with regard to a given discourse. The purpose of the dissertation is, first, to articulate the usefulness of alethic pluralism in distinguishing between
realism and antirealism concerning some subject matter and, second, to extend Wright’s minimalist approach further to encompass the notion of existence, so that ontological pluralism likewise becomes a means of casting ontological disputes as instances of realist-antirealist contention.

Chapter One serves primarily as a review of predominant trends in the realism literature in Anglophone philosophy over the past half-century. The aim of the chapter is to clarify the idea of mind-independence or objectivity, which I take to be essential for the idea of realism as a metaphysical thesis.

In Chapter Two I explain Wright’s minimalist conception of truth and use it as a model for the development of a corresponding minimalist conception of existence. I propose that the concept of existence is bound up with the concept of domain of discourse, along with the closely related concepts of quantification and predication. Then the specifically metaphysical question is whether items found in the domain of a given discourse have further realism-relevant features.

Finally, Chapter Three deals with the question of the unification of the two pluralisms, as I’ve articulated them, into one coherent metaphysical position. A theory of facts, which is again inspired by Wright’s minimalist methodology but also borrows from the work of Kit Fine, fulfills this task.
Chapter One

Realism and Antirealism: The Distinction and the Debate

1. Introduction

The term ‘realism’ has gained currency within an impressive number of the regions making up philosophy, characteristically as a label for belief in the reality of something germane to the region in which it appears.¹ Of course, in the absence of any prior understanding of what ‘reality’ signifies, to say this much is just to draw an etymological connection, and not yet to confer any substance on the idea of something’s being real, or of believing something to be real. Nor, on the approach I’ll take here, would it be proper to try to clarify the notion of the reality of something by means of a prior understanding of the notion of realism concerning the thing. ‘Realism’ and ‘reality’ (and so ‘being real’) are cognate concepts. Thus the elucidation of one is the elucidation of the other; the two are to be expounded concurrently or not at all. And although the affiliation of the two notions is, as one might put it, merely analytic, making their affiliation explicit will prove helpful for recognizing the implications between realism and other metaphysical notions, like truth, existence, and objectivity.

The purpose of this chapter is, first, to develop a conception of the dual notions of realism and antirealism as they’ve come to be understood in the past few decades of philosophical literature and, second, to canvass the nature of the debate that has recently taken place in view of the distinction between realism and antirealism. The conception of realism given here will aspire to an appropriate level of generality, in order to encompass as much of the relevant terrain as possible;

¹ Because the term ‘antirealism’ is less common than its counterpart, my interest in the terminology of certain philosophical debates concerns, first and foremost, the use of the title ‘realism,’ which will serve as a guide to identifying realist-antirealist disputes. For my purposes, antirealism is just any opinion that stands opposed to a view designated ‘realism.’
at the same time, the terms ‘realism’ and ‘antirealism’ occur in such diverse philosophical contexts that the *usefulness* of the generalizations we might want to make soon becomes a pressing constraint. The goal of breadth, it seems, readily conflicts with the goal of substantiveness. A central presumption of mine, however, is that there is indeed a happy balance of breadth and substance, a balance which is at once both unificatory enough and meaningful enough to offer common theoretical ground for a plurality of philosophical approaches to truth and existence. The common ground to be delineated here will consist in a number of general—I won’t claim universal—features that have characterized the realism-antirealism distinction in the thought of recent commentators. More specifically, my focus will be on commentators who have taken up the matter in the most *generic* sense: whereas many particular regions of philosophy, or particular topics within those regions, have seen their own localized skirmishes between positions construed as ‘realist’ and their rivals, some philosophers have sought to address a notion of realism or antirealism which is, at least in principle, applicable to several quite different topics or domains of discourse. But this isn’t to say that the generic approach to the realism-antirealism distinction must be perceived as exotic by the participants in the localized debates. Although the generic project tends to abstract away from the familiar peculiarities of any specific realist-antirealist dispute, it’s marked by an attempt to preserve the contours such disputes typically follow, and thus to capture what it is that distinguishes them as realist-antirealist disputes *per se*. The resulting generalities probably aren’t without exception, but the efforts of a few prominent writers have made it possible to describe something like a common core of almost all the varieties of philosophical realism.

Within recent Anglo-American philosophy, we can trace two major lines along which the generic project has developed; one is due to Michael Dummett, the other to Hilary Putnam. Although each of them has generated much philosophical activity aimed at clarifying the
metaphysical notion of realism—activity that has undoubtedly met with *some* success—both Dummett and Putnam have gained notoriety for launching *attacks* against that notion.\(^2\) As is perhaps to be expected of philosophers working within the analytic tradition, the two of them pose their respective challenges to the realist view by approaching the matter from a radically *linguistic* standpoint. It was Dummett himself, in fact, who remarked that the essential attribute of analytic philosophy, for which it owes much to the achievements of Frege, is its presumption that the way to understand thought is through an understanding of language.\(^3\) On this orientation it’s unmistakable that the question how our thought bears on reality, or how the way we think relates to the way things are, is to be answered by an investigation into the nature of our language. While the antirealist arguments of Dummett and Putnam are in certain regards quite distant from each other in content, both can be seen as expressions of the idea, to speak roughly, that our language is insufficient to establish the linkages with reality that the realist’s picture requires.\(^4\) Dummett and Putnam (along with many others of like mind) are therefore in the thrall of a particular philosophical *method* which, in keeping with Dummett’s characterization of analytic philosophy, places matters of language prior to any direct theory of the things our language purports to describe. Of course, one might well accept the method and yet feel no compulsion to accept Dummettian or Putnamian antirealism, if one is equipped with an argument to the effect that language in fact *succeeds* in expressing things as they objectively are (or, alternatively, if one

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2 For the origins of Dummett’s attack on realism, see his (1978), especially “Truth” and “The Philosophical Basis of Intuitionistic Logic.” Putnam’s attack can be found in his (1977) and especially “Models and Reality” in his (1983).

3 “What distinguishes analytical philosophy, in its diverse manifestations, from other schools is the belief, first, that a philosophical account of thought can be attained through a philosophical account of language, and, secondly, that a comprehensive account can only be so attained.” (1993), 4.

4 In this formulation, as elsewhere in this document, ‘language’ is a term meant to include not just the ordinary instances of natural and artificial languages but, moreover, conceptualization in general, regardless of what exactly the medium of conceptualization is taken to be. The term thus encompasses what philosophers might variously refer to as ‘thought,’ ‘theory,’ and so on.
simply deems that the antirealists’ arguments aren’t enough to dislodge a pretheoretical presumption in favor of realist semantics). To take this approach in defending realism is to comply with the terms of the debate as they’ve been sketched by the antirealist. Perhaps a more popular tactic for fending off linguistic antirealism, however, has been to overturn the method that grants language so much metaphysical clout. As is visible in the contributions of Michael Devitt, a trenchant line of opposition to linguistic antirealist arguments is grounded in explicit rejection of the doctrine that the theory of language is methodologically prior to the theory of thought and reality as such. Devitt’s response to antirealism arises from a position, perhaps to be classified as a species of naturalism, that seeks to dismiss or postpone any worry about the contributions or capacities of language and instead begin from the perspective that we deal with, and think about, real objects in the world all the time in quite straightforward ways. Although the realist doesn’t have to endorse the naturalist’s rearrangement of philosophical priorities, the rearrangement is prima facie one that anyone who harbors sympathies for realism will find amicable.

The realist, as conceived by Dummett and Putnam, is committed to the position that the concepts we use and the beliefs we entertain acquire at least a dimension of their semantic value from their relationships with a world which is—in some crucial respects, anyway—-independent of our thought. The ‘semantic value’ in question here, as possessed by the likes of concepts and beliefs, consists paradigmatically in such things as reference and truth value. The realist opposed by Dummett and Putnam, then, holds that concepts (or terms), when they refer to things, do so in virtue of particular sorts of systematic connections obtaining between the concepts and their referents, and that beliefs (or propositions) are rendered true or false in virtue of their accordance with the way things are in the world beyond our language. I’m leaving matters vague enough to

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5 Most concertedly in his (1991), but see also his (1983a) and (1983b).
accommodate the many possible specifications of just what the relevant language-world relationships are and how they come to be, but the point is simply this: for the realist against whom Dummett and Putnam inveigh, language under ordinary circumstances is in the business of affording representations of an autonomous reality, and these representations are construed as, so to speak, semantic feats. As far as the linguistic component of truth and reference is concerned, it’s due to the semantic values of the constituent concepts that a statement has any capacity to be what one could consider a depiction of a state of affairs. For the realist, this brand of semantic theory typically serves to underwrite (what non-philosophers by and large take to be) a commonsense claim, that when all goes well—and it usually does⁶—the large majority of our beliefs do indeed comprise more-or-less accurate portrayals of how things are with a mind-independent world. In any case, regardless of whether we’re mistaken in isolated incidents, massively deluded, or anything in between, the realist as portrayed by Dummett and Putnam contends that in general there’s a fact of the matter as to whether a given belief is true or false, a fact autonomously decided by the way the world is. To put it roughly: because the world is determinate, so is the faithfulness or unfaithfulness of any representation of it.

The semantic notion of representation, and especially representation of the way things are objectively, is the point at which Dummett and Putnam aim their antirealist arguments. Their claim, as against the commonsense picture, is that our linguistic machinations can’t produce mirrorings of an autonomous world, that our language has no capacity to reach into an imagined

⁶ A qualification like this has the effect of setting aside worries about global skepticism, as threatened by hallucinations, mental illness, brain-in-vat scenarios, and so forth. Although skepticism has traditionally been considered a predominant adversary of realism, the challenge it presents is chiefly epistemological, whereas the issue under consideration here is chiefly metaphysical. It’s one thing to contend that as a matter of fact we have no guarantee of any correspondence between our beliefs or perceptions and the mind-independent external world; it’s another to contend, as do Dummett and Putnam contra the realist, that it’s impossible or even unintelligible that such a correspondence should obtain.
noumenal realm and capture the way things stand in themselves. It’s for this reason that their arguments have sometimes been categorized together as a single topic, constituting the semantic or meaning-theoretic challenge to realist metaphysics. The challenge, specifically, is to explain how our language could make it possible—or what it is, if not our language, that could make it possible—for our thought to bear a systematic resemblance with a reality that is in no respect constituted or determined by our thought.

The semantic antirealist can thus be seen as objecting to a particular conception (or family of conceptions) of truth, at base consisting in the idea that for a proposition to be true is for it to give an accurate depiction of an independent reality. A theory of truth meeting this sort of description bears obvious affinities with the traditional ‘correspondence theory’ of truth, whose name derives from the slogan that truth is ‘correspondence with reality’ or ‘correspondence with the facts,’ where ‘correspondence’ is typically understood in terms of a mental, logical, or semantic isomorphism between a proposition (belief, mental image, utterance, etc.) and a worldly state of affairs. Indeed, the correspondence theory of truth has at times (though perhaps not very recently) been simply identified with realism—and understandable so, for the thesis that truth is correspondence with reality appears to have the consequence, if we discount skeptical hypotheses, that a good deal of what we talk about and think about is in some sense real. Moreover, the correspondence theory of truth seems to incur ontological commitment in precisely the manner that realist positions are often taken to: just as realism with regard to mathematics is usually associated with the thesis that mathematical objects exist, so a correspondence theory of truth for mathematical statements is likely to be construed as the view that mathematical statements are rendered true or false by things in the world—e.g., mathematical objects. But though these are

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7 See, for example, Gardiner (2000) and Khlentzos (2004).
noteworthy points of contact, I’ll leave it open for the time being whether the correspondence theory of truth has any essential connection with realism, and I also won’t allege that the conception(s) of truth under attack from Dummett and Putnam must be classified under the banner of correspondence truth. Let it suffice to say that semantic antirealism controverts a traditional (and ever popular) way of thinking about truth, one that the realist depicted here espouses, and that the distinction between realism and antirealism, on its current interpretation, is (or anyway implies) therefore a distinction between two sweeping ways of understanding the nature of truth.

Before turning to the details of Dummett’s and Putnam’s semantic challenges to realism, I’ll give in the next section a preliminary account of the generic realism-antirealism distinction. A closer examination of the semantic challenges to realism, in sections 3 and 4, will then serve to enrich my presentation of the generic distinction. The concluding remarks in section 5 discuss the general contours of the realism-antirealism dialectic and bring them into connection with a kind of dilemma famously characterized by Paul Benacerraf.

2. Dimensions of Realism

This section will present, in merely propaedeutic terms, what has come to be regarded as the generic form of the realism-antirealism distinction. An apparent source of complication for this task, as has already been mentioned, is the wide philosophical application of the notion of realism; there are well-known positions on ethical and aesthetic value, mathematical entities, modality, the ontology of the natural sciences, mental states, and much more that have been at one time or another associated with the label ‘realism.’ And even within a particular philosophical domain, there are yet many forms that the distinction between realist and antirealist approaches can take, spanning any number of issues pertinent to the domain. Given how divergent the domains of philosophy and their pertaining issues can be, then, one is inclined to wonder if there’s any hope
of unifying their realisms under a common rubric and vindicating their shared taxonomy. Still, even prior to investigating the developments due to Dummett and Putnam, it’s possible to point to something like a consensus across most of philosophy concerning the nature of positions designated ‘realism.’

The first element of that consensus, a *contextualizing principle*, takes its cue from the foregoing observation that the issue of realism crops up separately in many diverse philosophical contexts. A view titled ‘realism’ in ethics is logically independent, at least potentially, from a view so titled in the philosophy of mathematics (to use two common examples), and the considerations for and against one are likely to have little to do with those for and against the other. We thus need to make room for the eventuality that the theorist will hold to a patchwork combination of realist and antirealist views on different philosophical topics rather than any homogeneous realism or antirealism across the board. For the purposes of this project, I will presuppose as a basic maxim of the realism issue that one is a realist or antirealist with regard to some or other subject matter, not a realist or antirealist *tout court*. Someone might thus hold a realist view with regard to the posits of physical science but hold an antirealist view with regard to ascriptions of aesthetic value, and so forth. The contextualizing principle does not, of course, preclude the espousal of realism (antirealism) with regard to *all* subject matters. However, it seems to me that such extreme positions are best interpreted, for sake of clarity and consistency, not as instances of ‘realism (antirealism) *tout court*’ but rather as conjunctions of positions which all happen to be aligned in their individual realist (antirealist) orientations. The possibility of combining realist or antirealist outlooks in this consonant way should not obscure the logical independence, for the most part anyway, of the individual commitments to realism or antirealism with regard to some or other subject matter. As a result of that independence, the notion ‘being a realist’ is incomplete in itself,
for it remains to be specified, whether explicitly or contextually, that with regard to which someone is a realist.

The specification isn’t just one of subject matter, however; even on the assumption that the relevant subject matter is known, it’s a point of some contention how best to understand what the realist or antirealist position is about. One way to construe realism or antirealism is as a stance regarding a class of *entities*; another is as a stance regarding a class of *statements*. The former I designate the ‘ontological interpretation’ of realism; the latter the ‘semantic interpretation.’ In some cases, the two construals look as if they were straightforwardly interchangeable: a realism about statements that express modal judgments in terms of possible worlds seems equivalent to a realism about possible worlds themselves. And in general, positions concerning the status of certain entities tend to be translatable, perhaps with some finessing, into positions concerning the status of statements *about* those entities. Yet the converse doesn’t always hold: it’s not clear how realism regarding ethical statements could be converted into realism regarding any particular class of entities, unless one is prepared to countenance ‘ethical objects’ or something similar.\(^8\) This is why Dummett, for example, prefers to understand realism and antirealism as attitudes taken up with regard to classes of statements instead of classes of entities.\(^9\) Although not every realism-antirealism dispute lends itself to being depicted as a matter of ontology—as the case of ethics shows—there seem to be better prospects for depicting realist-antirealist disputes as matters of

\[^{8}\text{Maybe this is a little hasty. One could maintain that the ‘ethical objects’ in question, concerning which the realist position is taken, are ethical facts, where a fact is robustly conceived to be an object of sorts rather than a (true) statement. If the theorist is willing to permit this type of outlook globally, so that there are facts to be found wherever there are truths, then the equivalence between the ‘class of entities’ version of realism and the ‘class of statements’ version of realism is complete, for any position concerning the status of certain statements could hereby be translated into a position concerning the status of the facts with which the statements correspond. This move has the appearance of undue ontological inflation, but it’s believable that that appearance could be dissipated with further development of the resulting view. Anyway, the extent to which the ontological and semantic construals of realism and antirealism are interchangeable is immaterial here.}\]

\[^{9}\text{E.g., Dummett (1982), 55.}\]
semantics; questions of logical and semantic structure are, at least in some respects, universally applicable. In any event, in the interest of comprehensiveness, my exposition of the generic notion of realism will remain neutral as to whether realism and antirealism are views on classes of entities or on classes of statements. It’s arguable that each construal is the more natural within particular philosophical contexts, and moreover the distinction is only sometimes consequential. Hence the contextualizing principle is that one is only ever a realist or antirealist with regard to a particular class of entities or with regard to a particular class of statements. And because there are so many classes of entities and classes of statements concerning which someone could prefer either realism or antirealism, what follows from this principle is an immense proliferation of logically permissible combinations of realist and antirealist doctrines.

Once an affirmation of realism or antirealism has been contextualized to some class of entities or class of statements, it still remains to be specified just what realism or antirealism concerning that class amounts to substantively. The nuances of the position and its entailments will vary with the class in question, but it’s still possible to make some generic remarks on the characteristics of a realist position and its distinction from antirealism. In order to have something concrete in view first, though, I want to give two renditions of the general thesis of realism from Dummett and Devitt, whose formulations are jointly representative of the shape the realism-antirealism issue has taken. Once those are on the table, I’ll offer some observations concerning what they have in common.

I mentioned just above that Dummett prefers to conceive of realism and antirealism as positions taken with regard to classes of statements rather than classes of entities, and that the rationale he gives is that such a conception is better able to handle realism-antirealism disputes which, at least prima facie, aren’t ontological disputes—the debate over moral realism is an easy
example. Although the case of ethics makes the point salient, there can be little doubt that Dummett’s reason for preferring to cast the realism issue in terms of classes of statements goes much deeper. As explained in the first section, his orientation on the question of realism is guided by his appreciation for what he takes to be the fundamental (Fregean) insight of the analytic tradition: that thought hinges on language, and therefore that thinking about worldly things is a matter of the language used to refer to them. It should be no surprise, then, that for Dummett the traditional problems of metaphysics are secondary to inquiries into the nature of language and its capacity to represent the world, so that questions about what we take to be real are at base questions about how we regard the semantic properties of particular sorts of sentences. So realism, he says, may accordingly be understood as a semantic thesis—a thesis concerning what makes statements of the given class true when they’re true. One of the features of a realist theory of a class of statements is that it implicates a specific kind of metaphysical outlook on the truth conditions of those statements, and thus places a strong emphasis on the way the language being used relates to the world at large. In particular, Dummett takes it that a realistic interpretation of the statements of some subject matter applies to those statements the principle of bivalence, which he characterizes as the principle that every meaningful statement is determined as true or as false independently of anyone’s knowledge or belief. In broad summary, then:

the fundamental thesis of realism, [regarded as a semantic doctrine], is that we really do succeed in referring to external objects, existing independently of our knowledge of them, and that the statements we make about them carry a meaning of such a kind that they are rendered true or false by an objective reality the constitution of which is, again, independent of our knowledge.\textsuperscript{10}

Antirealism, for Dummett, consists in the rejection of this formulation as a (component of the) semantics for the given class of statements, but it’s easy to see that there’s more than one way to

\textsuperscript{10} Dummett (1982), 104.
deny that the realist semantics pertains to the class. The rejection of bivalence is for Dummett a particularly conspicuous route to antirealism regarding the class, but it’s by no means the only one\textsuperscript{11}; others will be addressed shortly.

Devitt’s rendition of the thesis of realism shares some of its vital components with Dummett’s, despite one or two significant divergences. Devitt is concerned specifically with realism about the external world—that is, realism about everyday objects and the posits of the sciences—but it’s a simple matter to abstract from the particular case preoccupying Devitt and gain a sense of what, for him, is peculiar to realism as such. He expresses the thesis of realism about the external world thus: “Tokens of most current common-sense and scientific physical types objectively exist independently of the mental.”\textsuperscript{12} Presumably, then, Devitt more generally interprets realism concerning a class of entities simply as the contention that members of the class of entities ‘objectively exist independently of the mental.’ By contrast with Dummett’s traditionally analytic approach to the realism-antirealism issue, whereon questions of thought and language are antecedent to questions of ontology, Devitt’s orientation is to begin from a more or less naturalistic picture of the world—a picture according to which the world is populated by familiar objects bearing familiar properties—and to address questions concerning thought and language only on the basis of this scientific image. Devitt therefore prefers to cast realism and antirealism as doctrines concerning the status of a class of entities, not as semantic doctrines.

In spite of that discrepancy, it’s fair to say that Dummett and Devitt give analyses that share much of their important content—content that can serve as a point of departure for an explication of the generic notion of realism. The common core of their formulations of realism is the concept

\textsuperscript{11} Dummett affirms (ibid., 55) that the principle of bivalence is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for a realist interpretation of the statements of the given class.

\textsuperscript{12} Devitt (1991), 23.
of metaphysical ‘independence,’ along with the related notions of being ‘objective’ and ‘external’ (that is, external to the mind or to language). The basic idea behind this talk of ‘independence,’ of course, is just that things within the relevant context are, or are not, the way they are described to be, regardless of anyone’s describing or not describing them so.

Dummett and Devitt part ways over the character of this independence, however. Whereas Devitt construes realism as a straightforward metaphysical postulate about the mind-independent existence of things, or particular sorts of things, Dummett conceives of realism as, in essence, an approach to understanding what constitutes the truth of true statements. Without doubt, Dummett’srealist also takes there to be an objectively existing, mind-independent reality, and this reality is an indispensable part of what renders true sentences true. Nonetheless, what figures centrally in Dummett’s conception of realism, and what’s absent from Devitt’s conception, is the semantic notion of reference. (We should expect a disparity of this form, given that Devitt’s realist undertakes to expound existent things directly within the object language, whereas Dummett’s realist expounds existent things only indirectly via metalinguistic scrutiny of sentences about them.) So while Devitt’s formulation of realism is a thesis concerning merely the independent existence of some class of entities, Dummett’s formulation of realism is a thesis concerning both the given class of entities—where these ‘entities’ might turn out to be something like states of affairs in some cases—and, moreover, the linguistic or conceptual apparatus that enables us to portray in language the state of those entities as they exist, objectively and independently, in the external world. This is not to say that Devitt necessarily disagrees with the assertion conveyed in Dummett’s formulation of realism, nor that their respective formulations are incompatible from within. But Devitt does quite explicitly dissent from Dummett’s decision to approach the issue of realism from a semantic perspective; in Devitt’s view, we are in danger of getting the issue exactly
backwards, and perhaps even of lapsing into some sort of linguistic idealism or conceptual relativism, if we allow that metaphysics be in this way beholden to matters of language. Indeed, two of the guiding maxims of Devitt’s treatment of the problems of realism are that we should “[d]istinguish the metaphysical (ontological) issue of realism from any semantic issue” and that we should “[s]ettle the realism issue before any epistemic or semantic issue.” The function of these maxims is precisely to subvert the ‘traditional analytic’ methodology of Dummett in favor of a methodology that gives more metaphysical weight to the results of empirical inquiry than it gives to philosophers’ a priori ruminations on the nature of language.

In holding that realism is always with regard to some specific class of entities or some specific class of statements, I’ve remained neutral between Devitt’s and Dummett’s rival approaches, and I’ll continue to do so, since my intention here is not to establish any particular formulation of realism against its competitors, but rather to develop a global view of the shape the realism-antirealism distinction has taken. To that end, I want to point out some cardinal features of these paradigmatic renditions of realism. What they have in common is what I’ll presume to be, almost without controversy, the defining mark of any philosophical persuasion that deserves the name ‘realism’: they both maintain that the (mind-external, or extralinguistic) world is the way it is regardless of anyone’s beliefs, conceptual schemes, linguistic habits, theoretical constructions, and so forth—in brief, the root of realism is the proposition that reality is independent of the mind. (Alternatively: reality is independent of language, or of conceptualization.)

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13 (Ibid.), 3-4. He correctly remarks on p. 260 that Dummett, in delineating realism as a question of semantics, “stands opposed to” these two maxims. Indeed, there’s little doubt that Dummett’s unapologetically semantic approach inspired Devitt to set forth these maxims.

14 Of course, there’s a sense in which certain artifacts, institutions, and other human creations can be said to be obviously ‘mind-dependent’: buildings and governments wouldn’t exist if people hadn’t first developed the concepts required to construct and maintain them. Even someone who takes a realist view with regard to such things will acknowledge without reservation that they’re mind-dependent in this sense. But I’ll assume that it’s clear why this construal of ‘mind-independence’ isn’t what’s at issue between the realist and the antirealist; the contention is
The thesis calls for some unpacking. Its present form—“Reality is independent of the mind”—lends itself to a kind of subject-predicate partition that dovetails with the way a few prominent commentators have analyzed realism into its two constituent notions. ‘Reality’ is suggestive of *what exists* or *what is the case*, and ‘independent of the mind’ suggests that what exists, or what is the case, is *autonomous* with respect to the conceptual activity, if any, that we engage in. These two suggestions correspond to what Devitt terms the *existence dimension* and the *independence dimension* respectively.\(^{15}\) His definition of ‘realism’ thus has it that the adoption of both an ‘existence thesis’ and an ‘independence thesis’ with regard to some class of entities is necessary and sufficient for being a realist about those entities.

The existence dimension of realism is straightforward enough. On the ontological interpretation of realism, the existence dimension requires that the realist countenance (at least some of) the entities of the given class; on the semantic interpretation, the existence dimension amounts to the position that (at least some of) the statements of the given class are determinately true.\(^{16}\) The independence dimension is more difficult to explicate with precision and without provoking metaphysical controversy, but the thrust of it is just that the existence of the entities of the given class, or the truth or falsity of the statements of the given class, has a metaphysical *objectivity* that bars it (the entity or the truth value) from being in any way contingent upon our

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15 Devitt (1991), 14-22. See also Miller (2012), who employs the same terminology in explaining what realism is in general.

16 It’s reasonable to ask whether the term ‘existence dimension’ is uncharitable to the semantic interpretation of realism, since those who espouse the semantic interpretation maintain that the question of realism is chiefly a question about the truth conditions of particular sorts of statements, not about the existence of any particular sort of entity. But I think the proponent of the semantic interpretation can be comfortable with talk of the ‘existence dimension’ of realism, because ‘existence’ can be understood as involving—not a collection of entities to be accepted or rejected, but rather—the state of the world broadly construed. Thus, for instance, the existence dimension of moral realism isn’t the opinion that some type of object exists, but that a specifically ethical type of assertion concerning *the way existents are* holds true in some cases. (In a similar vein, one who favors the semantic interpretation might simply say that what exist are facts or states of affairs, which constitute, as it were, the world’s being a certain way.)
capacity for observation, thought, or knowledge. So to say that an entity exists objectively is to say that it exists *regardless of* (that is, *independent of*) our ability to observe it or conceive of it; to say that a statement is true objectively is to say that it holds true *regardless of* our ability to understand or come to know it.

In *Truth and Objectivity*, Crispin Wright characterizes realism’s independence dimension and its existence dimension as a pair of contrasting inclinations, the independence dimension exhibiting an attitude of modesty and the existence dimension exhibiting a kind of presumptuousness with regard to the class of entities or class of statements in question. The independence dimension is ‘modest’ in that—to borrow a comparison from Frege—it takes human thought to be “at best a *map* of the world. Maps can better or worse represent the terrain they concern. But nothing about that terrain will owe its existence, or character, to the institution of cartography or to the conventions and techniques therein employed.”\(^{17}\) The metaphor of the map, of course, is meant to evoke the notion of representation, particularly mental or linguistic representation of a world that extends beyond the medium through which the representations are given. This is the importance of the qualifier ‘at best’: there’s no *necessity* that binds the way things are represented with the way things are in themselves, and therefore our attempts to portray the state of the world might turn out to be inaccurate or incomplete. Modesty is the recognition of our fallibility in view of the world’s autonomy from our representational practices. On the other hand, the existence dimension of realism is ‘presumptuous’ in that, according to it, we sometimes succeed in giving accurate portrayals of what there independently is, or of the way things independently are. “Not merely is there a good measure of non-accidental fit between the external world and our thoughts about it, but we are capable of winning through to the knowledge that this

\(^{17}\) Wright (1992a), 2.
is so, or at least to a perspective from which we may quite justifiably take it to be so.”\textsuperscript{18} The presumption of the existence dimension is that mind-independent objects (sometimes) exist \textit{in the manner that we conceive of them}, or that propositions \textit{in the manner that we understand them} are (sometimes) mind-independently true. With respect to some class of entities or class of statements, the conjunction of the modest sentiment with the presumptuous sentiment, or (if one prefers) of the independence dimension with the existence dimension, is constitutive of realism, for my purposes, while any view that denies either of the two sentiments is a form of antirealism.

Parsing the realism-antirealism distinction in this way allows us to distinguish further between the \textit{types} of antirealism that result from various combinations of acceptance or rejection of the existence and independence dimensions.\textsuperscript{19} Because there are two elements which can be separately either affirmed or denied, we can arrange the four possible combinations into a ‘square of opposition’ of sorts, with realism—the affirmation of both the independence dimension and the existence dimension—occupying one of the corners and the three categories of antirealism occupying the others. The square then offers a visualization of the major ways in which the realist-antirealist battle lines have been drawn.

Perhaps the most historically familiar alternative of realism is what can be loosely called \textit{idealism}, consisting in the acceptance of the existence dimension and the rejection of the independence dimension. Antirealists of the idealist school don’t repudiate the ontology of the relevant domain or deny that some of its characteristic statements are true, but they do maintain that the entities or facts in question are in some way constituted by the cognition of the thinking subject, and thus aren’t mind- or language-independent. Phenomenalism about physical objects

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{19} Although Wright doesn’t cast the issue in quite these terms, the combinations of independence and existence spelled out here roughly correspond to what he classifies as ‘three paradigms’ of antirealism (ibid., 2 ff).
and subjectivism about ethical value are typical examples of idealism on this account. The
phenomenalist affirms that there are physical objects, but takes them to be constructed out of mind-
dependent sense data; the ethical subjectivist affirms that some of our everyday moral beliefs are
ture, but holds that those beliefs are made true (merely) by features of our mental lives, not by
external states of affairs.

The opposite corner belongs to the antirealist who, quite unlike the idealist, accepts the
independence dimension but rejects the existence dimension. An antirealist of this stripe is an error
theorist: it’s an objective, mind-independent matter whether the entities of the given class exist, or
whether the statements of the given class are true or false, but objective reality is such that none
of the entities exist or none of the statements come out true. The commonplace examples of error
theorists are John Mackie in the case of ethics and, more recently, Hartry Field in the philosophy
of mathematics. In agreement with realism, and contrary to the other two forms of antirealism,
the general temperament of error theory is to acknowledge that the language employed within the
relevant subject matter is properly suited to have bearing on a metaphysically autonomous world;
the snag, however, is that the world contains nothing correlated with the names and predicates
distinctive of that language.

The final corner of the square, the one diagonally opposed to realism, is occupied by the
form of antirealism that accepts neither the existence dimension nor the independence dimension:
noncognitivism. Ordinarily, what the label ‘noncognitivism’ designates, with regard to some

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20 Most famously in his (1977).
21 Field (1980).
22 In an epistemological rather than metaphysical context, the alternative of realism meeting the description given here
would probably be broadly classified as skepticism. The skeptic tends to be someone who grants the independence
dimension—indeed, the underlying idea is usually that the realm of experience, thought, inference, and so on is not
the locus or final arbiter of absolute truth—but who denies that (or else suspends judgment concerning whether)
the independent world is the way we take it to be, thereby dissenting from the existence dimension.
region of discourse, is the doctrine that the statements germane to that region lack assertoric content: they don’t express genuine propositions, and thus aren’t evaluable as true or false. (Perhaps it’s more appropriate in that event to say that the statements, strictly speaking, don’t comprise a region of discourse at all.) It’s clear that such a view is indeed antirealist with respect to the given class of statements, but it’s not immediately apparent that the semantic thesis of noncognitivism—that the statements in question are meaningless (at least in the sense of lacking propositional content)—follows from the rejection of both the existence dimension and the independence dimension. Yet I think there’s at least a prima facie argument that the denial of both dimensions gives rise to a noncognitivist position, and the reasoning is straightforward. First, consider what it means to reject the existence dimension: the rejection of the existence dimension is tantamount to the affirmation that, within the given context, things aren’t the way we conceive of them as being. Presumably, it follows from this affirmation that, in the given context, the way things are isn’t dependent on our conceptualization; for if it were, then surely our conceiving of things in a certain way would just constitute their being that way. Second, to deny the independence dimension is to deny that, within the given context, the way things are is independent of our conceptualization. But now the problem is that “the way things are isn’t dependent on our conceptualization” and “the way things are isn’t independent of our conceptualization” appear to be logical complements, such that asserting both together is incoherent. An obvious (and, for

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23 While it’s probably more natural to suppose that the noncognitivist, who takes a stance on the meaningfulness of a collection of linguistic items, must construe realism and antirealism as theses concerning classes of statements, there’s room for the noncognitivist who wishes to cast the realism issue as one that pertains to classes of entities as well. On the ontological construal, the nonexistence of any entities answering to certain vital terms in the discourse makes the discourse cognitively meaningless: a failure of reference leads to a failure of truth-aptness. The error theorist, by contrast, agrees to some extent that it’s a case of reference failure but, at least on one natural portrayal, sets up the relevant semantics in such a way that the sentences suffering from reference failure are rendered false rather than senseless.

24 Of course, it’s no contradiction to assert both that the way things are isn’t fully dependent on our conceptualization and that the way things are isn’t fully independent of our conceptualization, and anyone whose metaphysics takes inspiration from the Kantian tradition will likely opt for just this line. However, those who subscribe to the Kantian
some people regarding some subject matters, attractive) solution to this problem is simply to *disallow that there’s a way things are at all* as concerns the class of statements in question. This accounts for both the claim that the statements aren’t determined as true or false by our cognitive activity and the claim that the statements aren’t determined as true or false by anything else either: the statements just aren’t true or false to begin with. I don’t claim that the noncognitivist view is deductively entailed by the rejection of the existence and independence dimensions (although the converse entailment is all but certain), but I maintain that there’s a strong affinity between the two. Moreover, the historical fact is that noncognitivism has emerged as a strain of antirealism importantly distinct from the idealist and error theorist strains—most notably in relation to assessments of value, and going by names like ‘expressivism’ and ‘emotivism’—and there can be little doubt that it should be classified as repudiating both dimensions of realism.

There’s a kind of position which hasn’t been mentioned so far, and which seems to have no stable place on the square of opposition just described, but which has sometimes been taken to be hostile to a realist view: *reductionism*. The view, for example, that macroscopic physical objects are reducible to their component particles, perhaps along with the interrelations among those particles, might be construed as incompatible (or at least in tension with) a robust realism about ordinary physical objects. Similarly, someone could be labeled an antirealist about mental states for holding that all talk of the mental is in principle reducible to talk of the physical. In such cases, presumably, antirealism arises (if at all) along the existence dimension rather than the independence dimension: reductionism about the mental may appear to insinuate that the mind doesn’t—in some relevant sense—*exist*. One can imagine the militant reductionist seeking to advance some version of an error theory about the mental. But the notion that reductionism is in fusion of mind and world probably want to claim *acceptance* of both the existence and independence dimensions—perhaps with some qualifications—so I set this alternative aside.
general a brand of antirealism is confused, though not in every respect mistaken. The question of reductionism is instructive here because it underscores the importance of the contextualizing principle: the worry that reductionism regarding x amounts to antirealism regarding x seems to trade on an ambiguity in the operative conception of x, which is thus an ambiguity in what the purported antirealism is about.

For it’s not that the reductionist about macroscopic objects denies the reality of tables; tables do exist, according to her, and they just are collections of interrelated particles (or what have you), which also individually enjoy full-fledged being. If we present the reductionist with a table, she’ll affirm with full sincerity and without metaphysical qualification that there’s a table before her—that is, a collection of simples arranged tablewise, or something similar. Nonetheless, we should note that there is something whose existence the reductionist is precluding when she gives expression to her reductionist thesis: namely, the table conceived as something over and above its material constituents and their interrelations. Much the same can be said for the reductionist about the mental: although he countenances the mind qua neurophysiological phenomenon without reservation, he’s unwilling to accept the existence of the mind qua metaphysically discrete entity (relative to the physical body, that is). And this sort of distinction generalizes to any instance of ontological reduction, insofar as the reduction entails a thesis along the lines of “x is nothing over and above y.” For in every such case, it’s possible to distinguish between two divergent conceptions of x: the conception according to which x is nothing over and above y, and that according to which x is something over and above y (and possibly, moreover, independent of y). Call these the deflationary and substantive conceptions of x respectively. It follows that anyone claiming that reductionism about x entails antirealism about x is equivocating between the deflationary and substantive conceptions of x. When the reductionist asserts that x is
nothing over and above $y$, she can’t, on pain of incoherency, be asserting that $x$ conceived substantively is nothing over and above $y$; but $x$ conceived substantively is the only thing whose reality she decisively rejects in the statement of her reductionist thesis. Therefore, while it’s true that reductionism naturally entails a certain sort of antirealism in every case, what the reductionism is about isn’t what the resulting antirealism is about, and as a consequence it’d be misleading to classify reductionism as a category of antirealism per se. On the contrary, what the foregoing considerations suggest is that careful observation of the contextualizing principle eliminates the need to give any special treatment of reductionism as a locus of realist-antirealist debate. Once we make precise what the targets of any putative reductionist, realist, or antirealist positions are, classifying those positions according to the two-dimensional scheme given above becomes a straightforward matter.

This concludes the characterization of the realism-antirealism distinction in general. We’ve seen that realism and antirealism are subject to a contextualizing principle, which restricts any affirmation of a realist or antirealist position to some specific subject matter. We’ve seen that the subject matter thus specified can be construed (ontologically) in terms of a class of entities or (semantically) in terms of a class of statements, with varying theoretical ramifications. Finally, we’ve seen that realism, once contextualized and construed either ontologically or semantically, amounts to the averment of two logically independent theses: that things are the way we represent them as being (the existence dimension), and that the way things are is independent of any

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25 Of course, reductionism is apparently rendered trivial if we suppose, on the other hand, that its thesis is that $x$ conceived deflationarily is nothing over and above $y$. Rather, I presume that, whenever the thesis of reductionism is meant to be informative, the reductionist has in mind some pretheoretical conception of $x$ which is neutral between the deflationary and substantive conceptions. Equivalently, we could modify the deflationary and substantive conceptions of $x$ so that they hold, respectively, that $x$ might be nothing over and above $y$ and that $x$ decidedly is something over and above $y$.

26 Cf. Dummett (1982, 74-76) on why reductionism shouldn’t in general be construed as a form of antirealism.
representational endeavor on our part (the independence dimension). It’s conspicuous that the independence dimension is the aspect of realism in greatest need of further articulation; for all that’s been said here thus far, the philosophical notion of mind-independence has seen little more substantial treatment than synonyms (‘objectivity,’ ‘autonomy,’ etc.) and standard turns of phrase (‘regardless of our capacity for observation,’ etc.) meant to appeal to prosaic intuitions about the ways our conceptual activity bears on the world. Because the presumption that things are the way we generally take them to be (the existence dimension) is, in my view, both more pervasive and more agreeable to explication than the independence dimension, the notion of mind-independence is probably the most crucial and characteristic feature of realism. It appears that securing the independence dimension, or at least giving it its due explication, is more than half the battle for the realist. Accordingly, cashing out in more precise terms just what it is for existence or truth value to be mind-independent is a foremost desideratum of the rest of this chapter, and that goal is primarily what the discussions of Dummett and Putnam will be aiming at. Part of the importance of their participation in the realism issue is that their antirealist arguments help bring into a new light what’s at stake in questions having to do with mind-independence. In particular, the two philosophers challenge the tenability of what seems to be one of the most revelatory consequences of mind-independence: that truth is a matter of bona fide representation. In attacking the possibility, or even the intelligibility, of robust representation—where what’s represented is in no way contingent on being represented—they help to make it clearer just what the realist’s notion of mind-independence amounts to.

In what remains, I’ll examine the contributions to the realism literature made by Dummett and Putnam. While my task isn’t to adjudicate the debates they’ve roused, I intend to use the
peculiarities of those debates to build on the foundation established here and further develop the realism-antirealism distinction.

3. Dummett’s Semantic Challenge to Realism

As has been discussed at some length already, Dummett favors a semantic construal of realism and antirealism; he prefers to understand the thesis of realism—and thus also the disagreement between a realist and an antirealist over any subject matter—in terms of some class of statements rather than some class of entities. The insistence upon beginning the philosophical analysis of a domain of discourse at the level of sentences rather than the level of subsentential expressions is, as Bob Hale has remarked, a vestige of Frege’s ‘context principle’—the principle that the meaning of a word is to be found in the context of the proposition in which it appears. According to Frege’s recommendation, we’re liable to be led astray if we first seek to determine the semantics of individual terms—say, by settling on an ontology—and then use our findings to evaluate the statements containing those terms. Now, it may well be the case that our right to countenance or repudiate some class of entities hangs crucially on, or is of a piece with, the result of a dispute over sentences purporting to refer to such entities, and, in this sense, direct metaphysical queries concerning the entities in question aren’t necessarily irrelevant to realist-antirealist disputes as Dummett represents them. But for him the ontology of a given domain of discourse is, we might say, posterior to its semantics, and in particular posterior to considerations regarding the kind of truth borne by the sentences belonging to that domain. More specifically, on Dummett’s approach the (fundamentally linguistic) realism debate ramifies into metaphysics in just the following way: insofar as our realist and antirealist positions entail metaphysical

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27 In Hale (1997), 273.
28 A famous statement of this principle can be found in his *Foundations of Arithmetic* (1884/1960), xxii.
commitments in the traditional sense, they do so by assigning quite different kinds of truth conditions to realist versus antirealist domains, where the assignment of truth conditions of a particular kind is simply constitutive of realism or antirealism concerning the given domain. The dispute between a realist and an antirealist over some class of statements, in brief, is a dispute over whether the statements in question enjoy what could be called \textit{realist truth conditions}. According to the picture which emerges from Dummett’s work, the defining mark of statements with realist truth conditions is that their truth or falsity is potentially \textit{epistemically unconstrained}—that is, sentences with realist truth conditions are capable of being true or false even if we’re unable, even in principle, to ascertain their truth or falsity.\footnote{A note on terminology. There is a small family of expressions generally synonymous with ‘epistemically unconstrained’: evidentially unconstrained, evidence-transcendent, recognition-transcendent, and perhaps a few more. Except where otherwise noted, I’ll treat them as interchangeable for expository purposes. My habit will be to use ‘epistemically unconstrained’ (or, if a noun is called for, ‘recognition-transcendence’), but in general my preference for one term over the others shouldn’t be construed as anything besides a pragmatic necessity. As a further aside, the adverb ‘potentially’ is often added in order to capture the ‘even in principle’ qualification found in the main text. For sake of expediency, I’ll usually omit the qualification and let it be implicit that, unless otherwise noted, ‘recognition-transcendence’ (etc.) is only ever ‘recognition-transcendence \textit{in principle}’, regardless of whether or not the truth conditions in question are beyond our epistemic reach in actuality.} Thus William Stirton casts the realism-antirealism debate, in its Dummettian formulation, as a debate over whether all truths are (in principle) knowable, with the antirealist claiming that truth and knowability are coextensive and the realist contending that truth is the sort of thing that might in principle outstrip our epistemic or cognitive capabilities.\footnote{Stirton (1997), 700.} In this section I’ll investigate Dummett’s portrayal of realism and antirealism, with particular attention to the utility of Dummett’s concept of recognition-transcendence. That concept provides a means toward explication of the notion of objectivity or mind-independence, and thus toward giving fuller content to the independence dimension of realism.
We’re now in a position to take a closer look at the implications of Dummett’s way of phrasing the thesis of realism. For convenience I repeat the Dummettian formulation given previously:

the fundamental thesis of realism, [regarded as a semantic doctrine], is that we really do succeed in referring to external objects, existing independently of our knowledge of them, and that the statements we make about them carry a meaning of such a kind that they are rendered true or false by an objective reality the constitution of which is, again, independent of our knowledge.

Of course, Dummett has written extensively on issues pertaining to language, truth, and realism, and he’s made some significant modifications to his views over the course of his writing. As a result, other commentators might locate Dummett’s most definitive statement of what realism amounts to elsewhere, with somewhat variable results. Although this particular formulation of the thesis of realism is by no means the last word concerning his position on the matter, I’ll treat it as canonical and on the whole authoritative. I’ll do so largely for two reasons: first, it comes at a time when Dummett’s outlook on the matter has attained at least a partial maturity, and it thus reflects some developments in his thought since his initial forays into the realism issue; and second, regardless of what Dummett’s earlier or later stances were, the present formulation captures in a succinct way what has in fact been at stake in much of the literature provoked by his semantic challenge to realism. So while the present formulation is, so to speak, defeasible in the face of alternative formulations in which Dummett puts things slightly differently, it’s still a felicitous point of departure for an examination of his approach to the issues surrounding realism.

31 In one pertinent example, he held, prior to giving the present characterization of realism, that the dispute between realism and antirealism can be generally construed as a dispute over whether or not truth in the given domain is bivalent—see, for instance, his (1978), 155. In (1982), 103-104, he retracts his former contention that acceptance or rejection of bivalence is the crux of the realism issue, and he substitutes for it the claim that bivalence is necessary but not sufficient for the maintenance of a realistic position.
It’s a thorny question what form of linguistic theory is underwriting the present formulation. It might seem at first that, in mentioning the view that “the statements we make […] carry a meaning of such a kind that they are rendered true or false by an objective reality,” Dummett invokes a loose version of truth-conditional semantics in his characterization of realism. Roughly, truth-conditional semantics is a theory holding that the meaning of an assertion consists in, or is at least intimately connected with, the conditions under which the assertion is true. On this interpretation, then, the realist is one who holds that objective states of affairs underlie the meanings of our statements (or words) and confer on them the kind of truth that they bear. The suspicion that Dummett—or, in any case, Dummett’s realist—is a truth-conditional semanticist gains some credence from the observation that Dummett construes the realism-antirealism distinction, as pertains to some region of discourse, in terms of differing conceptions of the truth conditions possessed by the statements germane to that region. Moreover, as we’ll see below, Dummett’s primary objection to semantic realism is that there appears to be no means by which the competent language user could display an understanding of (purportedly realist) sentences as having epistemically unconstrained truth conditions, and the lesson is supposed to be that the sentences of the disputed class therefore can’t have the kind of meaning that the realist needs them to have. So it’d seem that on Dummett’s view, statements have the meaning they have in virtue of the conditions for their truth.

An apparent problem for this interpretation is that Dummett notes elsewhere that his orientation in the philosophy of language is heavily influenced by the Wittgensteinian tradition of grounding meaning in use. Indeed, a semantic antirealism like Dummett’s is naturally well-served by a methodological emphasis on the practical, communicative side of language. (And it’ll soon
be obvious that the only plausible way of depicting his outlook on linguistic meaning is along those lines.) Thus he writes:

The meaning of [...] a statement cannot be, or contain as an ingredient, anything which is not manifest in the use made of it, lying solely in the mind of the individual who apprehends that meaning: if two individuals agree completely about the use to be made of the statement, then they agree about its meaning.32

Perhaps it’s an open question, pending the details, whether a use theory of meaning could be compatible with a truth-conditional semantics, but insofar as they identify the source of meaning in ostensibly contrasting ways, there’s a prima facie tension between them. It’s easy, furthermore, to see the two approaches as pointing in opposite explanatory directions: Dummett’s use-theoretic account holds, more or less, that the use of a statement circumscribes its meaning, and that the meaning of the statement in turn determines the kind of truth condition it has (thereby endowing the statement, in selected cases, with “meaning of such a kind that [it is] rendered true or false by an objective reality”); according to truth-conditional semantics, conversely, meaning is to be explained by appeal to truth conditions, and our use of a statement presumably complies with our prior grasp of its meaning or truth condition.

The resolution, or part of it anyway, is that Dummett distinguishes between semantics proper and the theory of linguistic understanding—giving an account of how expressions are imparted with their sense, and thereafter apt to be rendered true or false, is a separate task from giving an account of how competent language users come to appreciate that sense. Because semantics, on Dummett’s construal, deals primarily with those features of a sentence that equip it to be made true or false, it follows that

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32 Dummett (1978), 216. He advances this claim in the context of his treatment of mathematical statements, understood intuitionistically, but his philosophical inclination is to extend intuitionistic logic from mathematics to discourse in general.
[a] semantic theory is not itself a theory of meaning, since it does not concern itself with what is known by a speaker and constitutes his grasp of the use of an expression: a knowledge of the meaning of a predicate does not consist in knowing of which objects it is true and of which it is false, and a knowledge of the meaning of a sentence does not consist in knowing its truth value.\textsuperscript{33}

The latter knowledge—of extensions and truth values—is, perhaps along with a theory of reference, squarely within the purview of semantics, whereas questions of speaker understanding fall under another theoretical endeavor. According to the current distinction, the semanticist investigates the nature and origin of the meaning that a sentence has, in view of its components and its role in the language in question, whereas the meaning theorist investigates the nature and origin of the language user’s knowledge of a sentence’s meaning. But this isn’t to say that the two theoretical projects are unrelated; on Dummett’s view, “a semantic theory is plausible only in so far as it provides a base on which a theory of meaning can be constructed.”\textsuperscript{34}

Thus it’s open to Dummett to favor a theory of meaning (that is, speaker understanding) which is in some respects patterned after a truth-conditional semantics while, at the same time, couching that theory within a broader framework that explicates the significance of a linguistic expression ultimately in terms of its use. And I maintain that his linguistic philosophy has just this structure, such that a roughly use-theoretic semantics (one in which a sentence’s meaning “cannot be, or contain as an ingredient, anything which is not manifest in the use made of it”) “provides a base” on which he constructs a theory of meaning whose contours are truth-conditional. Dummett’s theory of meaning is truth-conditional simply in the sense that—as it insists—“[a]n understanding of a sentence must involve a grasp of how it is determined as true, if it is true, in accordance with its composition.”\textsuperscript{35} And this is just the thesis that to know the meaning of a

\textsuperscript{33} Dummett (1982), 60.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 61-62.
sentence is *to know* what it’d be for the sentence to hold true; the idea should therefore be
distinguished from the thesis, typical of truth-conditional semantics in its regular form, that the
meaning of a sentence is what it’d be for the sentence to hold true. So, by separating semantics *per se* from the theory of speaker meaning, Dummett is able to blend use-theoretic elements together
with truth-conditional elements into a unified philosophy of language, and the appearance of
conflict is assuaged. As a consequence, however, we need to be mindful of an ambiguity in the
word ‘meaning’: although meaning is something a statement can have in the abstract, Dummett
sometimes (as above) uses the term in reference to the significance the speaker bestows upon a
statement in the act of understanding it. ‘Meaning’ in the former sense belongs to the domain of
what Dummett calls ‘semantics,’ in the latter sense to ‘the theory of meaning’ or ‘the theory of
understanding.’ Having noted this ambiguity, I’ll refrain where possible from using the term
‘meaning’ in the context of the theory of speaker understanding.

A vital detail in Dummett’s formulation of semantic realism for a class of statements is that
the statements contained in the class are conceived to be “rendered true or false” by a mind-
independent world. For the realist so construed, this ‘rendering’ is *complete* : every sentence taken
to bear realist truth conditions is either made true or made false by the way things are. Thus the
realist accepts the principle of bivalence, that every statement of the given class has exactly one of
the values ‘true’ and ‘false,’ and moreover holds that the statements conform to the standard
operations of classical logic.\(^{36}\) The intuitive connection between bivalence and realist metaphysics
isn’t difficult to see: loosely speaking, the realist takes there to be a determinate way that things,

\(^{36}\) Although the issue is often cast in terms of bivalence, it should be noted in passing that what matters to the realist
isn’t the number of possible truth values but the objective determinacy with which each statement of the given class
is assigned its truth value. Even if the world is correctly represented by a non-classical logic with more than two
truth values, there’s room for the realist thesis that each statement in the pertinent domain has its truth value, 
whatever it might be, mind-independently. Having said this, however, I’ll continue to speak of bivalence for sake
of simplicity.
within some specified domain, stand in themselves, quite apart from anyone’s conceptualizing
powers or epistemic access. But if there’s a determinate way that things are in some context, then
the statements pertaining to that context are determinately true just in case they bear the right sort
of relationship with the world (or the relevant parts of it), and determinately false otherwise.37
Given that reality is determinate, and that the truth or falsity of a properly conditioned statement
(in the case of those statements which bear realist truth conditions) is regulated by reality, it seems
that such a statement couldn’t possibly fail to have its value fixed either as ‘true’ or as ‘false.’ A
metaphysical picture of this sort is why Dummett takes bivalence to be a necessary condition for
a realist view of some subject matter; rejection of bivalence with respect to the given class of
statements suggests the denial of an independent fact of the matter concerning the statements’
worldly content. But although the acceptance of bivalence is necessary for realism, according to
Dummett, it’s not sufficient for realism. This is undoubtedly correct: Dummett himself mentions,
as a historical example of a realist-antirealist dispute involving no disagreement over bivalence,
the dispute between platonists and nominalists over the reality of universals.38 A still more salient
example is the debate between external-world realists and subjective idealists, the latter of whom
need not demur from bivalence in any regard. Indeed, the external-world realist and the subjective

37 A qualification is necessary here. There might be cases in which a given sentence is defective, and so potentially
not truth-apt, for reasons orthogonal to the realism-antirealism debate. Two staple kinds of such cases are instances
of vagueness and instances of reference failure, but these two defects aren’t necessarily the only reasons why an
apparently assertoric sentence may turn out to lack a truth value. Insofar as sentences defective in this way are
neither determinately true nor determinately false, they pose a prima facie difficulty for the realist’s contention that
truth in the specified domain is bivalent. But the grounds for dismissing this issue as orthogonal to the realism-
antirealism debate are that they don’t present a problem for the realist in particular. Even the antirealist, surely, will
want to find some way of accounting for aberrations resulting from vagueness and reference failure—and it’s not
clear that either the realist or the antirealist should be any better (or any differently) equipped to do so relative to
the other. Standard accounts are on offer. In particular, Hale (1997, 288) observes that the realist can always resort
to the stance that vagueness results merely from an inexactness in our language, not from any genuine
indeterminacy in reality. I’ll set the question of defective sentences aside and treat of bivalence without further
qualification.

38 Dummett (1982), 104.
The idealist might not disagree, in principle, on the truth value of any (non-philosophical) claim at all; theirs is a controversy over the metaphysical grounding of truth, not over the segregation of statements into truths and falsehoods.

The connection between realism and the principle of bivalence is most conspicuous in the context of undecidable sentences. A sentence is undecidable exactly when we possess no warrant for belief in its truth or in its falsity and, what’s more, we know of no method by which we could place ourselves in a position to be warranted in believing its truth or its falsity. To borrow a standard example, we have no evidence for or against the claim that Julius Caesar sneezed exactly five times on his nineteenth birthday, and we also have (to our present knowledge) no means of acquiring evidence for or against it. In this case, to say that the claim accords with the principle of bivalence—in other words, that it’s either determinately true or determinately false that Julius Caesar sneezed exactly five times on his nineteenth birthday—is, assuming a mundane account of reference, to hold that the truth condition for the sentence “Julius Caesar sneezed exactly five times on his nineteenth birthday” is epistemically unconstrained. The truth of the sentence consists in the obtaining of a state of affairs which is beyond our cognitive reach, transcending our recognitional capacity. But this is just to say that the sentence has a realist truth condition by Dummett’s criteria. In more traditional imagery, the statement is true or false in virtue of its relationship with a determinate and mind-independent reality, and that relationship holds good regardless of whether we ourselves are, or could be, in a position to ascertain the state of that mind-independent reality.

Let’s take stock of what has emerged from Dummett’s account of realism so far. Bivalence is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for realism concerning some class of statements. In addition to holding that every member of the class is determinately true or determinately false, the
realist endorses a particular thesis having to do with *the way in which* the members of the class are determined as true or false. Namely, the statements for which one takes a realist view are conceived as being “rendered true or false by an objective reality” to which we *refer* when we make those statements. The principle of bivalence ensures that every statement of the given class has a definite truth value, while the notion of truth-via-reference locates truth conditions in external states of affairs. Thus the two together imply that truth, on the realist conception, is potentially epistemically unconstrained, or evidence-transcendent, as is made plain by the case of realistically-construed undecidable sentences. Because the realist takes even undecidable sentences to have determinate truth values, it’s fair to portray realism about a class of sentences as the view that the truth or falsity of the sentences is a separate matter from their epistemology. So Stirton’s gloss on the central thesis of semantic realism—that there’s no assurance in principle that all truths should be knowable—is upheld.

*Antirealism* concerning a class of statements amounts, for Dummett, either to the denial of the principle of bivalence for those statements or to the rejection of their being made true or false by extralinguistic states of affairs to which they refer. But the former route is one that he supposes to have particular philosophical interest, and throughout his career he gives special emphasis to the prospect of advancing an antirealist position through the argument that we possess no bivalent conception of truth for the disputed class of statements. But it doesn’t follow that the two routes to antirealism are altogether disconnected. The former strategy for assailing realism is founded on the insight, already alluded to, that the repudiation of bivalent truth for the given class of statements strongly implies (setting aside exceptional cases like those of vagueness and reference failure) that the statements, insofar as they’re true or false at all, are made true or false by something other than mind-independent states of affairs. Thus the rejection of bivalence for a class of statements leads
naturally—though perhaps not necessarily\(^{39}\)—to the rejection of the notion that the statements are rendered true or false by their extralinguistic referents. To the extent that this entailment is indeed natural, then, we may say that the first strategy against realism—that of denying bivalence—naturally includes the second. Perhaps it’s for this reason, in addition to the principally linguistic character of the question of bivalence in contrast with the metaphysical bent of the second strategy, that Dummett gives such attention to considerations concerning bivalence in relation to realism and antirealism. In consonance with his general philosophical orientation, the metaphysics of the matter must be adjudicated (if at all) only subsequent to, and on the basis of, a proper account of the role played by language as the vehicle of thought. So if semantic antirealism is to gain any purchase against metaphysical realism, it should seek to do so by way of the theory of language and logic, and a fitting point of attack is the principle of bivalence.

Dummett famously models his approach to the question of bivalence after the intuitionist school in the philosophy of mathematics. As the intuitionists have it, mathematical activity has the form of construction rather than discovery, and mathematical statements thus carry truth or falsity only inasmuch as they’ve been decisively proved or disproved. The school owes its presence on the philosophical and mathematical scene to the work of L. E. J. Brouwer, whose aim was to develop a mathematical system not dependent upon the (in his view) insecure metaphysical

\(^{39}\) An antirealist position that rejects the principle of bivalence but accepts the proposition that truth value is in virtue of objective states of affairs is conceivable, albeit outlandish in certain contexts. For instance, one can imagine an antirealist about the external world holding—maybe with some inspiration from quantum indeterminacy—that claims about physical states of affairs are neither true nor false until such time as the pertinent states of affairs are observed. Upon being observed, however, the physical states of affairs become both determinate and fully objective (or, if one prefers, the physical states of affairs somehow shift from being objectively indeterminate to objectively determinate). A less eccentric example of this kind of antirealist view might be found in the philosophy of mathematics: one could hold that mathematical statements are rendered true or false by reference to objectively existing mathematical entities, but that such entities only come into their objective existence through the exercise of mathematical cognition. Some interpreters have construed Aristotelian philosophy of mathematics and intuitionist metaphysics along these lines.
assumption that mathematics has a self-subsisting subject matter.\textsuperscript{40} Rather than take it for granted that mathematical statements have truth conditions lying in a platonic realm of mathematical objects, Brouwer considered it methodologically superior to ground mathematical truth and falsity in the active intellect of the mathematician, who is conceived to be endowed with a special faculty of construction. On the intuitionist’s view, therefore, the truth and falsity of mathematical sentences are entirely within the limited domain of epistemology, and there’s no space to say that a mathematical sentence, neither whose assertion nor whose negation admits of demonstration, nonetheless possesses a truth value lying beyond our capacity to ascertain. For the truth condition of a mathematical sentence, intuitionistically construed, just is its having been proved, and its falsity condition just is its having been disproved. As an obvious consequence, the intuitionist is obliged to say that mathematical statements that are neither provable nor disprovable simply lack truth values—the inveteracy of the principle of bivalence notwithstanding.

The more general lesson is this: if the antirealist wants to hold that the statements belonging to some domain of discourse are governed by an epistemically constrained notion of truth, then the presence (perhaps even the possibility) of undecidable statements in that domain will evidently require the antirealist to relinquish the principle of bivalence with regard to the domain. By the same token, the transition from bivalent to nonbivalent semantics marks a significant revision of the concept of truth itself; to ratify an epistemically constrained notion of truth is to take the view, contrary to the classical conception, that truth is something closely akin to justification, if not totally indiscernible from it.\textsuperscript{41} The reconception of truth is plainly visible in the case of intuitionistic philosophy of mathematics: according to the intuitionist, truth is provability, and

\textsuperscript{40} See, for instance, Brouwer’s papers collected in van Heijenoort (1967).

\textsuperscript{41} In his (1982), 91, Dummett even suggests that in some contexts it might be preferable to discard the notion of truth altogether and replace it with the pertinent epistemic notion.
falsity is disprovability—in sum, truth and justification effectually merge together. More broadly, the bivalence-denying antirealist about any domain whatsoever is committed, on Dummett’s construal anyway, to the thesis that the notion of truth applicable to the given domain is to be explicited in terms of grounds for assertion. Such a thesis signifies a prima facie departure from truth-conditional semantics, on its standard formulation, in at least one striking way: it seems to be no longer guaranteed that disquotation will afford an adequate expression of an utterance’s truth condition. On the standard (Davidsonian)\textsuperscript{42} conception of truth-conditional semantics, the truth condition of an utterance type like “snow is white” can be specified via the relevant instance of the disquotation schema, so that the truth condition of “snow is white” is simply snow’s being white. But on the adoption of a semantics employing an epistemically constrained notion of truth, the truth condition of “snow is white” is whatever constitutes sufficient grounds for asserting that snow is white, rather than the straightforward circumstance of snow’s being white, as the disquotational approach would have it.

Of course, Dummett’s antirealist might try to minimize the impact of this modification by contending that when truth is taken to be epistemically constrained, a consequence is that snow’s being white \textit{just consists in} whatever counts as justification for the assertion that snow is white; then, with this supplemental identity claim in place, the application of the disquotation schema proceeds as assuredly as ever. And this reply, I find, is the right one for the antirealist—after all, if truth is conceived to be epistemically constrained, then the ‘truth condition’ for a statement is properly understood to be the condition under which the statement is \textit{justified}. As a result, it appears that the truth-theoretic platitude expressed by the disquotation schema is no less platitudinous when truth is taken to be something like justification. That is, the bare move from

\textsuperscript{42} The locus classicus is Davidson (1967).
“P” is true iff “P” is justified iff [justification conditions for P] is hardly a loss of face-value plausibility, regardless of any philosophical misgivings one might harbor for generally reconceiving truth in this fashion. Similarly, the antirealist needn’t feel threatened by the observation that—according, anyway, to the ordinary concept of assertion—to assert that P is to present that P as true. For the realist and the antirealist alike can agree that the language user who makes an assertion is thereby implicitly assigning warrant to that very assertoric act. Having thus provided reason to expect basic platitudes concerning assertion and disquotation to be preserved under the present reconception of the notion ‘true,’ the antirealist is prepared to accept the metaphysical overtones of epistemically constrained truth, along with the rejection of the principle of bivalence, in stride.

Dummett’s chief argument against semantic realism is founded on his manifestation challenge, an argument (or cluster thereof) that purports to show the difficulty—insurmountable, in Dummett’s view—of explaining, in use-theoretic terms, how a language user could possess an understanding of realist truth conditions. Recall that Dummett, an adherent of the Wittgensteinian tradition in the philosophy of language, maintains that the meaning of a statement “cannot be, or contain as an ingredient, anything which is not manifest in the use made of it, lying solely in the mind of the individual who apprehends that meaning.” This principle naturally allows for the formulation of what Stirton calls the “manifestation requirement,” which demands that a speaker’s knowledge of the meaning of a statement be somehow perceptible in the speaker’s behavior.43 Borrowing a familiar metaphor from Wittgenstein’s discussion of language use, Dummett gives the following rationale for the manifestation requirement:

43 Stirton (1997), 697. He remarks that the manifestation requirement can be approximately identified with the slogan “meaning is use.”
The reason is that the meaning of a statement consists solely in its role as an instrument of communication between individuals, just as the powers of a chess piece consist solely in its role in the game according to the rules. An individual cannot communicate what he cannot be observed to communicate: if one individual associated with a […] symbol or formula some mental content, where the association did not lie in the use he made of the symbol or formula, then he could not convey that content by means of the symbol or formula, for his audience would be unaware of the association and would have no means of becoming aware of it.44

This much seems to follow straightforwardly from the thesis that meaning derives from use. Pursuant to the standard interpretation of that thesis, one’s grasp of the meaning of an expression is a practical ability to use the expression in customary ways and to respond appropriately to others’ uses of it. But included in such a practical ability—and, furthermore, included entirely within it—is one’s capacity to recognize that the state of affairs described by a declarative sentence obtains or doesn’t obtain; this recognitional capability is simply part and parcel of understanding the meaning of the statement. Now, however, if the class of statements in question contains any undecidable sentences, the antirealist is poised to deal a serious blow to the tenability of realism with regard to that class. This is because an undecidable sentence, by definition, is one which describes a state of affairs whose obtaining or not obtaining is beyond our epistemic reach, and thus an undecidable sentence with a realist truth condition is, by use-theoretic considerations, a sentence which we couldn’t possibly achieve the requisite understanding of. Dummett completes the antirealist’s argument thus:

Since the sentence is, by hypothesis, effectively undecidable, the condition which must, in general, obtain for it to be true is not one which we are capable of recognising whenever it obtains, or of getting ourselves in a position to do so. Hence any behaviour which displays a capacity for acknowledging the sentence as being true in all cases in which the condition for its truth can be recognised as obtaining will fall short of being a full manifestation of the knowledge of the condition for its truth: it shows only that the condition can be recognised in certain

44 Dummett (1978), 216.
cases, not that we have a grasp of what, in general, it is for that condition to obtain even in those cases when we are incapable of recognising that it does.\textsuperscript{45}

But the contention that a given statement can be determinately true or false \textit{even when we’re unable to ascertain its truth value} is precisely what’s at issue between the realist and the antirealist interpretations of the statement. If we’re capable of understanding a sentence only to the extent that we possess the means to verify or falsify it, as the manifestation requirement suggests, then it seems we could have no notion of what it’d be for the sentence to bear realist—that is, potentially \textit{recognition-transcendent}—truth conditions. Note that loosening the manifestation requirement does little to alleviate the problem: for suppose we made the assumption that knowledge of realist truth conditions could be manifested simply by the ability to respond to recognizable, yet inconclusive, \textit{evidence} for or against an undecidable statement, and not only by the ability to respond to circumstances that definitively confirm or disconfirm the statement. Even then, the language user’s knowledge will nonetheless be limited by the scope of her epistemic access, and her behavior will offer no grounds for the claim that she understands an undecidable statement as having a realist truth condition.\textsuperscript{46} Therefore, insofar as semantic realism imputes to language users a kind of knowledge they apparently can’t have, semantic realism is an implausible position. (The manifestation \textit{challenge} is then to demonstrate that this seeming obstacle to a grasp of realist truth conditions is really no formidable obstacle at all.)

One lesson that could be drawn from the foregoing argument against semantic realism is that the manifestation requirement, and \textit{a fortiori} any use theory of meaning, is incompatible with a particular brand of truth-conditional account of speaker understanding. Stirton takes the manifestation requirement to entail a somewhat more general \textit{decidability requirement} stating that

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 225.
\item \textsuperscript{46} Cf. Hale (1997), 281.
\end{itemize}
implicit grasp of a concept may be attributed to a language user only if the concept is decidable for the user. This is because the manifestation requirement casts implicit knowledge as a practical ability, and undecidable concepts (thus also the undecidable statements containing such concepts) are, for the reasons canvassed just above, necessarily of such a kind that an understanding of them can’t be adequately displayed in speaker behavior. As Dummett rightly argues, at least some portion of a speaker’s understanding of a theory of meaning must consist in implicit knowledge of how the principles of that theory play out in practice. Hence Stirton observes that

[Once it is accepted that knowledge of a theory of meaning consists essentially in the possession of certain practical abilities, it arguably follows that there is something absurd about the idea that someone could implicitly know the rules and axioms of a theory of meaning and be unable to manifest this knowledge.]

At least, this is the case when the ‘rules and axioms’ in question belong to a formalistic truth-conditional theory of meaning, because that theory, on its standard articulation, employs undecidable concepts that can’t be implicitly known—most importantly, the undecidable concept truth. It’s obvious why truth construed as epistemically unconstrained is an undecidable concept, but Stirton contends that even an epistemically constrained notion of truth—e.g., the intuitionistic one—will, in its current form, fail to satisfy the manifestation requirement. This is due to the fact that while an intuitionistic theory of construction has been worked out for certain formal systems (like Heyting arithmetic, which Dummett cites as a prototype of intuitionist mathematics), none

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47 Stirton (1997), 704 ff.
48 Dummett (1978), 217. “But to suppose that, in general, a knowledge of meaning consisted in verbalisable knowledge would involve an infinite regress: if a grasp of the meaning of an expression consisted, in general, in the ability to state its meaning, then it would be impossible for anyone to learn a language who was not already equipped with a fairly extensive language. Hence that knowledge which, in general, constitutes the understanding of [language] must be implicit knowledge.”
49 Stirton (1997), 705.
50 Dummet (1978), 233.
has been worked out that captures the notion of constructibility in a fully general form that can accommodate natural languages.

Thus, although Stirton allows for the possibility that the intuitionistic concept of truth will turn out to be generally decidable on further investigation, he concludes that as things stand, even intuitionistic truth is not up to the demands of the manifestation requirement, and moreover that a truth-conditional theory of meaning, even when construed intuitionistically, is ruled out by the manifestation requirement. Of course, it bears emphasis that the sort of truth-conditional semantics Stirton has in mind is quite different from anything that can be attributed to Dummett himself. On Dummett’s view, the correct theory of *speaker understanding* proceeds by way of truth conditions—to understand the meaning of an assertion is to have a conception of the circumstance in which it’s true—but this alone is a far cry from a truth-conditional semantics of the kind that linguists, logicians, and philosophers of language have been developing. Because the latter kind of semantics involves axioms and rules implicit knowledge of which isn’t manifestable, Stirton adjudges that the manifestation requirement precludes the possibility of a truth-conditional theory of meaning in any form. But the exclusion of a truth-conditional theory of meaning isn’t an immediate victory for Dummett’s antirealist, since the reason for its exclusion also cuts against the antirealist’s theory of meaning, as Stirton argues, by implying that even the intuitionistic notion of truth is undecidable when applied to natural languages. Undoubtedly, the task of formulating a conception of truth in the spirit of intuitionism that can have perfectly general application, and not merely application within the formal sciences, is monumental. Stirton’s point, moreover, is one that the semantic antirealist ought to take seriously: although the antirealist project will do well to find inspiration in intuitionistic philosophy of mathematics, what’s needed for a generalized

51 Stirton (1997), 709-710.
semantic antirealism is some epistemically constrained conception of truth sensitive to epistemic relations weaker than definitive proof and definitive disproof—and the intuitionist apparatus in its received form doesn’t meet this need. It remains to be seen, then, whether there’s a decidable, rigorous, and widely useful concept of truth at the antirealist’s disposal. If not, the realist might simply respond to the polemical state of affairs with a modus tollens argument to the effect that the manifestation requirement—or perhaps the use theory of meaning more generally—must be rejected, since it entails (via Stirton’s reasoning) a decidability requirement that can’t be, or at least hasn’t yet been, met by any acceptable conception of what a language user understands in grasping what it is for a sentence to be true.

Devitt, in fact, advances an argument against Dummett’s antirealism in just this style. In a discussion of the reasoning Dummett presents in support of semantic antirealism, Devitt attributes to him a tacit presupposition about the nature of the competent speaker’s knowledge of meaning. The presupposition, according to Devitt, is that the language user’s knowledge of meaning consists in the knowledge that a given statement has the truth condition it has; because such knowledge, being an instance of ‘knowing-that,’ is propositional rather than practical knowledge, Devitt calls Dummett’s presupposition ‘the propositional assumption.’ 52 When a language user’s understanding of sentence meaning is construed along these lines, the insinuation is that the meaning—the truth condition—borne by a sentence is circumscribed by those features of the sentence that lie within the speaker’s conceptual grasp. And surely it’s this insinuation, or something much like it, that Dummett exploits in his attempt to exclude realist truth conditions from the scope of the speaker’s comprehension. 53 A key repercussion of the propositional

52 Devitt (1983a), 83 ff.
53 It might seem odd that Devitt interprets Dummet as making the propositional assumption, given that Dummett’s formulation of the manifestation challenge depicts the language user’s knowledge as implicit in her practical ability to respond to states of affairs which recognizably have epistemic bearing on a given statement. The formulation
assumption is, therefore, that the dispute between the semantic realist and the semantic antirealist becomes a dispute over whether the competent speaker knows a given statement to have a realist truth condition, rather than a dispute over whether the statement simply has a realist truth condition, regardless of anyone’s knowledge qua competent speaker. And just this distinction is, for Devitt, the crux of the matter. For if the issue is framed in terms of what sorts of truth conditions statements have, independent of what language users know in virtue of understanding them, the possibility arises that the truth conditions statements have might be realist—the limitations of our recognitional capacities notwithstanding. Allowing that the truth conditions of statements—here, states of affairs metaphysically conceived—might involve more than we understand, just in knowing their meanings, entails, according to Devitt, that Dummett’s argument at best “establishes that all understanding is verificationist but not that all truth is.”54 Here Devitt is presupposing, contra the antirealist, that there’s a distinction, at least potentially, between epistemology and truth; otherwise, if truth were epistemically constrained, any limitation (in principle) on the speaker’s conceptual grasp of a sentence’s meaning constitutes a limitation on what it could be for the sentence to hold true. So if the distinction between the truth conditions a competent speaker can know and the truth conditions statements can have is acknowledged, then the semantic antirealist

54 Ibid., 91. Emphasis mine.
is obliged to produce some nontrivial rationale for the claim that statements possess no truth conditions beyond whatever truth conditions the speaker associates with them epistemically. According to Devitt, Dummett has provided no such rationale.

The reply to this point from Dummett’s corner will likely stem from deeper methodological considerations. As I mentioned briefly in sections 1 and 2, Dummett and Devitt approach the realism-antirealism debate with philosophical orientations that, in broad outline, are profoundly incompatible with one another, and in some respects even antithetical. Whereas Dummett’s orientation shows heavy influence by the perspectives and techniques of traditional analytic philosophy, and in particular Frege and the later Wittgenstein, Devitt’s orientation is more informed by the naturalistic strain that has become prominent in the past several decades of anglophone philosophical work. Roughly, the fundamental difference is exhibited in the different ways the two orientations construe the significance of language (which term, again, I intend in the far-reaching sense of ‘conceptualization’): Dummett’s traditional analytic approach takes the philosophy of language, in its broadest sense, to underlie and constrain both empirical and metaphysical theories of how the world is, and Devitt’s naturalistic approach holds that rudimentary scientific knowledge is prior to, and so forms the basis for, any theory we might develop concerning the contribution of language to human thought. Perhaps Dummett’s preference for the traditional analytic approach affords him a response to Devitt’s criticism with approximately the following shape: the reason a statement can’t have truth conditions beyond those

55 Some may question my decision to classify the later Wittgenstein as a ‘traditional analytic’ philosopher. To be sure, the classification is less than apt in a few noteworthy ways. Nonetheless, some philosophers—like Dummett—who address standard problems of analytic philosophy from a non-naturalistic point of view see the later Wittgenstein, or at least certain of his ideas, as continuations of themes introduced and belabored by the undisputed progenitors of the analytic movement. At the very least, we can say that Dummett brings one major contribution of the later Wittgenstein—the notion that meaning is use—into the service of an anti-metaphysical paradigm kindred with traditional logical positivism.
which we can know it to have is that any attempt to specify those additional truth conditions will be devoid of content if it sets its sights beyond what we’re able in principle to conceptualize. Moreover, as the analytic tradition in large part has taught us, the scope of our conceptualizing power just is the scope of our linguistic understanding. Therefore, insofar as realist truth conditions are defined to be circumstances that obtain beyond the ken of any fully competent conceptualizer, talk of realist truth conditions is unintelligible.

The temptation now is to respond to the antirealist, as if from a third-person point of view, by insisting that it’s perfectly conceivable 1) that a state of affairs A should obtain, 2) that a language user U could recognize A’s obtaining by recognizing A’s property P, and 3) that A could possess properties besides P which U isn’t in a position to recognize. Of course, in order for this scenario to be problematic for the antirealist, the additional properties of A must be properties that U can’t in principle recognize—for instance, maybe A, or some entity figuring in A, has intrinsic properties with absolutely no ramifications for A’s (the entity’s) relational properties. But so long as the responder is playing by the antirealist’s rules, and granting the antirealist a few core assumptions, a response of this sort will probably yield little effect. For it’s open to the antirealist to interrogate the perspective from which the counterexample is supposed to be understood. If the counterexample is meant to be understood from the point of view of another conceptualizer—one who observes U’s recognition of A, and so literally takes a perspective on the relationship between U and A—then any suggestion as to properties of A that U fails to recognize will still be cashed out entirely within the framework imposed by the conceptualizer’s linguistic faculties, and the scenario will then inevitably lack any element of the recognition-transcendent (that is, the conceptualization-transcendent). After all, even though U doesn’t recognize that A has some property beyond P, the bystander apparently does. On the other hand, if the counterexample is
meant to be understood not from the point of view of an ordinary ‘third party’ but rather from an objective, metaphysically absolute “sideways-on” view, then the antirealist will simply reply that no such outlook can be had, even conceptually. The very idea is a philosophical phantasm, says the antirealist; any purported example of a sideways-on view of things is merely a third-party view of things coupled with delusions of grandeur.

Although a reply of this latter sort sticks to its antirealist guns, it’s unlikely to persuade someone with realist inclinations, or someone who isn’t willing to play along with the (Dummettian) antirealist’s orientation on the significance of language. The semantic realist will presume against the antirealist that it makes sense, at least in selected contexts, to talk about the way things stand beyond the bounds of our conceptualization, or at least considered apart from our conceptualization, and converting the presumption into an assertion will launch a more effective criticism of the antirealist’s position than the criticism canvassed just above. The thrust of Devitt’s rejoinder to Dumettian antirealism consists in precisely this move. One of his central objections, and indeed one of the central objections to semantic antirealism, is that an account like Dummett’s doesn’t appreciate the role of external, potentially unrecognized factors in our semantic lives. More goes into the relationship between linguistic symbols and their worldly referents, according to this standard objection, than the competent speaker typically acknowledges or apprehends conceptually, and thus we shouldn’t think the semantic circumstance to be constrained by the speaker’s own understanding, as Dummett’s antirealist does. A favorite alternative to Dummett’s approach to semantics takes causation to be a fundamental ingredient in establishing reference relations between words and objects or events. On a causal theory of reference, of course, most of

56 The metaphor is due to John McDowell. One might just as well employ Putnam’s “God’s-eye view” or Nagel’s “view from nowhere.”
the semantic work takes place behind the scenes, unbeknown to the language user. An obvious result, as Devitt points out, is that

[a] speaker can use a term to refer though almost entirely ignorant about its referent. He may not be able to describe it, recognize it, or know how to track it down. […] Judging which part of reality is so linked [i.e., to a linguistic expression] is a job for the experts, not the essence of what every speaker can do.57

In consequence, the divergence between what truth conditions a sentence has and what truth conditions the speaker knows it to have can be quite vast, enabling the possibility that statements can bear realist truth conditions in addition to the merely epistemic conditions the speaker associates with the statements. Since the causal theorist presumably doesn’t share the semantic antirealist’s tenet that the philosophy of language undergirds all other theorization about the world, he’ll find, as Devitt does, that Dummett’s exclusion claim—that statements possess no truth conditions beyond whatever truth conditions the speaker associates with them epistemically—is without warrant.

Before concluding the discussion of Dummett, I’d like to address some points recently made by Alexander Miller on the adequacy of Dummett’s formulation of the realism-antirealism distinction. In particular, Miller is concerned with the degree to which Dummett’s semantic renditions of realism and antirealism can be said to capture the traditional, more straightforwardly metaphysical conceptions of realist and antirealist positions. As an example of a realist position conceived in the spirit of traditional metaphysics, Miller cites Devitt’s formulation of realism concerning the external world, presented in section 2 above: “Tokens of most current commonsense and scientific physical types objectively exist independently of the mental.”58 Dummettian

57 Devitt (1983a), 94.
58 Miller feels the urge to modify Devitt’s formulation so that it affirms the objectivity not just of physical entities but of their properties as well. He says:
semantic realism about the external world, on the other hand, Miller formulates as the thesis that “our understanding of at least some sentences about the external world consists in our grasp of their potentially evidence-transcendent truth-conditions.” 59 I take it that this is an uncontroversially accurate statement of Dummett’s construal of realism (applied, in this case, to discourse concerning the external world); the question Miller takes up, then, is whether the latter locution faithfully captures the philosophical intention behind the former.

Miller attributes a pair of intertwined theses to Dummett—a pair of theses conveying an aspect of Dummett’s metaphysical thought that I haven’t yet had occasion to discuss. The first is what Miller calls the metaphor thesis: “any attempt to formulate realism in austerely metaphysical terms results at best in pictures or metaphors, whose non-pictorial or non-metaphorical content is unclear.” 60 By ‘austerely metaphysical,’ Miller means something like ‘free from the use of semantic or otherwise linguistic terms’; Devitt’s formulation of realism is an instance of an ‘austerely metaphysical’ formulation because it addresses itself to the world directly, rather than phrasing the position as chiefly a matter of language. ‘The metaphor thesis’ denotes a predilection of Dummett’s that has its basis in his adherence to the Fregean supposition, mentioned in section 1, that the proper way to understand thought is by means of an understanding of language, which

As stated, common sense realism is consistent with the following scenario: tables, chairs, cats, the moons of Jupiter and so on, objectively exist independently of the mental; but in every case, and for every possible property which one of them might possess, their possessing (or failing to possess) that property is constituted by “our knowledge, by our epistemic values, by our capacity to refer to it, by the synthesizing power of the mind, by our imposition of concepts, theories, or languages.” (2003, 192-193)

The rationale is that “the more properties that fail to be possessed objectively, the weaker the version of realism.” While there can be little doubt that Miller’s addendum brings the formulation closer to the traditional notion of external-world or scientific realism, I think it’s misguided to suggest that the inclusion of objective properties affects the strength or weakness of the realism as such. Rather, the more fruitful analysis results from careful observation of the contextualizing principle. In other words, Devitt’s proposal and Miller’s proposal are realisms about different things: Devitt’s realism is a realism about physical objects, whereas Miller’s is a realism about physical objects and physical properties.

59 Miller (2003), 195.
60 Ibid., 196. Emphasis in original.
sets the boundaries on possible thought. A corollary of this supposition, as Dummett sees it, is that any verbalization professing to speak of the way things are in themselves, beyond our faculties of conceptualization—and just this is the vocation of metaphysics—must amount to a sort of philosophical poetry. Thus he writes in *The Logical Basis of Metaphysics*:

> What does it mean to say that natural numbers are mental constructions, or that they are independently existing immutable and immaterial objects? What does it mean to ask whether or not past or future events are *there*? What does it mean to say, or deny, that material objects are logical constructions out of sense-data? In each case, we are presented with alternative pictures. The need to choose between these pictures seems very compelling; but the non-pictorial content of the pictures is unclear.\(^61\)

Now the second thesis, with which the metaphor thesis is intertwined, is that the only non-metaphorical content to be found among metaphysical assertions consists in their reformulation as assertions of corresponding conceptions of meaning. As applied to the case of realism, Miller calls this the *constitution thesis*: “the literal content of realism consists in the content of semantic realism.”\(^62\) Thus Miller offers the following summary of Dummett’s construal of realism:

> [A]ttempts at purely metaphysical characterisations of realism result at most in metaphor, and any literal content which these characterisations possess consists in the claim that our understanding of sentences concerning the disputed subject matter consists in our grasp of potentially evidence-transcendent truth-conditions.\(^63\)

Miller’s aim is to evaluate whether such a construal is satisfactory in view of the presumed intentions of those who, like Devitt, have approached the issue in straightforwardly (that is, ‘austerely’) metaphysical terms.

The first objection Miller raises is directed against the metaphor thesis. Although he grants that the formulation as given is somewhat vague, he contends that, at face value anyway, there’s

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\(^{62}\) Miller (2003), 197.

\(^{63}\) Ibid., 198.
nothing metaphorical about the claim that selected entities (and properties, on Miller’s own modification) ‘objectively exist independently of the mental.’ If Dummett wants to maintain his metaphor thesis, then it’s incumbent on him, says Miller, to show that some feature of the austerely metaphysical characterization of realism “resists literal clarification” and “is thus essentially metaphorical.” Of course, settling this issue will require the development of a plausible criterion for distinguishing between literal and metaphorical terms in metaphysical (or generally philosophical) language, and that project, while interesting, is one that can’t be undertaken here. It’s undeniable, as well, that the burden of the task falls to Dummett, or whoever would seek to advance the metaphor thesis in Dummett’s legacy, and so Miller is right, as far as I know, to suggest that the obligation hasn’t been fulfilled by the antirealist. Nevertheless, even in the absence of such a criterion, I think Miller is too hasty in his allegation that no part of the austerely metaphysical formulation of realism has the appearance of non-literal wording. For, in a locution like ‘[such and such] objectively exist independently of the mental,’ it’s at least clear what the candidates for metaphorical status are, and thus what elements of the formulation Dummett would be likely to concentrate on if he were to accept Miller’s task. These are the notions of objectivity and mind-independence—and, concurrently, the implied distinctions between the objective and the non-objective and between the mind-independent and the mind-dependent. Because these notions (distinctions) convey the metaphysical thrust of the formulation, the Dummettian antirealist will claim that they lack literal content except as expressions of a fundamentally semantic or epistemic idea—namely, the thesis that sentences concerning the existents mentioned in the formulation bear epistemically-unconstrained truth conditions.

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64 Ibid., 199.
65 I presume that these distinctions, these two pairs of notions, are synonymous, or at least sufficiently close in meaning that we can treat them as equivalent for present purposes.
The antirealist’s claim isn’t entirely unreasonable: some common ways of explicating the concepts of objectivity and mind-independence do overtly employ figurative language. For instance, one might attempt to explain the contrast between objectivity and subjectivity in terms of *points of view* by noting, say, that a subjectively correct statement is correct only from certain points of view while an objectively correct statement is correct regardless of one’s point of view; but in such explanations, the ‘points of view’ in question are seldom literal, and in metaphysical contexts they probably never are. Similarly, one might attempt to explain the contrast between what’s mind-dependent and what’s mind-independent by telling someone that what’s mind-dependent has reality only ‘within’ the mind, while what’s mind-independent has reality ‘outside’ the mind, but the literal sense of this internal-external distinction, much like that of a ‘point of view,’ is strictly spatial. So these efforts—which I take to be standard at least among the philosophical laity—to say in more detail what ‘objective’ and ‘mind-independent’ mean make essential use of figurative language. In another vein, one might try to explain that mind-independent (or objectively existing) objects are ‘there anyway,’ whether we observe them or not, or something in this spirit. But there’s a colloquial sense in which even the idealist may well accept the claim that certain objects are ‘there anyway’: I can say that the contents of my refrigerator are ‘there anyway’ in that they’re in the refrigerator *no matter when I go to check on them.* In order to preclude this colloquial interpretation of the phrase ‘there anyway,’ and instead single out the metaphysical interpretation of it, one would need to make use of some concept or turn of phrase that has a specifically metaphysical meaning. But the preeminent options for terms expressing that metaphysical notion, most likely, are just terms like ‘objective’ and ‘mind-independent.’ It’s only by returning to the philosophical lexicon, it seems, that one can rule out colloquial misinterpretations of the explanation. Obviously, it doesn’t follow from just these considerations
that all efforts to explain the notions of objectivity and mind-independence will inevitably be consigned to metaphor (or else narrow circularity), but the *prima facie* implication is that without recourse to figurative language, and without recourse to semantic or epistemic concepts in Dummettian style, the resources available for an explication of objectivity or mind-independence—a notion vital to realism—are seriously limited. In any case, further development of this point must await articulation, on Dummett’s behalf, of a concrete set of criteria for distinguishing literal from metaphorical language in metaphysics.

The bulk of Miller’s misgivings over Dummett’s characterization of the realism-antirealism distinction have to do with the constitution thesis. He offers a number of objections to the effect that historical and contemporary disputes between positions described as realist and positions described as antirealist aren’t satisfactorily captured by Dummett’s formulation of semantic realism—the doctrine that “our understanding of at least some sentences about the external world consists in our grasp of their potentially evidence-transcendent truth-conditions.” I’ll consider these in turn.

The first objection, borrowed from Devitt, is that semantic realism about the external world is compatible with Berkeleyan idealism about the external world, which has traditionally (and for good reason—see section 2 above) been considered a form of antirealism with regard to physical objects. The thought here is that Berkeleyan idealism allows for, or perhaps even requires, the result that some sentences concerning physical objects possess recognition-transcendent truth conditions, since such sentences have truth conditions involving perceptions in the mind of God, to which we might, in principle, lack any access. So if semantic realism with regard to physical-object sentences demands nothing more robust than that the truth of those sentences be

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66 Ibid., 200-201.
epistemically unconstrained, then semantic realism doesn’t exclude Berkeleyan idealism. Thus it fails to give definitive expression to the realism-antirealism distinction.

Whether this objection withstands scrutiny depends on some subtle features of the notion of recognition-transcendence (and, less importantly for our purpose, on some subtle features of Berkeleyan metaphysics); regardless of whether the objection is sound, then, it’s edifying in that it calls due attention to detail. To be more specific, the crux of the matter is whether recognition is transcended by recognition-transcendent truth conditions, or whether epistemology places no constraint on epistemically unconstrained truth. What needs to be specified is an indexing relation on the concept of recognition-transcendence, one that relativizes it to some being, or set of beings, with recognition capacities. Possible answers here are many: to list just a few options, one might hold that recognition-transcendence is indexed to the epistemic capabilities of the individual language user, to those of communities of language users, to those of humanity as a species, to those of any species perceptually and cognitively similar to us, or—maximally—to those of any perceptual, cognitive, rational (etc.) epistemic agent whatsoever. Now, contingent upon her philosophical commitments elsewhere, the antirealist might find it most natural to specify the indexing relation in any number of various ways. But I maintain that the realist is arguably best served by specifying the relation in the aforementioned maximal way; that is, in averring that some class of statements has potentially recognition-transcendent—thus realist—truth conditions, the realist should stipulate that potential recognition-transcendence is to be understood with reference not just to human abilities but to those of any possible cognitive being whatsoever. This is because construing recognition-transcendence in this way helps to elaborate a basic metaphysical intuition: that to conceive of something as real in the fullest sense is to conceive of it as having a self-standing and autonomous nature, as being a certain way simply in its own right. This intuition, or
something closely akin to it, is surely what drives the notion of mind-independence: if the existence of an entity is in any respect reliant on another being’s epistemic (perceptual, cognitive, etc.) faculties, then the entity can’t be said to be real just in itself; if the truth of a statement depends on the activity of an epistemic agent, then it can’t be said that the state of affairs represented by the statement obtains on its own. The same reasoning, I suggest, explains why the concept of recognition-transcendence is even relevant to the realism-antirealism issue in the first place. By insisting that a given statement is in principle capable of holding true—not just independently of human epistemology, but rather—*independently of any epistemology whatsoever*, the semantic realist is able to amplify and precisify the notion of objective truth.

If the realist chooses to spell out recognition-transcendence in this maximal way, as I maintain he should, then the viability of Miller’s (and Devitt’s) objection hinges on whether or not God is properly construed as an epistemic agent in the relevant sense in Berkeleyan metaphysics. The *relevant* sense is that in which the epistemic agent has cognitive capabilities analogous to those enjoyed by human beings; so if Berkeley’s conception of God attributes to God epistemically efficacious abilities that resemble our own, then truth conditions that are dependent on God’s epistemology are *not* epistemically unconstrained. My aim here, of course, is far removed from that of Berkeley scholarship, but there’s a strong (albeit superficial) case to be made that God, on the current portrayal, is indeed an epistemic agent with recognitional capacities that parallel ours. The basic point is just that Berkeley conceives of God as having (or being) a *mind* that *perceives*, where the divine mind and the divine faculty of perception are to be understood in analogy with the minds and perceptual faculties of humans. It’s agreed on all sides that humans are epistemic agents, and that our ability to perceive the world is inseparable from our epistemic capability at large. I presume, then, that the most plausible interpretation of Berkeley would have him
conceiving of God as what we today would call an epistemic agent. In that case, however, insofar as (to recast the view in contemporary parlance) Berkeley construes the truth conditions of empirical statements as being constituted by the cognitive activity of an epistemic agent, he doesn’t construe them as being recognition-transcendent, and Dummett’s semantic approach correctly categorizes Berkeleyan idealism as a kind of antirealism.

Whereas Miller’s first objection concerns the adequacy of Dummett’s semantic formulation of realism with respect to idealistic antirealism, his second objection concerns its adequacy with respect to noncognitivist and error-theoretic forms of antirealism. Concerning noncognitivism, Miller argues that if the literal content of the metaphysical conception of realism consisted in semantic realism, then

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\text{one would expect debates between realists and their opponents generically to assume the form of a debate between those who accept semantic realism and those who reject it. But this is not in fact the case. Historically, one characteristic form of opposition to realism about a particular subject matter is the denial that there are truth-conditions of the appropriate type, whether potentially evidence transcendent or not.}^{68}
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Thus Miller finds it worrisome that debates between realists and their noncognitivist opponents appear to focus not on the particular nature of the truth conditions of a class of sentences, but rather on whether the sentences of the given class have truth conditions—that is, whether they count as truth-apt—at all. The question whether the truth conditions of ethical sentences, for

\[^{67}\text{Suppose this presumption is still denied. Although I doubt the exegetical soundness of such an interpretation, perhaps the view it attributes to Berkeley is coherent in its own right. In other words, perhaps it’s coherent to hold both that physical states of affairs are perceptions in the mind of God and that God is nonetheless not an epistemic agent—that is, not a being who has rationally evaluable beliefs. Maybe it follows, on such a position, that physical states of affairs which consist in God’s perceptions are recognition-transcendent, since God isn’t a being with recognitional capacities. If so, then this view is an example of semantic realism—and I think this result is acceptable. For if the God with a ‘perceiving mind’ isn’t a God who thereby knows, then the meanings of terms like ‘perceive’ and (especially) ‘mind’ have been attenuated to such an extent that the terminology should no longer worry the realist. I’d say that the view described here is best understood as a pantheistic, poetic expression of the idea, compatible with realism, that the world is comprised of a myriad of interconnected states of affairs.}\]

\[^{68}\text{Miller (2003), 201.}\]
example, are epistemically constrained or epistemically unconstrained does, one might grant, simply presuppose that ethical sentences bear truth conditions in the first place, and accordingly the noncognitivist will press the issue at the level of the presupposition, before the question of epistemic constraint can even be broached. But one could grant all this without feeling any dissatisfaction with Dummett's characterization of realism, because the fact remains that by the lights of Dummett's approach, noncognitivism's classification as a kind of antirealism is straightforwardly *explicable* by appeal to its disagreement with the thesis of semantic realism: that statements of the given class have potentially evidence-transcendent truth conditions. The claim that a sentence has no truth conditions at all is contrary to the claim that the sentence has epistemically unconstrained truth conditions, and so Dummett's formulation correctly classifies noncognitivist positions as antirealist positions. Moreover, there’s no reason to expect that the rejection of a view like semantic realism will proceed in just one way, turning in all cases on a single point of contention. Ergo, Miller's worry about noncognitivism poses no genuine problem for Dummett's view.

On the other hand, Miller's worry about error theory presents a more significant challenge to Dummett's formulation. He points out that a debate between a realist in the traditional sense and an error theorist would seem, according to the standard set by semantic realism, to be a debate between two *realists*.\(^6^9\) Undeniably, Dummett's characterization of semantic realism fails to exclude error theory, since the error theorist can perfectly well *accept* that the truth conditions of statements belonging to the given class are epistemically unconstrained—in fact, according to canonical articulations of error-theoretic approaches to some domain of discourse (for instance, Mackie on ethics and Field on mathematics), it seems that the systematic falsity of the germane

\(^{69}\) Ibid.
statements is best construed as being objectively determined by the way things are, and thus not mind-dependent in any respect. The implication, then, is that Dummett's formulation is inadequate with respect to error-theoretic antirealism. But this lacuna is easy enough to remedy. The solution is just to stipulate that, in order for Dummett's formulation to capture the sense of realism most generally, it should be *combined* with the assertion that most of the statements we make with regard to the relevant subject matter, or most of the ones that we generally recognize to be correct, are indeed *true*, where 'true' is understood in the manner spelled out by the remainder of Dummett's formulation.

In other words, in order to classify error theory as a form of antirealism, Dummett's characterization needs to be supplemented with an expression of the *existence dimension* of realism. This is to be expected, since, in accordance with the 'square of opposition' sketched in section 2, realism and error theory are aligned with respect to the independence dimension, and disagree only over the existence dimension; it follows that an articulation of realism that omits the existence dimension will be compatible with an error-theoretic approach to the given class of statements. What this demonstrates, incidentally, is that Dummett's formulation of semantic realism—the thesis that the relevant statements possess recognition-transcendent truth conditions—is at best an expression *only* of the independence dimension of realism, an articulation of the notion of objective or mind-independent truth. As a consequence, Dummettian semantic realism is in this sense necessary but not sufficient for an expression of the thesis of realism in its traditional, straightforwardly metaphysical form. This is no cause for disappointment, however,

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70 Perhaps the existence dimension isn’t best captured by the contention that ‘most’ of the ‘commonly accepted’ statements pertaining to the given domain of discourse are true. The realist might prefer to supply a threshold more precise than ‘most,’ or he might prefer to use some criterion other than ‘commonly accepted.’ (For instance, maybe it’s better to hold that the generally true statements within the domain are selected not by public acceptance but by the best available theory of the subject matter, or by some idealized limiting-case theory of the subject matter.) I take it that this detail is comparatively easy to negotiate, so I set it aside here.
since—as I noted at the end of section 2—the independence dimension is the more crucial and distinctive of the two dimensions of realism, and thus the independence dimension is the one in more urgent need of explication. Dummett's formulation addresses precisely that need, and the painless addition of a claim expressing the existence dimension makes the formulation a faithful construal, on both counts, of the traditional conception of realism.

So I conclude that, properly understood and in conjunction with a statement of the existence dimension, Dummett's semantic formulation of realism correctly demarcates realist from antirealist positions, whether the latter are of the idealist, noncognitivist, or error-theoretic sort. But Miller raises a final kind of objection to the adequacy of Dummett's formulation, one that challenges the notion that, in all contexts in which realist-antirealist disputes are situated, realist truth conditions must be construed as potentially recognition-transcendent. In apparent conflict with that notion, there seem to be examples of realistically-inclined positions that don't regard their subject matter as capable of transcending our epistemic capabilities. Miller expresses his misgivings using the example of elementary arithmetic:

Intuitively, there ought to be scope to debate a realist view of a certain subject matter even when sentences concerning that subject matter are always decidable. For example, consider elementary arithmetic: the subject matter of quantifier-free arithmetical statements. These are decidable in the relevant sense, but there should still be scope for the formulation of, and debate about, both realist and opposing views of the area. But if the constitution thesis were true, this would seem to be precluded. […] To the extent that we think that there should be scope for such a debate, doubt is again cast on the constitution thesis.\textsuperscript{71}

The concern here has to do with the phenomenon Wright calls `cognitive command.'\textsuperscript{72} The general idea is that certain subject matters are ostensibly so amenable to our epistemic abilities that it’s highly improbable—perhaps even impossible—that there should be facets of those subject

\textsuperscript{71} Miller (2003), 203.
\textsuperscript{72} Wright (1992a), 92 ff.
matters which obstinately elude our grasp, save in cases of our own ‘cognitive shortcoming.’ Hence, given that the problems of elementary arithmetic are eminently tractable, their decidability guarantees that we’ll never encounter a statement of elementary arithmetic whose truth condition is recognition-transcendent. That is, inasmuch as we exercise ‘cognitive command’ over elementary arithmetic, no statement of elementary arithmetic has a truth condition that lies beyond the reach of our recognitional capacities. In that case it seems to follow straightforwardly, in light of Dummett’s formulation of semantic realism, that there’s no room to articulate a realist view of elementary arithmetic. Yet there are well-known historical (not to mention contemporary) examples of disputes between realists and antirealists concerning the metaphysical underpinnings of mathematics, including those of basic number theory. Namely, the platonist camp has held, more or less, that simple mathematical statements—of which those belonging to elementary arithmetic are exemplary—are true in virtue of the existence and nature of entities known as numbers. So if (excepting instances of cognitive shortcoming) our knowledge of elementary arithmetic is unerring and practically complete, the semantic realist appears unable to catch hold of the gist of platonist metaphysics.

But it seems to me that this objection doesn’t fully appreciate the role of the qualifier ‘potentially’ in the concept of ‘potentially recognition-transcendent truth conditions.’ The purpose behind the latter concept is to furnish a more precise articulation of the intuition underlying the independence dimension of realism, and thus of the intuition underlying the notion of mind-independence. So in order to see the intended significance of the term ‘potentially,’ we can begin by reexamining the pretheoretical notion of mind-independence. On the typical understanding of that notion, to say that a state of affairs (or the truth of a proposition, etc.) is mind-independent isn’t necessarily to say that it’s unknowable or unknown, but rather that it’s not constituted by our
Regardless of whether or not we in fact possess the means to recognize a given mind-independent state of affairs, its mind-independence consists in the possibility in principle that the state of affairs should obtain and yet be unrecognized. Presumably, on the realistic construal, what makes it possible in principle for a state of affairs to obtain unrecognized is that its metaphysical constitution, whatever that might involve, is autonomous and self-sufficient with respect to our (or anyone’s, for that matter) epistemic activity. But there’s no reason to suppose that our happening to know that the state of affairs obtains will disturb its metaphysical constitution in any way—the realist, at least, is likely to be adamant that our knowledge of external reality just isn’t the sort of thing that could result in such interference.

Emphasizing the potentiality of the realist’s notion of recognition-transcendence in this manner also staves off a possible objection to my argument above that Berkeley’s conception of God should be understood to depict God as an epistemic agent. The objection proceeds as follows: if God—whether on Berkeley’s conception or not—is construed, qua omniscient being, as an epistemic agent with knowledge of all there is to be known, then it’s impossible for the traditional theist to be classified as a realist. This is because traditional theism takes God to be omniscient, and omniscience precludes the obtaining of any recognition-transcendent state of affairs, assuming, as I’ve argued the realist should, that recognition-transcendence is indexed to all possible epistemic agents, not just to human or humanoid epistemic agents. Yet, though the two might be compatible, it’s highly implausible to suppose that traditional theism entails global antirealism. Therefore, insofar as that supposition is indeed implausible, we must reject either the thesis that an omniscient God is an epistemic agent or the thesis that recognition-transcendence is

73 In the context of the independence dimension of realism, this apt distinction is due to Devitt (1991, 15).
to be construed according to the maximal reading—thereby undermining, in either case, the distinction between semantic realism and Berkeleyan idealism.

But the reply to the objection is straightforward in light of Devitt’s distinction between being known (or unknown) by an epistemic agent and being constituted (or not constituted) by the epistemic agent’s knowledge. Although the traditional theist maintains that all truths are in fact known by an omniscient being, whether or not she’s a realist about any domain depends on a further specification: namely, on whether she takes all truths to be constituted by their being known, or whether, on the other hand, she regards some class of statements as having truth conditions not constituted by their being known (despite nonetheless being known). The Berkeleyan idealist is an antirealist not because he holds that all truths are known but because he holds that all truths are metaphysically dependent upon an epistemically active percipient. But one could easily envision a form of traditional theism which isn’t rendered antirealist in this way: roughly, such a theism would hold that, while God does in fact possess complete and perfect knowledge of the world, the act of creation was such that the physical world currently exists in its own right and so doesn’t depend on God’s recognitional capacity for its sustenance. On this view, the created universe as it stands now is metaphysically independent with respect to its divine creator, and thus it could exist in itself if (per impossibile, as it may be) its creator were to vanish. And this is just to say that, on the position just sketched, the truth conditions of statements about the physical world are conceived to be recognition-transcendent in principle. Then, even though all statements are, according to the same position, effectively decidable for some epistemic agent—even though God exerts ‘cognitive command’ over total discourse—this instance of traditional theism is nonetheless realist with regard to statements concerning the physical world, since it takes them to possess potentially, even if not actually, recognition-transcendent truth
conditions. Hence traditional theism presents a limiting case of cognitive command, a circumstance in which what’s true and what’s known are precisely and universally coextensive; and the limiting case serves to highlight, on a global scale, the importance of the ‘potentially’ in ‘potentially recognition-transcendent’ states of affairs.

If we apply these considerations more locally, it follows that the circumstance in which we, as a matter of fact, know an autonomously constituted state of affairs to obtain is nonetheless a circumstance in which it’s possible in principle for the state of affairs to obtain unrecognized. Once we grant that the qualifier ‘potentially’ in ‘potentially recognition-transcendent truth conditions’ is intended to safeguard this sort of intuition about what it means for something to be real, it’s difficult to see the thorough decidability of a domain of discourse as an obstacle to the formulation of a realist position regarding that discourse. So even if it’s the case that we exert cognitive command over, say, elementary arithmetic, it can still make just as much sense of semantic realism concerning elementary arithmetic as we ever could. The metaphysical motivation backing such a view of arithmetic presumably takes the following shape: although, as a matter of contingent fact, the truth conditions pertaining to statements of elementary arithmetic are in every case within the scope of our recognitional abilities, those truth conditions (be they classically platonistic or not) are of such a kind that they obtain regardless of our recognition, and so they obtain all the same in the (relevantly similar) possible world in which no sentient beings exist—or in which sentient beings exist but never get around to developing mathematics, or what have you. Of course, stating in a strict and literal way what the relevant truth conditions are or what comprises their metaphysical autonomy might require the use of conceptual resources the semantic realist isn’t prepared to authorize—this talk of possible worlds, for instance, might represent a

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74 Following Wright, Miller suggests ethics and comedy as further candidates for wholly decidable domains of discourse. The point remains the same.
prohibitively expensive ontological commitment—but the important point, elucidations aside, is that formulating semantic realism in terms of potentially evidence-transcendent truth conditions allows for the intelligibility of realist positions concerning totally decidable subject matters. For this reason, our cognitive command over a given discipline by no means precludes the articulation of a semantic realist perspective on that discipline.

By contrast with the foregoing, Miller cites Dummett as saying explicitly in *Truth and Other Enigmas* that the dispute between the realist and the antirealist can arise only in contexts where both parties agree that some members of the disputed class of statements might be undecidable.\(^{75}\) The Dummett of 1978 is, in my estimation, mistaken to characterize semantic realism and antirealism in that way, but a case can be made that Miller is referring to an unfledged and later superseded version of Dummett’s thought. In fact, Dummett’s restriction of realism-antirealism disputes to domains containing undecidable sentences is of a piece with his early view—later unequivocally recanted—that the difference between realism and antirealism over a domain of discourse amounts, respectively, to acceptance or rejection of the principle of bivalence for that domain. This connection is made clear by the continuation of the passage Miller cites:

> To know the meaning of a statement is to know what it is for the statement to be true: we may in the first place derive such knowledge from learning what is counted as evidence for its truth, but in this case we do so in such a way as to have a conception of the statement’s being true even in the absence of such evidence. For this reason, the dispute [between realism and antirealism] can arise only for classes of statements for which it is admitted on both sides that there may not exist evidence either for or against a given statement. *It is this, therefore, which makes acceptance of the law of excluded middle for statements of the given class a crucial test for whether or not someone takes a realist view of statements of that class.*\(^{76}\)

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\(^{75}\) Miller (2003), 215, footnote 9.

\(^{76}\) Dummett (1978), 155. Emphasis mine.
At the time of the above writing, Dummett held that restricting the scope of semantic realism and antirealism to undecidable contexts entails that the principle of bivalence (the semantic counterpart of the law of excluded middle, a first-order theorem schema) can be used as a definitive standard for distinguishing between realist and antirealist positions. And positing the entailment is surely reasonable: if we have only undecidable statements in view, then acceptance of bivalence is a reliable sign of realism, because it effects the realist’s cleavage of truth from epistemology. But if the entailment holds, then we can regard Dummett’s later renunciation of the bivalence standard as implying also, by modus tollens, a lifting of the restriction to undecidable statements. Interpreting his more mature position in this way also fits well with what I’ve taken to be his canonical intuitive expression of the thesis of semantic realism: that “the statements we make […] carry a meaning of such a kind that they are rendered true or false by an objective reality the constitution of which is […] independent of our knowledge.” Nothing about this latter formulation suggests that realism, on Dummett’s conception, can only be articulated with regard to sentences that aren’t effectively decidable.

At the same time, though, there’s an important sense in which this concern with Dummett’s own position is beside the point. My aim here hasn’t been to produce an exposition of Dummett for exposition’s sake, or to defend the veracity of his views, but rather to highlight the respects in which his efforts have proved profitable for an understanding of the generic distinction between realism and antirealism. If the adequacy of his construal of the issue requires that we make modifications or qualifications, then so be it. In fact, we’ve already done so in a few places: we’ve specified that Dummett’s later work, wherein he takes the principle of bivalence to be a necessary but not a sufficient condition for realism, ought to be regarded as superseding his inchoate work, wherein he takes the principle to be both necessary and sufficient for a realist position; we’ve
observed, as a corollary, that realist-antirealist disputes can concern decidable sentences, despite Dummett’s former contention that such disputes can only take place over undecidable sentences; and we’ve noted that semantic realism—construed as the thesis that the statements in question bear recognition-transcendent truth conditions—is at best only an expression of the independence dimension of realism, so that supplementation with an expression of the existence dimension is called for as well. Additionally, I’ve argued that the semantic realist’s attempt to capture the independence dimension is best served by construing the notion ‘potentially recognition-transcendent truth conditions’ in what I termed the maximal sense: to conceive of an entity or a truth value as real in the full-blooded traditional sense is to conceive of it as capable in principle of transcending the recognitional capacity of any epistemic agent whatsoever. But it’s also crucial that we take the qualifier ‘in principle’ seriously, in order that the realist account be able to handle decidable classes of statements. With the needed adjustments in place, however, a Dummettian formulation of the realism-antirealism distinction presents a broad, incisive, and historically adequate account of what’s at stake, in the most general sense, in debates between realists and their opponents.

4. Putnam’s Semantic Challenge to Realism

The previous section gave an overview of Dummett’s contributions to a philosophical interpretation of the general distinction between realist and antirealist positions. Those contributions can be approximately categorized into two sorts: first, Dummett has articulated a particular kind of outlook—a linguistically or semantically inclined one—on the realism issue and a corresponding means of formulating realist and antirealist views of a domain of discourse, which I’ve accordingly called ‘semantic realism’ and ‘semantic antirealism’; second, on the basis of that construal of the realism issue, Dummett has advanced a positive thesis concerning the relative
merits of semantic realism and semantic antirealism, leveraging the manifestation challenge against the plausibility of realism in general. Although the former sort of contribution is more immediately relevant to the purpose of the present chapter—to develop a systematic account of the realism-antirealism distinction—I include discussion of Dummett’s grounds for rejecting realism because the argumentation and dialectic, in their own fashion, help to clarify the nature of the contending doctrines and the ramifications of Dummett’s own linguistic approach to the topic. Naturally, though, Dummett’s efforts to give explicit formulation to realism and antirealism take center stage.

With Putnam the situation is more or less reversed. While he does offer some brief remarks on the proper understanding of the realist and antirealist positions at hand, the preponderance of his contribution to the realism issue consists in his polemic against the realist position. As with Dummett’s positive argumentation, however, Putnam’s attack on realism is still rife with implications regarding the significance of representation, mind-independence, the external world, and other notions central to the realism-antirealism debate. This section will therefore lay emphasis on Putnam’s antirealist arguments, with due attention to the implicit metaphysical and methodological points of view to be found therein.

Unlike Dummett, Putnam doesn’t state outright that realism and antirealism are to be construed semantically rather than ontologically; that is, he institutes no overt requirement that realism and antirealism be understood as positions taken with regard to a class of statements rather

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77 Putnam doesn’t describe himself as an antirealist. His own alternative to the metaphysical stance he criticizes is a view he calls ‘internal realism,’ which he portrays as an empirical or scientific theory concerning the relationship between the mind (or the language user) and the world, where each relatum is considered scientifically. (1977, 483) But because his internal realism is opposed to the metaphysical form of realism he argues against, I’ll regard it as a kind of antirealism in the present context. Of course, one must acknowledge the simplism of classifying Putnam as an antirealist without biographical qualification, given his infamous tendency to renge his own views years later. Nonetheless, his ‘middle period,’ during which he espouses internal realism in place of his earlier version of realism, is the period where he launches his most sustained and systematic attack on traditionally realistic metaphysics.
than a class of entities. He also neglects the contextualizing principle: indeed, he intends for the
antirealistic viewpoint he’s advocating to be *global* (or at least highly general) in scope, bearing on
the tenability of realism concerning *any* of the traditional realist-antirealist battlegrounds. Despite
these theoretical elisions, there can be little doubt that Putnam’s orientation on the realism issue is
closely aligned with Dummett’s, for both of them argue that realism, as they conceive of it, is
implausible due to the character of the conceptual apparatus through which we comprehend the
world—that is, due to the character of *language*. Our language, they both argue, simply isn’t
endowed with the means to traverse the metaphysical gap that the traditional realist countenances
between the mind and the mind-independent world. Putnam thus joins Dummett in furnishing a
global case against realism on *semantic* grounds. Moreover, Dummett and Putnam express the
thesis of their realist target in essentially the same way, as holding that truth might in principle
extend beyond the reach of epistemology. Even though Putnam assigns a different name to his
adversary—*metaphysical realism*—his description of the view bears an affinity with Dummett’s
formulation of semantic realism:

> The most important consequence of metaphysical realism is that *truth* is supposed
to be *radically non-epistemic* [...] the theory that is “ideal” from the point of view
of operational utility, inner beauty and elegance, “plausibility,” simplicity,
“conservatism,” etc., *might be false*. “Verified” (in any operational sense) does not
imply “true,” on the metaphysical realist picture, even in the ideal limit.⁷⁸

So Putnam’s realist, much like Dummett’s realist, is someone who takes truth (in some or all
contexts) to be epistemically unconstrained, or potentially recognition-transcendent. In terms more
suitable to Putnam’s framing of the realism issue, the metaphysical realist maintains that there’s a
way that the world objectively, mind-independently is, such that there’s no guarantee in principle
that even the pinnacle of our epistemic capability will afford an accurate representation of the world.

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⁷⁸ Putnam (1977), 485.
Thus, what Putnam calls the ‘most important consequence’ of metaphysical realism is straightforwardly recognizable as an expression of the independence dimension of realism as classically construed—where the independence dimension, as for Dummett, is cast as a certain view of the relationship between metaphysics and epistemology. A ‘less important’ feature of metaphysical realism, as will soon become clear, is an endorsement of the existence dimension; that dimension is less important for Putnam’s purpose because the brunt of his antirealist attack cuts against the intelligibility of determinate, epistemically unconstrained truth.

The thrust of Putnam’s criticism of metaphysical realism, in other words, is that it’s incoherent to affirm that even the ideal theory might be false. His principal arguments to that effect are two: the model-theoretic argument and the brain-in-a-vat argument. The model-theoretic argument prosecutes a direct assault on the notion that truth is something over and above the deliverances of ideal epistemology, whereas the brain-in-a-vat argument takes a more indirect route, challenging the intelligibility of global skepticism, whose possibility results from the thesis of metaphysical realism. Indeed, Putnam’s construal of metaphysical realism and the possibility of global skepticism go hand-in-hand, as both hinge on the characteristically realist idea that the ultimate nature of the world isn’t confined by the limitations of epistemology.79 So if Putnam’s argument against the possibility of global skepticism is successful, then metaphysical realism is defeated by just the same token. Interestingly, however, the style of the brain-in-a-vat argument differs from that of the model-theoretic argument in some noteworthy respects. I’ll consider each in turn.

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79 See footnote 22 above: skepticism is the epistemological analogue of error-theoretic antirealism, since both accept the independence dimension of realism while rejecting the existence dimension. Global skepticism of the form Putnam criticizes is possible only if the justifiability (or systematic coherence, etc.) of our beliefs is insufficient for their truth.
The model-theoretic argument proceeds as follows. Suppose we’re in possession of an *ideal theory*, T. Our theory T is ideal in that it meets any epistemic constraint we might wish to apply to it; that is, T “can be imagined complete, consistent, to predict correctly all observation sentences (as far as we can tell), to meet whatever ‘operational constraints’ there are […], to be ‘beautiful,’ ‘simple,’ ‘plausible,’ etc.”

In sum, T complies with all the operational constraints (i.e., has maximal fit with the empirical data) and all the theoretical constraints (i.e., has maximal theoretical virtue: parsimony, explanatory power, what have you) we might want to impose. According to metaphysical realism, even a theory meeting such a lofty description could nonetheless be false. Putnam’s next maneuver gives the model-theoretic argument its title:

I assume the world has (or can be broken into) infinitely many pieces. I also assume T *says* there are infinitely many things […] Now T is *consistent* (by hypothesis) and has (only) infinite models. So by the completeness theorem (in its model theoretic form), T has a model of every infinite cardinality. Pick a model M of the same cardinality as the world. Map the individuals of M one-to-one into the pieces of the world, and use the mapping to define the relations of M directly in the world. The result is a satisfaction relation SAT—a “correspondence” between the terms of L and sets of pieces of the world—such that the theory T comes out *true*—true of the world—provided we just interpret ‘true’ as TRUE(SAT). So what becomes of the claim that even the *ideal* theory T might really be false?

Plainly, the metaphysical realist can’t concede that truth *simpliciter* could be established by SAT, even though SAT seems to ground something quite similar to correspondence truth, for then Putnam will have shown that the epistemically ideal theory is guaranteed to be true.

In fact, it won’t be at all difficult for the metaphysical realist to deny the adequacy of the foregoing model-theoretic conception of ‘true,’ because the truth of a theory is supposed to be (primarily) a matter of metaphysics, not a matter of mathematical logic. Thus, even if there are

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80 Putnam (1977), 485.
81 Ibid. For convenience and consistency, I’ve changed Putnam’s ‘T1’ to ‘T’ and his ‘THE WORLD’ to ‘the world,’ and will continue doing so.
many, even infinitely many, possible methods of assigning worldly denotations to the elements of
M, where those assignments preserve the empirical adequacy and theoretical virtues of T, the
metaphysical realist wants to reply that truth and falsity simpliciter are determined (in part) by the
*referents* of the elements of M, not by the elements’ arbitrarily assigned denotations. Perhaps
another way of expressing the same point is to say that for the metaphysical realist, a truth-
implicating relationship between the ideal theory (or its model) and the world isn’t a mere
‘satisfaction relation’ of the sort Putnam envisages, but rather a relation of *representation*—the
ideal theory is rendered true if the ‘correspondence’ in question entails that the theory *depicts* the
world. It’s clear, then, that the metaphysical realist is obligated to supply an additional criterion
for distinguishing true ideal theories from false ones, or a criterion that separates the *right*
kind of ‘correspondence’ from the wrong kinds. The task is to specify the ‘*intended interpretation*’ of M,
as distinct from its haphazard, purely model-theoretic interpretations, like SAT.

One way forward, at least, is obvious for the metaphysical realist. ‘Cat,’ for example, refers
to cats, and so any interpretation of M that fails to assign the set of cats as the extension of T’s
term ‘cat’ isn’t an interpretation that could be true *simpliciter*, although it might count as
TRUE(SAT). So in order to single out the intended interpretation of M, the one capable of being
true simpliciter, the metaphysical realist needs to articulate some sort of constraint on the reference
relations holding between M and the world. Doing so seems like a simple matter: in general we
want it to be the case, according to the intended interpretation of M, that any singular term ‘*x*’
refers to *x*, any predicate ‘*P*’ has as its extension the set of things that are *P*, and so forth. But the
problem with specifying reference constraints, whether merely disquotational or not, is that the
question then arises whether those constraints are to be understood as given *within* the ideal theory
or as specified ‘from without.’ The question can be seen as presenting the metaphysical realist
with a dilemma: if the reference constraints are supposed to be simply incorporated into T, then they do nothing to combat the antirealist force of the model-theoretic argument, since the same argument can just be run again with T* instead of T if necessary; but if the reference constraints are supposed to be applied to the interpretation of M from the outside, so that they comprise no part of the ideal theory itself, then it appears that no comprehensible account—that is, no theory—of reference can be given, and such a position seems to undercut its own motivation. Thus Putnam argues that insofar as T meets all operational and theoretical constraints by hypothesis, the interpretation of the reference relation as SAT thereby meets all operational and theoretical constraints on reference. He concludes:

So what further constraints on reference are there that could single out some other interpretation as (uniquely) “intended,” and SAT as an “unintended” interpretation (in the model-theoretic sense of “interpretation”)? The supposition that even an “ideal” theory (from a pragmatic point of view) might really be false appears to collapse into unintelligibility.\(^82\)

If the metaphysical realist’s claim, that T might be false despite its ideality, isn’t meant as a claim concerning whether T is TRUE(SAT), and if the needed reference constraint isn’t explicable in the ‘operational’ and ‘theoretical’ language already constraining T, then what follows, evidently, is that there just isn’t anything to be said toward a specification of the ‘intended’ interpretation of M. Thus Putnam takes the kind of metaphysical realism he’s attacking to entail, by the foregoing considerations, a radical indeterminacy of reference, and he construes that entailment as grounds for rejecting the view.

Putnam regards the model-theoretic argument to be inimical to just one of what he classifies as “three main positions on reference of truth.” These are, first, the platonist position, which “posits non-natural mental powers of directly ‘grasping’ forms,” where “‘understanding’ or

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\(^{82}\) Ibid., 486.
‘grasping’ is itself an irreducible and unexplicated notion”; second, the verificationist position, which substitutes an epistemically constrained notion of truth for the classical realist notion; and third, the ‘moderate realist’ position, which “seeks to preserve the centrality of the classical notions of truth and reference without postulating non-natural mental powers.”83 And moderate realism, he adds, is the only position of these three that’s threatened by the model-theoretic argument. The ‘verificationist’ (antirealist, in our terms) stance, of course, has nothing to worry about in the face of the argument, since it contends that truth is epistemically constrained—or rather, as Putnam has it, replaces the notion of truth with that of justification. But the platonist position is likewise immune to the model-theoretic argument, because it countenances as a primitive notion exactly what the metaphysical realist was at a loss to elucidate or define moments ago: an occult faculty that enables us to conceptualize, refer to, speak about the way things are in themselves. This ineffable faculty surely provides the means to select a unique ‘intended’ interpretation, even if no operationally or theoretically defined procedure could do so, for it enables us to know whether a given interpretation assigns to ‘cat’ the things that really are cats (‘have the form of’ cat). But without direct grasp of the ‘forms,’ any attempted specification of the intended interpretation is simply an enlargement of the ideal theory, and so can’t serve as a further, extratheoretic constraint on model-world reference. For this reason, according to Putnam, the ‘moderate realist’ position alone is vulnerable to the model-theoretic argument, since it seeks to retain a realistic conception of truth without positing a non-natural platonistic intellect.

It’s worth pausing to reflect on the way in which platonism, in this sense, also provides a ready rejoinder against Dummett’s argument for antirealism. That argument, recall, is based on the manifestation requirement, which states that any knowledge or linguistic understanding

attributed to a speaker must be manifestable, at least in principle, in the speaker’s behavior; then, loosely speaking, since it’s impossible by definition for the speaker to behave in such a way as to demonstrate sensitivity to the obtaining of recognition-transcendent states of affairs, it follows that the speaker can have no conception of what it’d be for a given statement to have realist truth conditions. Semantic realism is thus implausible across the board. This antirealist argument holds together well enough if the speaker’s conceptual abilities are delimited by what she can recognize in the typical sense of ‘recognize’—roughly, in the empirical sense. In that case, her understanding is straightforwardly circumscribed by the scope of her experience. But if, on the other hand, we attribute to the speaker a platonistic ‘grasp of the forms’ as characterized by Putnam, then there seems to be no difficulty prima facie in saying that she’s able to conceptualize states of affairs of the sort that she couldn’t, even in principle, recognize by empirical means. The manifestation challenge, just like the model-theoretic argument, presents no problem for the language user endowed with the platonistic faculty, because that faculty affords nonempirical access, in some degree, to the way things are in themselves—or at least, it affords conceptual access to certain metaphysical distinctions and possibilities (the distinction between really referring to cats and not really referring to cats, the possibility that an unrecognizable state of affairs might obtain simply in its own right, and so on). Of course, Dummett’s use-theoretic approach to linguistic meaning unequivocally denies that language users have the platonistic faculty, since in that circumstance their grasp of linguistic meaning, at least in certain cases pertaining to metaphysics, would include a private element “lying solely in the mind of the individual who apprehends that meaning.” The manifestation requirement, along with the use theory of meaning more generally, precludes the possibility of a direct ‘grasp of the forms’ straightaway, and so Dummett’s antirealist argument isn’t naturally seen to impose the same dilemma between platonism and verificationism.
Undoubtedly, though, the Putnamian and Dummettian dialectics share a common undercurrent in their attitudes toward our presumed ability to conceive of the external world.

Putnam makes that attitude clear when he anticipates a glaring objection to the model-theoretic argument. The objection is this: according to a popular and, in some respects, intuitive account of reference, an essential ingredient in the establishment of reference relations is that the referring term (considered as a tokening) be causally connected with its referent in an appropriate way. The causal theory of reference stands opposed to description theories of reference, which hold that reference is achieved by a term’s being defined or conceived in a manner that constitutes a description of the referent; then whatever it is that meets the description associated with the term becomes the term’s referent, regardless of what the relationship between the referent and the speaker is. Now, Putnam’s model-theoretic argument very clearly creates trouble for the description theorist, because the reference-fixing descriptions themselves become permuted by the arbitrary ‘correspondence’ between elements of M and pieces of the world; what’s more, no further description could provide the referential stability needed in order to specify one such interpretation of M as the intended one. The causal theorist, on the other hand, doesn’t need to secure reference by means of description, but rather presents a criterion for intendedness that bypasses the concern with linguistic permutation entirely: the intended interpretation is simply the one on which, for example, the astronomical term ‘Mars’ in the model is mapped to the piece of the world which is its causal origin—the celestial body that first caused tokenings of the word ‘Mars’ (or its etymological ancestor). This is to say that the causal theorist has at his disposal a causal constraint on reference, and he’ll claim that just such a constraint fits the bill for the ‘further,’ non-operational and non-theoretical constraint Putnam demands in order for the notion of a uniquely intended interpretation to be coherent. Although the ideal theory might be guaranteed to be TRUE(SAT) on
model-theoretic grounds, it’s not true simpliciter unless it conforms to the causal constraint on reference, which does single out the intended correspondence between the theory and the world. We thus have a way to discriminate between true ideal theories and false ideal theories, and metaphysical realism is thereby vindicated.

Putnam’s response to the foregoing objection is notorious:

The problem is that adding to our hypothetical formalized language of science a body of theory entitled ‘Causal theory of reference’ is just adding more theory. [...] If ‘refers’ can be defined in terms of some causal predicate or predicates in the metalinguage of our theory, then, since each model of the object language extends in an obvious way to a corresponding model of the metalinguage, it will turn out that, in each model M, referenceM is definable in terms of causesM; but, unless the word ‘causes’ (or whatever the causal predicate or predicates may be) is already glued to one definite relation with metaphysical glue, this does not fix a determinate extension for ‘refers’ at all.84

This has come to be known as the ‘just more theory’ response. If T is an ideal theory, then presumably it already includes a complete account of reference, and the model-theoretic argument has seen to it that the sentences comprising that account are TRUE(SAT). To the extent that the causal theorist is offering a correct theory of reference—one that deserves a place in our best account of the world—the constraint he proposes is already satisfied, by hypothesis, in just the same fashion that the other operational and theoretical constraints are. How a relation like ‘is caused by’ determinately refers is just as mysterious as how any other bit of terminology belonging to the ideal theory refers. So an appeal to a causal theory of reference won’t salvage metaphysical realism, as Putnam sees it.

A number of commentators have disputed the legitimacy of the ‘just more theory’ reply. One form of response is simply to accuse Putnam of begging the question in his assumption that the reference of the relation ‘causally determines’ isn’t already determinate. Devitt takes this line,

84 Ibid., 18.
his critique following the same pattern as his appraisal of Dummett’s antirealism. While Devitt acknowledges that it’s possible at every step in our theorizing “to stand back from our theory and raise epistemic and semantic questions,” he considers it quite acceptable to give a causal-theoretic answer at every level.\(^{85}\) The case in point: although Putnam is free to inquire metatheoretically into the means by which the reference of ‘causally determines’ is itself fixed, Devitt takes it that the realist has a ready causal-theoretic answer, appealing—perhaps in the meta-metatheory—to causal relations \textit{holding between ‘causally determines’ and causal relations}. For Devitt, the fact that the lower-order explanatory theory can itself be queried
does not show that our answer to the first question was not a perfectly good one; it
does not show that we have failed to explain how one model among many is the
“intended” one. To show this it would be necessary to show that there is something
about our first answer that both needs explanation and that we cannot explain.
Putnam has not shown this. […] However long he continues his questioning the
realist has an answer along the above lines to pick out the desired unique referent.\(^{86}\)

Devitt and Putnam appear to have reached an impasse, then: insofar as Devitt presumes that the
causal theory of reference supplies an adequate account of reference-fixing at every level, and
Putnam presumes that the causal theory needs to have some further basis at every level, each has
grounds for accusing the other of begging the question. It’s fair to say that the two of them begin
from different presuppositions, and that those presuppositions inexorably incline them toward their
respective philosophical outlooks. Like Dummett, Putnam exhibits the influence of analytic
philosophy’s linguistic turn, much to the agitation of the staunchly naturalistic Devitt.

Another kind of criticism of the ‘just more theory’ reply is due to David Lewis. The
criticism, much like Devitt’s, presupposes against Putnam that we can meaningfully address the
ideal theory’s relationship with the world without simply working within the confines of the theory

\(^{85}\) Devitt (1983b), 298.
\(^{86}\) Ibid., 299.
itself. That presupposition enables Lewis to make a distinction that threatens the cogency of Putnam’s ‘just more theory’ maneuver:

Suppose we say that it is [reference] constraint $C$ that saves the day—a causal constraint, perhaps, or what have you. [...] $C$ is not to be imposed just by accepting $C$-theory. That is a misunderstanding of what $C$ is. The constraint is not that an intended interpretation must somehow make our account of $C$ come true. The constraint is that an intended interpretation must conform to $C$ itself.\footnote{Lewis (1984), 225.}

According to Lewis, Putnam misrepresents the character of a constraint on interpretation when he portrays it as an assertion internal to the theory so constrained, such that the constraint could be ‘satisfied’ in the same fashion as the rest of the statements constituting the theory; rather, the constraint is meant to be applied to the interpretations of $M$, as it were, externally. Provided that this internal-external dichotomy is coherent, Lewis’ point manifestly jeopardizes the ‘just more theory’ reply, and in any case there can be little doubt that Lewis is merely giving expression to what the realist takes himself to be doing when he proposes a ‘further’ (non-operational, non-theoretical) constraint on interpretation in response to Putnam’s argument. This seems to be Devitt’s attitude, anyway: the fact that our metatheory also counts as theory doesn’t imply, despite Putnam’s contentions, that our metatheoretical standpoint fails to give us a view on the way our theory bears on the world. But perhaps this is another realist-antirealist impasse, since Putnam’s stance doesn’t abide the presupposition Lewis relies on, that we’re capable of thinking about the relationship between total theory and the world from a perspective outside total theory. The proponent of the model-theoretic argument would thus deem Lewis’ distinction—between constraints ratified within the theory and constraints imposed on the theory from without—utterly unintelligible. In fact, Putnam would probably regard Lewis’ supposition that the distinction is intelligible as a sign that Lewis is in the grips of the ‘platonistic’ picture: the ability to conceive of
a constraint applied to total theory, rather than from within it, requires a faculty of direct metaphysical intuition not confined by our linguistic conceptualizations. Nevertheless, Lewis’ response to the ‘just more theory’ maneuver is instructive in clarifying what’s at issue in the debate between Putnam and the metaphysical realist.

I turn now to the brain-in-a-vat argument, as presented in the first chapter of Putnam’s *Reason, Truth and History*. The argument is formulated as a refutation of global skepticism, but it’s clear that the brain-in-a-vat argument is of a piece with Putnam’s broader opposition to metaphysical realism. The connection, as I mentioned above, is that the skeptical hypothesis presumes the independence dimension of realism: the skeptic’s concern is precisely that our perceptions, or commonsense beliefs, or whole body of putative knowledge might not accord with the way things really are in the external world, and such a concern makes sense only if we grant, as does the realist, that truth is in principle a separate matter from epistemology. The very possibility of the skeptical hypothesis hinges on the notion that reality is mind-independent. Consequently, if Putnam can demonstrate that global skepticism is incoherent as a result of its presumption of the independence dimension, then he’ll also have established the incoherency of metaphysical realism by the same token.

His brain-in-a-vat argument sets itself that task. But before examining the argument itself, I’ll consider its philosophical context, and specifically the support for it that Putnam draws from his philosophy of language. The brain-in-a-vat argument has as its basis a theory of meaning known as semantic externalism, which holds that the meaning of a linguistic expression is to some extent fixed by factors external to the language user. Crucially, the semantic externalist denies that

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88 And in view of Lewis’ affinity for ‘naturalness’ in metaphysics, as of kinds and properties, it’s quite possible that he wouldn’t deny this accusation by any means, although he might feel that it employs needlessly antiquated terminology.
items serving as symbols or representations possess their symbolism or their representational content intrinsically: if we happen upon an ant which, by the coincidence of its aimless wandering, has traced a line in the sand with a shape resembling Winston Churchill, we don’t say that the ant has *portrayed* Winston Churchill, or that the tracks in the sand *represent* him. No matter how close the similarity between the lines and the man, the purely accidental nature of the tracing precludes any possibility that the lines could constitute a picture of Winston Churchill. By the same reasoning, mental phenomena—thoughts, words, concepts, images—aren’t *about* things in the world simply in virtue of their intrinsic resemblance with them.99 Rather, in order to think about things in the world, and in order for those things to figure in the meaning of what one says, one must occupy a particular kind of position with regard to those things—one must be somehow (perhaps indirectly) *familiarized* with them. Putnam thus sees semantic externalism as a repudiation of a traditional kind of thinking about language and meaning—which he prejudicially calls the ‘magical’ conception of reference—which believes that a linguistic sign is just inherently ‘about’ its designatum, so that mere custody of the sign thereby grants the language user the power to think about whatever it purports to signify.9t

The idea that a term bears an intrinsic connection with its referent is a natural companion to the idea that the cognizer has a faculty for directly grasping ‘the forms’; the former view, one might argue, is simply the latter view dressed in linguistic clothing. In particular, both ‘magical’ reference and the platonistic faculty serve the same metaphysical function: they both deliver an account of our putative capacity to conceive of and talk about the way things are in themselves. The metaphysical realist who becomes dissatisfied with the notion of an occult, form-grasping

90 Ibid., 3.
intellectual power, but who still feels that we possess the means to conceptualize a mind-independent reality, might well turn to something like the magical conception of reference for an explanation of that ability. Thus modified, the platonistic position isn’t that the mind itself has an intrinsic connection with external reality, but rather that the mind operates via *language*, whose *elements* have intrinsic connections with external reality. Of course, the magical conception of reference and the platonistic faculty are independent of each other: someone dissuaded from conceiving of reference magically by Putnam’s argument could retreat to the view that we’re endowed with a (not especially linguistic) platonistic faculty—indeed, Putnam’s opinion is that the realist has no other option once semantic externalism is approved. The realist with sympathy for semantic externalism is obliged, on Putnam’s analysis, to say something to the effect that we *are* acquainted, *non-empirically*, with the external world; and it’s not clear how that could be if not by means of platonistic intuition.

Part of Putnam’s case for semantic externalism is his famous ‘Twin Earth’ thought experiment (or series thereof).\textsuperscript{91} Suppose that somewhere in the expanse of the cosmos is a Twin Earth, which is physically identical with Earth in every respect except (*per impossibile*, as it may be) that Twin Earth has no water, and the role played by H2O on Earth is played instead by XYZ on Twin Earth. Despite the chemical difference, H2O and XYZ are phenomenologically, sociologically, and linguistically indistinguishable—that is, *ex hypothesi*, residents of Twin Earth experience their clear, thirst-quenching liquid the same way we do, they interact with XYZ just as prominently and frequently as we interact with H2O, and they give XYZ the name ‘water.’ Since the two planets are physically identical except as specified, we can imagine that Oscar, a resident of Earth, has a doppelgänger on Twin Earth whose body is an exact (*modulo* ‘water’) replica of

\textsuperscript{91} A version of the thought experiment is given in Putnam (1981), 18-19. Putnam originally presented the thought experiment in his (1973).
Oscar’s. Because H2O and XYZ are indistinguishable by phenomenology, sociology, or linguistics, we may suppose that Oscar and Twin Oscar are alike in their subjective mental states; if Oscar or his twin were to wonder whether he’s on Earth or Twin Earth, their experience would be insufficient to decide the question. The intuition Putnam hopes to elicit here is this: if Oscar and Twin Oscar were to utter the same statement about what they call ‘water’—if they were to use the same words while in the same subjective psychological state, etc.—then their utterances wouldn’t express the same thought, for Oscar is talking about H2O while Twin Oscar is talking about XYZ. In Oscar’s mouth, ‘water’ refers to water, whereas in Twin Oscar’s mouth, ‘water’ refers to XYZ, and this is to say that their respective utterances differ in meaning. But if Oscar and Twin Oscar don’t differ in their phenomenology in any way, what follows is that ‘internal factors’—one’s experience, one’s intentions and motivations as regarded introspectively, one’s subjective understanding of language, and so on—aren’t enough to determine meaning. As Putnam’s well-known dictum has it, “meanings just aren’t in the head.”92 An additional component of linguistic meaning, it seems, is to be sought in the conditions of the external world, in the way things stand irrespective of anyone’s knowledge or belief; and just this is the thesis of semantic externalism.

The groundwork for the brain-in-a-vat argument is now in place. The skeptical scenario Putnam considers is that of a human brain kept alive in a ‘vat of nutrients’ and given sensory stimulation by a supercomputer, such that the person undergoes experiences identical to those of someone inhabiting what we’d regard as the ‘real’ world. The relevance of this scenario for global skepticism is that since there’s no distinction between the sensory experience of someone who’s a brain in a vat and the sensory experience of someone who’s not a brain in a vat, one has no way

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of knowing whether or not one really is a brain a vat. More importantly, *I myself* can have no assurance that I’m not a brain in a vat; as Putnam notes, the scenario presents a modern retelling of the classical skeptical problem (as visited, for example, by Descartes in his wrangling with dreams, hallucinations, and malevolent demons), whose central question is: *How do you know you aren’t in this predicament?* 93 Thus, according to the skeptic, we can have no certain knowledge that our sensory impressions correspond to real objects external to the mind; the external world as commonly conceived might not actually exist.94 Putnam’s response to the skeptic, based on his semantic externalism, is to argue that this scenario is *self-refuting* and so cannot be true. The rationale is that the utterance “I am a brain in a vat” is always false, because even if someone *were* a brain in a vat, the referents of the words in the utterance would not be ‘real’ brains or vats, but the *simulated* brains and vats given in the person’s experience *within* the vat. Since Putnam’s semantic theory maintains that a language user can only think about, and thus refer to, entities with which she’s been somehow acquainted, it follows that someone who’s actually a brain in a vat is unable to think about or make reference to *real* brains or vats—only to simulations thereof. As with the ant whose random scrawlings remind the onlooker of Winston Churchill, mere *similarity* between real-world brains and vats and the envatted person’s mental image of brains and vats—or between the *function* served by ‘brain’ and ‘vat’ in the language of the real-worlder and that served by those words in the language of the vat-worlder—is insufficient to establish that “I am a brain a vat” will have the same *meaning* when uttered by the real-worlder and by the vat-worlder. On the contrary, a consequence of semantic externalism appears to be that the real-worlder and the vat-

93 Ibid., 6.
94 Lest the scenario as described so far seem too solipsistic, Putnam extends the hypothesis to hold that all sentient beings are brains in vats, all participating in one collective simulation. As a result, the social or intersubjective aspect of our standard representation of the world is left intact, and anything taken to be essentially public—as language, for instance—is preserved. The sentient beings’ induction into the simulation, we can suppose, is only ever a matter of chance rather than the intention of a demiurgic computer programmer. (1981, 6-7)
worlder don’t even speak the same language at all: even if we assume that the two of them share their lexicon, the thoughts expressed by the real-worlder, whose language is English, will refer to the usual physical objects and states of affairs, whereas the thoughts expressed by the vat-worlder, whose language is vat-English, will refer to figments of the simulation. In other words, the brain in a vat doesn’t have the concept of cats, for instance, but only the concept of cats-in-the-image—although she might have no means of ascertaining that one of those concepts rather than the other corresponds with her word ‘cat.’ So when the brain in a vat utters the (vat-English) sentence “I am a brain in a vat,” the sentence’s truth condition is roughly that the speaker be, according to the simulation, a brain in a vat. But the hypothesis is that within the simulation, the envatted person has a normal body in physical space. So if I’m a brain in a vat, then my utterance “I am a brain in a vat” is false; and if I’m not a brain in a vat, then plainly my utterance “I am a brain in a vat” is likewise false. Therefore, “I am a brain in a vat” is necessarily false, and I can conclude elementarily that I’m not a brain in a vat.

Moreover, if global skepticism is untrue because of the radical separation it posits between thought and reality, or between what’s knowable and what’s the case, then metaphysical realism is likewise untrue on the same grounds. Of course, one might require some further warrant for the claim that this is the reason for the global skeptic’s downfall, since the source of skepticism’s vulnerability isn’t made explicit in the brain-in-a-vat argument itself. The warrant isn’t especially difficult to find, however, and the thrust of it is this: if the realist’s severance between truth and epistemology holds, then in general the truth conditions of a proposition—things’ being a particular way in their own right—will be in principle quite different from the conditions under

95 Of course, this wouldn’t be the case for the person who becomes a brain in a vat after having already learned a language. As far as Putnam’s argument is concerned, the skeptical scenario wherein I’m a brain in a vat as of last week stands unfuted; the hypothesis Putnam judges unintelligible is the one that stipulates that I’ve always been a brain in a vat.
which we can *understand* the proposition (much less bring ourselves into a position to verify or falsify it). As a result, the realist is put in the awkward position of affirming the possibility that some things essentially lie beyond our comprehension. Perhaps the awkwardness could be mitigated with the help of an extralinguistic grasp of the forms, or with the help of a magical conception of reference, but from Putnam’s semantic externalist perspective the allegation—formulated within the linguistic-conceptual system itself—that there are truths eluding any expression in language is odd indeed. For on semantic externalism, our entire understanding of notions like ‘ultimate reality’ or ‘things in themselves’ is founded upon our practical familiarity with things, and is thus in that sense epistemically constrained; despite the façade presented by our words, there’s then no space for a genuine *conceptual* distinction between, as Kant would have it, things as they appear to us and things as they are in themselves. Either the world already familiar to us counts as ‘ultimate reality,’ or else the phrase is void. In either circumstance, the *distinction* is lost, and it’s at just this point, according to Putnam, that metaphysical realism and the intelligibility of global skepticism founder.

One might not be willing to let Putnam have his victory over global skepticism so easily, though. Particularly suspect is the final step in the argument, where Putnam (or the reader who applies Putnam’s reasoning in the first person) infers on the basis of the necessary falsity of the utterance “I am a brain in a vat” that he is not a brain in a vat. In performing that inference, Putnam makes implicit appeal to an instance of the disquotation schema, viz.: “I am a brain in a vat” is true if and only if I am a brain in a vat. Although the general credentials of the disquotation schema are widely accepted, there are anomalous cases in which it straightforwardly seems to fail,

96 One obvious example: “I speak no English” is true if and only if I speak no English. Although the proposition on the right-hand side of the biconditional may very well be true, the case in which it’s true is a case in which I’m unable to utter the sentence on the left-hand side and *use it to mean* the proposition on the right. Despite the fact that “I speak no English” is never truly uttered, it’s not the case that everybody speaks English.
Putnam’s argument itself gives more than adequate cause for maintaining that the disquotation schema fails when applied to brains in vats. For according to Putnam’s own analysis, one’s being a brain in a vat is *compatible* with the falsity of one’s utterance “I am a brain in a vat.” As understandable as this objection is, it seems to me that to attack Putnam’s use of the disquotation schema is to miss the point, and that the crux of the issue is properly found elsewhere. Still, it’ll be instructive to consider why the disquotation objection misses its mark.

The intuition behind the objection seems to be that the disquotation schema miscarries whenever—to put it informally—the *meaning* of the quotation in question varies with its truth value. More concretely, the meaning of my utterance “I am a brain in a vat” is unstable, because it hinges on whether or not I in fact *am* a brain in a vat: the referential content of my sentence is ‘real’ if I’m not envatted, ‘simulative’ if I am envatted. The semantics of the sentence is such that the truth of what it purports to assert would undermine its (or my) ability to carry out the assertion; something like this, in any case, drives Putnam’s contention that the assertion that I am a brain in a vat is self-refuting. Wright gives the following assessment of the semantic state of affairs:

Say that a hypothesis H is *semantically auto-disruptive with respect to a language L* if and only if, were H true, some elements in the L-expression, S, of H would differ in meaning in such a way that S would no longer express H. And now define H as *absolutely semantically auto-disruptive—absaud*—if and only if for *any* expression, S, of H, in whatever language, if H were true some elements in S would so differ in meaning that S would no longer express H.97

In these terms, then, the intention of Putnam’s argument is to show that the global skeptical hypothesis is ‘absaud,’ and thus self-defeating, because its truth would forestall any possibility of our entertaining it. No language—none available to *us*, anyway—could even have the means to formulate the hypothesis, were it true. But now the objection is that if metaphysical possibility and

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97 Wright (1992b), 85.
expressibility in language come apart in this way, then surely the truth or falsity of an utterance is no reliable guide to the way things are, and Putnam’s tacit use of the disquotation schema is, in this atypical case, illicit.

The objector likely senses an air of equivocation in Putnam’s conclusion. If I’m a brain in a vat, then my sentence “I am a brain in a vat” doesn’t express what I (by my own lights) intend it to: it expresses, rather, the thought that I’m a brain in a vat in the image, whose falsity is little consolation in the face of skeptical paranoia. For the worry isn’t that I’m a brain in a vat in the image, but that I’m a brain in a vat in reality, and that’s the proposition whose falsity I’d like assured. But Putnam, it seems, is trading on an ambiguity between the two propositions in drawing his conclusion.

It seems to me that Wright’s treatment of the objection is the correct one. As he points out, what’s troubling the objector isn’t the use of disquotation per se, since both the brain in a vat and the real-worlder are in position to disquote properly:

Suppose the envatted brains do think determinate thoughts—that the components in their thought-symbolism are so related to real items that they constitute [vat-English] as a genuine language, apt for the expression of truths and falsehoods. Then whatever that language is, it may presumably be correctly used in homophonic characterisations of reference and truth-conditions. Let it be that I do not know whether I am speaking English or [vat-English]; still I do know that, whatever ‘snow’ refers to in my language, I may identify its reference by using that very word.98

Regardless of whether I’m a brain in a vat, my own use of disquotation is guaranteed to be sound, because my unquoted usage of terms only ever takes place in the language I myself employ. So the brain in a vat can know that “My word ‘vat’ refers to vats” is truly uttered, because the quoted and unquoted instances of the word ‘vat’ occur within the context of one and the same language.

98 Ibid., 74-75.
In fact, it’s arguable that such knowledge is in general *a priori*, at least in the first-person case, because it pertains to the basic formal structure of language. As a result, an initially sensible kind of worry in response to Putnam’s argument turns out not to make sense after all. The worry might be expressed in the following way: “If Putnam’s reasoning holds good, and semantic externalism is an accurate theory of linguistic meaning, then for all I know, I might not be referring to trees in my usage of the word ‘tree’—and more generally, my words might radically and universally fail to mean what I want them to mean.” Being in such a condition, no doubt, would be a calamity. But it’s incoherent to feel anxiety of this kind, because the content of one’s second-order *beliefs* about what one means, and *intentions* to mean particular things, is—as Wright says—“determined *in tandem* with” the content of the first-order thoughts themselves. That is, “whatever determines the content of the belief that P will *eo ipso* determine what belief it is that a subject who credits herself with the belief that P believes herself to possess.” 99 So it’s impossible, whether or not I’m a brain in a vat, that I should fail to think about what I aim to think about; my beliefs about the contents of my beliefs are accurate and authoritative. And this is just to say that my semantic theory for the language I use will be as faithfully aligned as ever with the content of that language *as I use it*. Thus the deployment of the disquotation schema to specify referents and truth conditions is no more objectionable in this context than in any other. Putnam shouldn’t be faulted for inferring that one isn’t a brain in a vat from the falsity of “I am a brain in a vat.”

At the same time, even if the use of the disquotation schema isn’t quite the problem, there does appear to be something deeply unsatisfactory in Putnam’s conclusion. Instead of protesting his appeal to disquotation, perhaps the qualm should take the following shape: even if we grant that the brain in a vat argument is entirely sound, so that our individual first-person rehearsal of its

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99 Ibid., 79.
reasoning leads us to a true and justified conclusion, *we can’t be certain what the content of that conclusion is*. If I’m *not* a brain in a vat, then Putnam’s argument brings me to the true conclusion that I’m not a *real* brain in a *real* vat; but if I *am* a brain in a vat, then the argument brings me to the true conclusion that I’m not a *simulated* brain in a *simulated* vat. So it seems that the content of the concluding proposition, true though it might (even necessarily) be, hinges on whether my language is English or vat-English. At this point, the metaphysical realist might catch sight of an opportunity to dismiss Putnam’s argument on grounds of circularity. For, says the realist, the argument demonstrates that I’m not *really* a brain in a vat only on the supposition that my language is English rather than vat-English, and that supposition itself assumes that I’m not a brain in a vat—since my language, after all, is determined by my standing *vis-à-vis* vats.

Unless the metaphysical realist is repudiating semantic externalism, however, this objection to Putnam’s argument is misconceived as well. According to semantic externalism, the supposition that one’s language is vat-English rather than English is incoherent, and for precisely the same reasons that the supposition that one is a brain in a vat is incoherent. If we’re going to countenance the distinction between English and vat-English at all, then vat-English is *ex hypothesi* a language in which ‘tree’ refers not to trees but to *trees in the image*, and analogously for the rest of its terms. But, as has recently been remarked in connection with Wright’s commentary, I can know *a priori* that my language disquotes—that my word ‘tree,’ for instance, refers to trees—and thus that my language isn’t vat-English. So to imagine a distinction between English and vat-English is thereby to imagine the possibility of a language, vat-English, which is divergent from one’s own and semantically impoverished relative to one’s own. Insofar as I can know with certitude that my word ‘tree’ refers to trees *simpliciter* rather than trees in the image, I can also know with certitude that my language is English rather than vat-English. It follows that
the objector is simply confused if he agonizes over which of two possible conclusions he reaches when he thinks through Putnam’s argument: the conclusion a normal human would (truly) reach, or the one that a brain in a vat would (truly) reach. The objector hopes that the proof, as he executes it, brings him to the former conclusion. Yet, as Wright notes,

[i]n order for the proof really to concern a thought of the latter, unwanted type, I have to suppose that I am really a brain-in-a-vat as I run it. And that is a supposition which, according to the externalism governing the argument, I can make only if it is false. So there is all the assurance we could need!

‘But surely a community of brains-in-a-vat could work through just these thoughts, and so convince themselves quite spuriously that they were not brains-in-a-vat?’ No, they could not. They might work through these words, and soundly convince themselves of something. But only creatures which are not brains-in-a-vat can have these thoughts.100

On semantic externalism, the brain-in-a-vat hypothesis we’re able to envisage is a hypothesis that’s provably false.

The formal justification for this claim involves Wright’s notion of an ‘absaud’ hypothesis. Recall that a statement is ‘absolutely semantically auto-disruptive’ just in case its truth would fatally interfere with the possibility of its expression in any language whatsoever. We’ve observed that the statement that I’m a brain in a vat is absaud, since if I were a brain in a vat, there’d then be no way for me to assert, or even to think, that I am. (That is, while I could use the words “I am a brain in a vat,” I couldn’t use them to express the true proposition that I’m a brain in a vat.) If we grant that thinking about a state of affairs requires the use of symbolism of some kind, then the upshot is that an absaud hypothesis, like the global-skeptical one Putnam considers, is thinkable only to the extent that it’s false. For a true absaud hypothesis is one that couldn’t be represented in language or thought. So inasmuch as I’m capable of entertaining the hypothesis that I’m a brain in

100 Ibid., 85.
a vat, I can have assurance that the hypothesis I entertain is false. What Putnam has shown, in
effect, is that any intelligible form of global skepticism is necessarily false, from which it follows,
at least in Putnam’s view, that the metaphysical realist’s most celebrated example of a potential
divergence between truth and ideal epistemology—the example furnished by global skepticism—is
neutralized.101

Ostensibly, then, the result of Putnam’s brain in a vat argument is an assurance that the
world we’re familiar with is real and not simulated, given what the concepts ‘real’ and ‘simulated’
mean for us—which is to say, the only meaning they could have for us. The metaphysical realist
will be inclined to protest that this is merely a verbal achievement, a comforting rearrangement of
concepts so as to preclude the possibility of genuine metaphysics by fiat. He’ll say: “Maybe all of
this semantic legislation means that I can’t actually use terms like ‘mind-independent’ the way I
thought I could—and maybe even this complaint itself is strictly nonsense—but the fact remains
that we were getting at something when we sought to distinguish between things as we apprehend
them and things as they are in their own right. And what we were getting at has been lost in this
transcendental argument against global skepticism.” It seems to me that the realist is basically

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101 One might question the generalization from the specific example Putnam addresses to global skepticism as a
whole. I don’t mean to deny that there are important differences between various kinds of skeptical proposal. In
particular, Wright (1992b, 89-90) notes that semantic externalism is of no help against the paranoia that I was (or
we all were) envatted starting yesterday. In that case, given plausible accounts of the longevity of reference once
determined, I’d still have the capacity to think and speak about things in the real-world, and so it’d be coherent for
me to worry that the world I inhabit today is mere simulation and not the real world I inhabited a week ago. I agree
that skepticism of this sort is left untouched by Putnam’s argument, but it seems to me that skepticism about the
present but not the past is something that doesn’t help the metaphysical realist illustrate her point. That point is
supposed to be that even the ideal theory might be false. It seems to me, though, that the proposal that I was envatted
yesterday is a proposal according to which, even in the realist’s estimation, I’ve become incapable of developing
an ideal theory. The best efforts of someone kept in a sensory-deprivation chamber, to use a more obvious example,
would fall far short of the truth, but the fair-minded metaphysical realist wouldn’t regard that as an illustration of
her thesis. That’s because the example is framed in such a way that the person uncontroversially comes to have an
epistemic impairment. By contrast, the kind of skepticism relevant to the coherency of metaphysical realism begins,
like the case of brains in vats, from the commonsense world we all know and love, as that’s the world in which the
ideal theory, by its very concept, must be developed. So for the purpose of assessing metaphysical realism, I
maintain that Putnam’s point can be extended to global skepticism in general.
right: the ‘real world’ promised to us by Putnam’s argument isn’t (or isn’t *necessarily*) the noumenal realm of objective existence as conceived by traditional realism. Although we can be sure, from a pragmatic point of view, that the set of cats is the extension of our concept ‘cat’ as that concept figures in our own language, the price of that surety is that we can no longer retain the notion that our language is *metaphysically privileged*. That is, according to Putnam’s argument, there’s no sense to be made of the idea that our concepts and categories reflect the intrinsic structure of the world, where ‘intrinsic’ implies ‘independent of our whole system of thought, language, and theorization.’ This result is precisely what Putnam *wants*, of course, but it also explains why the metaphysical realist should find no solace in the conclusion of the brain in a vat argument.

The realist’s disappointment can be phrased in terms of *which language it is* that can be said to capture ‘the real world.’ Putnam purports to offer an *a priori* proof that *my own* language affixes itself to reality in the fullest sense, that the referential relations between my concepts and the world hold exactly as I believe them to—since, as Wright puts it, my second-order beliefs about the status of my conceptualizations are the product of the same relations that determine the content of the conceptualizations themselves. But what the metaphysical realist seeks is a similar guarantee but without the indexical: a guarantee (at least of the possibility) that *some language or other*, considered from an external point of view, conforms to the inherent nature of the world and is thus true *simpliciter*. This is the same problem with which Putnam confronts the realist in his model-theoretic argument: from a point of view *within* the language of the ideal theory, it’s easy enough to specify the necessary constraints on reference, so that ‘cat’ refers to cats—but so long as this very constraint is given within the language, the reference of this latter, unquoted instance of ‘cat’ is itself referentially indeterminate in an ‘absolute’ sense. On the other hand, barring a
direct grasp of metaphysically absolute forms, the realist falls into unintelligibility when he tries to specify the reference constraints from an extralinguistic point of view, for any conceptual scaffolding he introduces to try to make that point of view understandable will be ‘just more theory’—that is, just more language.

It’s in this vein that Bas van Fraassen sees the model-theoretic argument as inviting a kind of dilemma when applied to one’s own language:

(A) if we cannot describe the elements of the world, neither can we describe/define/identify any function that assigns extensions to our predicates in the world;

(B) if we can describe those elements then we can also distinguish between right and wrong assignments of extensions to our predicates in the world.\(^{102}\)

In order to be able to specify a function mapping the terms of the ideal theory (or its model) onto the elements of the world, we need some sort of prior grasp of those elements; but it seems that any such prior grasp will enable us to discriminate between intended and unintended interpretations quite straightforwardly.\(^{103}\) In other words, if we aren’t already in the position of talking and thinking about the world, then we also lack any ability to talk or think about functions assigning semantic values to the terms of the ideal theory. So when the language in question, against which the model-theoretic argument is to be applied, is our own language, the one we already inhabit and employ, there’s no obstacle to pragmatically distinguishing between correct and incorrect interpretations of \(T\): the correct one assigns the set of cats to ‘cat,’ etc. As expected, however, selecting the correct interpretation isn’t so simple in the case of radical interpretation,

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\(^{103}\) The use of ‘active’ or ‘constructive’ phraseology here is inconsequential. Even if we assume more abstractly that there is a function mapping the terms of the theory onto the world, as van Fraassen notes (22-23), we’d need to devise a method of translating that function into our language in order to apply ourselves to the model-theoretic argument in the first place.

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where the language to be interpreted isn’t one that already holds meaning for us: “anthropologists studying recordings of an alien language,” van Fraassen remarks, “can get no further than truth-relative-to some interpretation.”104 The anthropologist can do no better than to call an alien sentence true provided that ‘gavagai’ refers to rabbits, and so forth; there’s no way for the anthropologist to determine truth and falsity in the alien syntax without relying on similar ‘provided that’ clauses.

Van Fraassen’s dilemma thus opens up a ‘pragmatic escape’ from the problems raised by the model-theoretic argument. The degree to which it’s even possible to assign worldly extensions to our predicates (et al) is the degree to which we already have a grasp on objects in the world, and insofar as we’re unable to discriminate extratheoretically between intended and unintended interpretations of our language, the task itself is ill-formed. From a certain point of view, one might regard this as an indication that the model-theoretic argument is innocuous: the challenge it raises for our conception of truth turns out to impose incoherent demands, and in any case we have as much license as we could ever attain for thinking that the objects of our thought genuinely exist in the real world. An appreciation of this outcome, or something analogous to it, is presumably what underlies Putnam’s adoption of what he calls ‘internal realism,’ which relinquishes the classically realist doctrine that the structures we find in the world are metaphysically absolute and inherent in it. Because internal realism, so-called, takes truth to be epistemically constrained, at least in the ideal limit, it counts as a kind of antirealism in the context of the present writing. And it’s for just this reason that the metaphysical realist ought to find the ‘pragmatic escape’ from the model-theoretic argument unacceptable. As Putnam says, metaphysical realism—purporting, as it does, to concern the way things are in themselves, inhabiting a metaphysically autonomous world—

seeks to present “a model of the relation of any correct theory to all or part of the world.”

From a perspective internal to one’s own language, it’s merely a truism that ‘cat’ refers to cats, and the metaphysical realist isn’t interested in truisms. What the realist wants to know, instead, is whether our word ‘cat’ refers to noumenal cats, cats-in-themselves, considered independently of their representation in our theory. The interpretation on which ‘cat’ refers to noumenal cats, and on which reference and truth conditions in general aren’t just truistically specified, is what the realist would consider the ‘intended’ interpretation, and thus the absolute standard for truth simpliciter.

The thrust of both the model-theoretic and brain in a vat arguments, however, is that the realist’s insistence on a noumenal standard of truth collapses into incoherency—provided, of course, that no platonistic or ‘magical’ conception of reference is on the table. Putnam should therefore be more than willing to heed van Fraassen’s dilemma and accept that even the initial project of putting the ideal theory into correspondence with the world is futile from an extralinguistic standpoint—so much the worse for the realist’s extralinguistic notion of truth!

Putnam’s arguments, then, can be construed as two prongs of one protracted semantic reductio of the realist’s conception of truth. Given Putnam’s semantic presuppositions—most crucially, that we possess no mystical form-grasping faculty and that signs have no innate connection with what they signify—what he establishes is, first, that the ideal theory is guaranteed to be true for reasons too trivial for the realist to permit and, second, that the realist’s attempts to lay down a more metaphysically robust criterion of truth reduce to absurdity. The cognitive resources available to us—the ‘natural’ ones, anyway—don’t equip us to conceive of the way things stand beyond our epistemic reach, yet that’s precisely where the realist wants to locate the criterion of truth simpliciter. Without the aid of a direct acquaintance with things in themselves, it seems

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105 Putnam (1977), 483.
that the metaphysics of realism is in precarious tension with its epistemology; and Putnam, with his assumption that nonnatural linkages between mind and world (or between language and world) are out of the question, exploits that tension in the service of antirealism. At base, the model-theoretic argument and the brain in a vat argument underscore one and the same difficulty: the incoherency of seeking to specify a further constraint on reference once all operational and theoretical constraints have been satisfied is, viewed from another angle, the incoherency of hypothesizing that one is a brain in a vat. In the semantic context of Putnam’s arguments, the conclusion is inevitable that the world we know and inhabit is the metaphysically real world, in any meaningful sense of ‘metaphysically real’—and that any effort to articulate a sense of ‘metaphysically real’ on which the former conclusion isn’t guaranteed will be provably unintelligible.

For all this, the metaphysical realist might still be unable to slough off the feeling that a legitimate concern has been too casually dismissed. The temptation is to say that even if the hypothesis that one is a brain in a vat is unintelligible—even if any spelling out of a global-skeptical scenario at all is bound to be deemed unintelligible—nonetheless there’s a genuine sense of disquietude, perhaps ineffable, underlying these nonsensical expressions of skeptical doubt. It’s possible for the realist to acknowledge the inescapable unintelligibility of any specific articulation of the global-skeptical hypothesis while at the same time sensing that there might be something systematically impeding the objective truth of our best theories, something forever beyond our conceptual reach. (Whether the conjunction of those two sentiments is coherent is a separate matter, and one that might not bother the realist in a case like this.) Even if armchair considerations have successfully established that any global-skeptical scenario we can understand must be false, the realist will be inclined to wonder—albeit on pain of incomprehensibility—whether some
global-skeptical scenario we can’t understand might be the case. That sort of skeptical hypothesis isn’t ruled out by the brain in a vat argument. In accounting for the realist’s dissatisfaction with Putnam’s argument, Wright observes that

[T]he real spectre to be exorcised concerns the idea of a thought standing behind our thought that we are not brains-in-a-vat, in just the way that our thought that they are mere brains-in-a-vat would stand behind the thought—could they indeed think anything—of actual brains-in-a-vat that ‘We are not brains-in-a-vat.’ The spectre is that of a thought whose truth would make a mockery of mankind and its place in nature, just as our true thought that they are merely brains-in-a-vat makes a mockery of the ‘cognitive’ activity of the envatted brains.106

As the antirealist sees things, the idea of such a thought ‘standing behind’ our thought and beyond our grasp is no felicitous ‘idea’ at all, but only an absurdity; the metaphor points nowhere. Accordingly, while it’s true that the brain in a vat argument only rules out the global-skeptical hypothesis we’re capable of understanding, the antirealist will contend that there’s no need to rule out the one we can’t understand, since the hypothesis that something inconceivable for us obtains isn’t really a hypothesis at all, not any more than Chomsky’s “colorless green ideas sleep furiously” counts as a legitimate proposal.

Perhaps the realist’s anxiety over the possibility of a thought ‘standing behind’ our inquiry into global skepticism is best summarized by Thomas Nagel’s response to Putnam’s argument:

If I accept the argument, I must conclude that a brain in a vat can’t think truly that it is a brain in a vat, even though others can think this about it. What follows? Only that I cannot express my skepticism by saying, “Perhaps I am a brain in a vat.” Instead I must say, “Perhaps I can’t even think the truth about what I am, because I lack the necessary concepts and my circumstances make it impossible for me to acquire them!” If this doesn’t qualify as skepticism, I don’t know what does.107

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106 Wright (1992b), 93.
107 Nagel (1986), 73.
This line of thought holds that Putnam’s argument actually serves to reinforce skeptical concerns, because the argument only highlights the possibility that thought and reality might radically diverge. If the effect of the argument is to demonstrate that a true global-skeptical hypothesis is necessarily unthinkable for us, then the upshot must be that we’re even worse off, from an epistemic point of view, than we originally realized. One might adopt a similar attitude in response to the model-theoretic argument: if we possess no means of determining the intended interpretation, the one that assigns noumenal cats to ‘cat’ etc., then the right conclusion isn’t that the (optimally) theoretically and operationally constrained world is the ‘real’ world in the fullest sense, but rather that our conceptual framework—even ideally implemented—offers us no reliable grip on the real world at all. Crucially, however, the realist can’t maintain in the face of this argument that the real world is inaccessible only for certain unfortunate creatures, as he may in the case of the brain in a vat; presumably, what troubles the ideal theorist in the model-theoretic argument constitutes a problem for any epistemic agent whatever. In consequence, although the realist’s doctrine that truth is epistemically unconstrained was supposed to be distinct from the claim that the world (or the particular subject matter in question) is unknowable, this manner of reply to Putnam threatens to conflate a realistic outlook with the latter, more extreme position. At the least, it seems that such hard-line efforts to shore up the independence dimension of realism put increasing strain on the epistemology of the existence dimension: the further we push reality toward ineffability, the more difficult it is to explain how our thought comes to correspond with the way things are in themselves, unless by some cosmic serendipity.

For the antirealist’s part, a response like Nagel’s carries little polemical weight. According to the antirealist who propounds the brain in a vat argument against the possibility of global skepticism, or who argues more directly that model-theoretic considerations undermine
metaphysical realism, our pretheoretical understanding of the relation between language and reality is quite fallible—and might in some respects be fundamentally mistaken. The antirealist who embraces Putnam’s argumentation, in other words, is already committed to the view that there are potentially counterintuitive limitations on our thought. We naturally believe ourselves to be capable of specifying nontrivial reference constraints on a putative model of the world, and we also take ourselves to be entertaining a genuine possibility when we wonder whether we’re brains in vats, but Putnam’s arguments suggest that those notions are confused. As Putnam and his antirealist adherents have it, distinguishing between intended and unintended interpretations, or between the case in which my world is metaphysically real and the case in which it’s metaphysically illusory, requires occupying an extratheoretical standpoint which can’t be occupied. And importantly, our inability to view things from such an absolute perspective isn’t a merely practical restriction, but an essentially conceptual one: we can’t even conceive of being in a position to distinguish (in the sense of grasping the difference) between what’s metaphysically real and what isn’t, and thus the question whether our concept ‘tree’ refers to metaphysically real trees isn’t undecidable—as the traditional skeptic might hold—but rather unintelligible. What makes this a particularly bold claim for the antirealist is that there’s a strong initial plausibility to the sentiment that the realist is presenting a sensible question with legitimate concepts; it seems perfectly coherent, albeit idle, to ask whether one is a brain in a vat. But the antirealist contends that the appearance is deceptive—that once we arrive at a proper understanding of the nature of thought or language, and especially the semantic grounding of our concepts, we can see that what held the appearance of a meaningful idea is correctly recognized to be senseless. In the abstract, this is the outcome of both of Putnam’s critiques of metaphysical realism.108

108 This interpretation of Putnam’s antirealism, and particularly of the brain in a vat argument, is conspicuously reminiscent of entry 6.51 of Wittgenstein’s Tractatus: “Scepticism is not irrefutable, but obviously nonsensical,
It’s then a simple matter to extend the same analysis to Nagel’s response: although it might appear meaningful to wonder whether something-I-know-not-what is systematically preventing me from apprehending the world correctly, the question is devoid of content. No bona fide hypothesis is being entertained when I run through that sequence of symbols. Nagel’s response gains an air of plausibility by its implicit use of existential quantification—“Suppose there is something such that it stands between me and the acquisition of the concepts I’d need in order to know the truth about the world”—but the antirealist will contend that the generalized form of global-skeptical doubt suffers from the same semantic defect that any specific expression of it would. In the terms of Putnam’s parable, the brain in a vat can’t even think an existentially quantified statement that would be rendered true by what we outsiders recognize as the brain’s epistemological predicament. It’s true enough that the brain in a vat could formulate a sentence like “Perhaps some or other global-skeptical hypothesis is true, and my epistemic condition is radically deficient,” but the metaphysical fact of the matter can only be expressed in English (or, at any rate, a language other than vat-English), and so the brain’s existentially quantified sentence—which is a sentence of vat-English—isn’t made true by the fact of the brain’s envattedness. By the same token, even the generalized form of Nagel’s concern fails to express a coherent hypothesis, being on precisely the same faulty semantic footing as any specification of a global-skeptical scenario, and so it makes no contribution to the plausibility of the realist’s outlook. Of course, while this is a natural line for the antirealist to take in reply to Nagel, its cogency is open to dispute; one might simply regard it as self-evident, or anyway more evident than Putnam’s semantic externalism, that an open-ended general statement of the global-skeptical hypothesis would be true if the right sort of metaphysical conditions were to obtain. This would be to affirm after all that the brain in a vat is capable of

when it tries to raise doubts where no questions can be asked. For doubt can exist only where a question exists, a question only where an answer exists, and an answer only where something can be said.”
formulating a true, existentially quantified statement concerning global skepticism. Alternatively, the realist might make partial concessions to semantic externalism and agree that both general and particular formulations of global skepticism are meaningless, while still maintaining that figurative language succeeds where literal language fails. This is to treat the meaningless of expressions of global skepticism, when taken strictly and literally, as little more than a technicality: though the image used doesn’t quite pass semantic muster, one has an inarticulate grasp of what it conveys, and one thus sees the sense in asking whether some skeptical scenario beyond our comprehension is in effect.

The committed metaphysical realist will undoubtedly feel tempted to make no concessions to semantic externalism at all, and his reaction to Putnam’s arguments will therefore be much more extreme than Nagel’s. Perhaps the realist’s boldest maneuver, seeing all these metaphysical ramifications of Putnam’s philosophy of language, would be to perform one sweeping modus tollens against Putnam’s semantic theory, getting rid of semantic externalism and its philosophical foundations and retaining the thesis that we have a straightforward conceptual grip on the distinction between what’s metaphysically real and what isn’t. So if semantic externalism entails the antirealist thesis that global skepticism is unintelligible, as Putnam has purported to demonstrate, then the more justifiable response is to reject semantic externalism in favor of a different semantic theory. We’re more warranted in believing that we can discern intended from unintended interpretations of a model of the world—so says the realist—than we are in believing that operational and theoretical constraints exhaust our epistemic faculties, and thus the model-theoretic argument is a reductio of the latter thesis. I suppose it’s fair to say that common sense is on the side of the metaphysical realist in these considerations, and common sense surely counts for something, even if it’s not the sole arbiter of plausibility. Be that as it may, it seems to me that
one of the most important virtues of Putnam’s semantic challenge to realism is that it lays bare the philosophical price of holding onto the realist picture. If the metaphysical realist opts to reject Putnam’s semantic externalism, as perhaps a realist should, then it appears that he’ll need to substitute for it a conception of meaning that involves precisely what Putnam is so concerned to repudiate: more or less, a non-natural, ‘platonistic’ faculty that affords a direct grasp of things in themselves. Once Putnam’s philosophy of language has been turned away, it seems as though something like this is the essence of what remains for the realist. And while the traditionally-minded philosopher may embrace the opportunity to retreat into platonistic rationalism, the contemporary realist is liable to find in this situation a sobering dilemma.

5. The Benacerraf Dilemma

The previous two sections concerned the semantic and metaphysical contributions of Dummett and Putnam to the long-lived debate between realists and antirealists. In this concluding section I’ll examine, in broad terms, the implications of Dummett’s and Putnam’s work for the generic realism-antirealism distinction.

As has already been made apparent, Dummett and Putnam adopt the same basic understanding of what realism with regard to some subject matter consists in. When Dummett construes realism as the thesis that the statements of the given class possess potentially recognition-transcendent truth conditions, and when Putnam construes realism as the thesis that even the ideal theory might in principle be false, both of them give expression to what I’ve taken to be the quintessential realist doctrine: that truth is a separate matter from epistemology, or that what is the case isn’t confined by what can be known (or conceived). More precisely, this doctrine is an articulation only of the independence dimension of realism—recall that the error theorist might well agree, after all, that the notion of truth germane to the subject matter in question is
epistemically unconstrained. Given that the independence dimension of realism holds, in effect, that the truth or falsity of the relevant sentences (or, on the ontological construal of realism, the existence or nonexistence of the relevant entities) is mind-independent, the concept of potential recognition-transcendence stands as a new, semantically tinged reading of the more traditional concept of mind-independence. If we understand the notion ‘potentially recognition-transcendent’ in its maximal form, as involving potentially the transcendence of the recognition of any epistemic agent whatsoever, then to regard a statement as having realist truth conditions is to regard it as being true or false in its own right—or, one might say, objectively—with no reliance at all on anyone’s perception, conceptualization, theorization, etc. Interpreting potential recognition-transcendence in this way thus also consolidates the intuition that the way things ‘really’ are, in the metaphysical sense, is the way things are ‘in themselves,’ as contrasted with the way things are taken to be when portrayed by an epistemic agent or by a conceptual scheme.

Realism, in general, is therefore correctly construed as a metaphysical doctrine, or as a family of metaphysical doctrines which all espouse the same sort of attitude concerning their respective domains of discourse. But clearly this isn’t the whole story of realism’s philosophical classification: the antirealist arguments of Dummett and Putnam have pointed to an undeniable and perhaps inescapable interweave of issues in the philosophy of language (especially semantics) and epistemology with the question of realism. In addition to the metaphysical components of realism and antirealism, being a realist or an antirealist encompasses commitments concerning the nature of thought and how thought pertains to the world at large. So it seems to me that the more important observation is that realism is, or at least involves essentially, a thesis concerning the relationship between metaphysics and epistemology. The antirealist’s conception of truth as evidentially constrained is grounded in the thesis that metaphysics is circumscribed by
epistemology: wherever truth value (alternatively, existence) is determinate, it’s determinate in virtue of epistemic tractability. Thus metaphysics, according to the antirealists, can be properly practiced only within the scope of in-principle justifiability. On the other hand, the realist’s stance on the relationship between metaphysics and epistemology is just the denial of the antirealist’s stance; metaphysics, at least in some respects, is a sovereign discipline, with a subject matter that may well turn out to exceed the limits of our epistemic and conceptual faculties, even in their ideal utilization. Hence emerges the methodological disparity that sets antirealists like Dummett and Putnam fundamentally at odds with staunch realists like Devitt: whereas Devitt and his ilk presuppose the metaphysical reality of the world as straightforwardly (if approximately) depicted in scientific and commonsense discourse, the antirealists presuppose that the scope of metaphysics is entirely subject to the deliverances of our epistemology. As elsewhere in philosophy, so long as those presuppositions are maintained, neither party to the debate is likely to gain much ground against the other.

Yet this isn’t to say that the argumentation figuring in the debate is futile. The antirealist arguments of Dummett and Putnam in particular illustrate a kind of quandary facing the realist in view of her conception of the way metaphysics relates to epistemology, a quandary famously characterized in connection with the philosophy of mathematics by Paul Benacerraf. In a 1973 article, Benacerraf contends that the favored account of mathematical truth is in deep conflict with the most promising account of mathematical knowledge. According to Benacerraf, the most plausible and well-understood general conception of truth is a semantic one, emerging from the efforts of Tarski, which construes truth in terms of reference and satisfaction. On its semantic

\[109\] Benacerraf contrasts the semantic approach to mathematical truth with a wholly syntactic approach that construes the notion of truth only in terms of formal provability. The defect of the wholly syntactic approach, in his view, is that it establishes nothing more than the theoremhood of a mathematical statement, and that it thus fails to “explain the connection between truth and theoremhood.” (1973, 666-667)
conception, the notion of truth isn’t without its metaphysical baggage; to hold that a mathematical sentence is true (partly) in virtue of its reference is to hold that mathematical terms denote entities: objects and extensions. Certainly we understand truth along these lines in more concrete contexts—we say that the truth of a statement like ‘grass is green’ is to be explained by the referential relations holding between ‘grass’ and grass, and between ‘green’ and the set of green things, and by grass’s membership in the set of green things. The truth of the statement, to put it simply, involves worldly existents. If we wish to apply the same theory of truth to mathematical statements—as Benacerraf thinks we should, for sake of consistency and utility—then we’ll need to avail ourselves of mathematical entities whose nature and structure constitute truth conditions for mathematical discourse. A semantics for mathematics, then, implicates a metaphysics for mathematics. The difficulty Benacerraf finds here is that appealing to metaphysics for an explanation of mathematical truth seems to render the epistemology of mathematics completely mysterious. For a mathematical ontology is an ontology of things far removed from our apparent epistemic faculties: if the objects represented by mathematical discourse genuinely exist, then presumably they stand outside space and time—which is to say that we can’t interact with them causally. And our in-principle causal disconnection from an entity makes it problematic, if not impossible, to explain how we might come to know about the entity in a manner consonant with scientifically-informed accounts of human knowledge. Of course, the epistemology of mathematics is less problematic if mathematical knowledge is cashed out simply in terms of the formal methods whereby mathematicians ply their craft, but in that circumstance the explanatory link between syntactic proof and semantic truth is lost. This, therefore, is Benacerraf’s dilemma: we can develop an adequate theory of mathematical truth, or else an adequate theory of
mathematical knowledge, but not both together; either the metaphysics or the epistemology of mathematics will come at the expense of the other.

For an example of someone who chooses the first horn of the dilemma—who takes it for granted that mathematical truth is to be interpreted metaphysically—Benacerraf looks to Kurt Gödel, a proponent of the view that our mathematical knowledge is founded upon a ‘mathematical intuition’ very similar to the ‘platonistic faculty’ Putnam disregards in his presentation of the model-theoretic argument.¹¹⁰ Yet Benacerraf demurs at Gödel’s position:

[Gödel] sees, I think, that something must be said to bridge the chasm, created by his realistic and platonistic interpretation of mathematical propositions, between the entities that form the subject matter of mathematics and the human knower. Instead of tinkering with the logical form of mathematical propositions or with the nature of the objects known, he postulates a special faculty through which we “interact” with these objects. We seem to agree on the analysis of the fundamental problem, but clearly disagree about the epistemological issue—about what avenues are open to us through which we may come to know things.¹¹¹

Thus Benacerraf agrees with Gödel that a special faculty of mathematical intuition is the sort of thing that could surmount the dilemma, reconciling the metaphysics of mathematics with its epistemology, but he finds the notion of an irreducible and seemingly non-natural form of intuition hopelessly recondite. On the other hand, it should be noted, if the second horn of the dilemma were the more firmly entrenched—if we took it for granted that the epistemology of mathematics is constrained by what’s empirically acceptable, and thus restricted to matters of syntax—then we’d have on our hands something like a semantic challenge to realism about mathematics. Sentences of mathematics bear no content beyond their formalism, and so the only ‘truth conditions’ to speak

¹¹⁰ Benacerraf (1973), 674.
¹¹¹ Ibid., 675.
of in mathematics are conditions of provability; mathematical ‘truth’ is then epistemically
constrained in a paradigmatic way.\(^{112}\)

The parallels between Benacerraf’s dilemma and the antirealist arguments of Dummett and
Putnam are unmistakable. The challenges that Dummett and Putnam pose for realism are an
illustration of the fact that Benacerraf’s dilemma can be generalized to bear on realism of whatever
kind, not just realism regarding mathematics. What makes it possible for Benacerraf to impose his
dilemma is that the ontology of mathematics, when the discipline is read literally, abides beyond
the reach of our natural epistemic faculties—that is, our perceptual faculties as detailed by
cognitive science. Mathematical entities thus construed, in other words, exist in their own right,
and not merely insofar as we’re capable of apprehending them (if at all). But this same recognition-
transcendence is precisely what the realist professes for the given class of statements, whatever
their subject matter might be: they’re true or false in their own right, and not in virtue of our
perceptual or conceptual abilities. So provided that we suspend, at least momentarily, the option
of appealing to something like a platonistic faculty, it should be possible to formulate a Benacerraf-
style dilemma with respect to any realist thesis at all.

I’ll illustrate this point in the context of realism about the empirically-describable external
world, since realism concerning ordinary objects and everyday statements seems least likely of all
to be susceptible to comparison with realism about mathematics. (After all, one might ask, what
could be more disanalogous with abstract, causally inert mathematical entities than familiar,
medium-sized, causally active physical objects?) The realist about the external world proposes that
a typical empirical statement—say, ‘the pug is on the rug’—has a potentially recognition-

\(^{112}\) One is reminded here of Dummettian intuitionism. Indeed, Benacerraf notes that on the second horn of the
dilemma, what he calls the ‘combinatorial’ view of mathematical truth, the assignment of truth value is based on
provability and disprovability, and the significance of the truth value assignment is held to be exhausted thereby.
(1973, 665)
transcendent truth condition, the sort of truth condition which could obtain apart from anyone’s awareness. The temptation here is to say that the pug’s being on the rug is the sort of fact which could figure in the etiology of the belief that the pug is on the rug, and thus that the epistemology of the empirical statement is by no means obscure. To be sure, empirical investigation can bear out quite straightforwardly that the truth condition of ‘the pug is on the rug’ obtains, but the important question for our purpose is whether that truth condition obtains recognition-transcendently—i.e., mind-independently—or whether its obtaining is epistemically constrained. To answer this question is to settle on a semantics, and so concomitantly a metaphysics, for external-world discourse, and that issue is what remains open once we’ve decided that the epistemology of such discourse is limited to our natural faculties.

Now the Benacerraf-inspired dilemma is just this: if we take the truth condition of an external-world statement to be epistemically constrained, then the classical notion of truth has been replaced by something like the notion of assertibility or justification. The antirealist makes no quarrel with such an exchange, of course, but for the realist the relinquishment of the classical notion of truth (as, at minimum and by contrast with assertibility, bivalent) is out of the question entirely. The realist is therefore compelled to avert this horn of the dilemma. But the other horn is not much friendlier, given our epistemological assumptions: if the truth condition of an external-world statement is recognition-transcendent, how could someone come to know that it’s recognition-transcendent? Phrasing the question properly is a delicate matter; if it’s indeed the case that the pug is on the rug, then there’s a relatively uncontroversial scientific explanation of our ability to ascertain, and thereafter to assert, that the pug is on the rug. This much, I take it, is a routine empirical observation underwritten by our empirical faculties as standardly described. Importantly, however, the empirical claim is metaphysically neutral: physicalist, phenomenalist,
and solipsist alike can agree (modulo the extent to which a solipsist is capable of ‘agreement’) that, in the everyday empirical sense, it’s the case that the pug is on the rug—or at least they can agree that the corresponding assertion is warranted in the context of the observation. What distinguishes realism from its competitors in this regard is that the realist appends to the merely empirical claim a particular sort of metaphysical claim: that the pug’s being on the rug obtains recognition-transcendently—that the state of affairs in question is the sort of thing that could in principle obtain without being known by anyone to obtain. And it’s this further claim that seems to defy integration into a naturalistic theory of knowledge.

The nature of the problem is evident enough. The recognition-transcendence of the truth or falsity of a statement, its metaphysical independence from our cognition, is apparently the sort of thing for which we could have no evidence in the conventional sense. Any evidence available to us concerning a state of affairs must, simply by definition, be within the scope of our recognitional capacities, and it thus has no immediate bearing on the given state of affairs qua recognition-transcendent. The realist will probably object here that the state of affairs I recognize when I notice that the pug is on the rug just is the recognition-transcendent state of affairs that the pug is on the rug; one and the same state of affairs is both detectable by ordinary empirical means and metaphysically independent with respect to my mind, so that empirical recognition does afford evidence of recognition-transcendent truth. Certainly this is the usual conception of what it means to perceive (successfully) that something is the case. But the realist’s identity claim—that the state

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113 This line of thought runs more or less parallel with Dummett’s acquisition challenge (e.g. 1978, 362-363), a minor companion of his manifestation challenge. One significant distinction between my formulation of the point and the acquisition challenge is that Dummett asks first how we could come to conceive of an understood statement as having recognition-transcendent truth conditions, and second how we could come to know that truth conditions obtain which are, perhaps incidentally, recognition-transcendent. My formulation, meanwhile, asks more directly how we could come to know that a statement’s truth condition is a recognition-transcendent matter. All three are worthwhile questions.
of affairs given empirically is identical with some mind-independent state of affairs—is itself likewise beyond the ken of the natural epistemic agent. The truth value, in other words, of the contention that empirically ascertainable conditions are also recognition-transcendent can’t be settled by our empirical faculties, but is instead merely an unargued presupposition of empirical investigation; so the realist who espouses a naturalistic epistemology is still on the hook to explain how knowledge of the specifically metaphysical component of his position could’ve been acquired. Thus Benacerraf’s dilemma, or an adaptation of it, bears even against realism concerning the external world, where our natural epistemic abilities—it might have been thought—are most likely to supply an account of our metaphysical knowledge. If even a realism about commonsense and scientific entities is vulnerable to the dilemma, then I take it that the dilemma weighs on realistic positions across the board.

In the case of Putnam’s antirealist arguments, the connection with Benacerraf’s dilemma is all but explicit. We’ve seen Putnam’s acknowledgement that something like Gödel’s ‘mathematical intuition,’ or a faculty enabling a direct grasp of the forms, would defeat the model-theoretic and brain in a vat arguments, since it would empower us to bypass the machinations of theory, language, conceptual apparatuses, and establish an immediate link with the noumenal world, or at least a means of conceiving of things as they stand in themselves. I’ve also remarked briefly in section 4 that the platonistic faculty would lay Dummett’s manifestation challenge to rest as well, since then a piece of linguistic behavior could be plausibly construed as an exterior manifestation of that faculty, and hence as a manifestation of one’s grasp of realist truth conditions. Moreover, Dummett and Putnam argue for antirealism by employing reasoning of the same basic form as Benacerraf’s: if the realist’s metaphysics purports to involve the epistemically unconstrained, as it must if it’s going to preserve the traditional conception of truth, then natural
epistemology (the domain of recognitional capacities, operational and theoretical constraints, etc.) leaves it utterly obscure how knowledge or even conceptualization of metaphysical truth could be possible. Benacerraf, then, found a way of formulating for realism about mathematics a kind of problem common to realism in general, insofar as realism countenances epistemically unconstrained truth. Of course, at the same time, Benacerraf’s dilemma can also be construed as presenting a problem for antirealism in general: if the scope of epistemology constrains the scope of metaphysics, then the classical conception of truth has been abandoned, and with it the traditional understanding of the relationship between truth and justification. But as the foregoing discussion has made clear, the antirealist is likely to regard this result as a good riddance.
Chapter Two

Alethic Pluralism and Ontological Pluralism:
Framing Realism-Antirealism Disputes

1. Introduction

The previous chapter offered a general view of the ways in which the distinction between realistic and antirealistic stances has been formulated in the past few decades of Anglo-American philosophy. One of the most elementary tenets of that formulation, owing its explicit articulation to the work of Dummett, is what I’ve called ‘the contextualizing principle,’ which states that one is a realist or antirealist with regard to some specified subject matter, not a realist or antirealist full stop. The basic insight encapsulated in the contextualizing principle is that a realist or antirealist commitment concerning one discourse—the empirical sciences, mathematics, ethics, and so on—needn’t entail a realist or antirealist commitment to any other discourse. Thus, one might hold that the truths of the empirical sciences, but not those of mathematics, involve the depiction of mind-independent states of affairs; or one might hold just the reverse. Provided at least some liberty in carving up our thought and talk into such ‘discourses,’ the result is that the logically possible combinations of local realist and antirealist positions are diverse and numerous.

Yet the contextualizing principle made only a brief appearance in the first chapter, since the focus of the chapter was a kind of global semantic objection to realism as such. The objection’s foremost exponents include Dummett himself, who levies his ‘manifestation challenge’ against the possibility that a language user could ever employ statements to have realist truth conditions; and Putnam, with his model-theoretic and brain in a vat arguments directed against the intelligibility of what he terms ‘metaphysical realism.’ The family of semantic challenges defended by Dummett and Putnam (inter alia, of course) intends to demonstrate that our conceptualizing
activity—our thought or language—is radically ill-equipped to represent the way things are in their own right, as the realist’s metaphysical outlook seems to require. So if a global semantic objection to realism can indeed be sustained along these or other lines, then the contextualizing principle is plainly moot: no realistic commitment is ever warranted for any discourse, and antirealism dominates the landscape without reservation. Perhaps unsurprisingly, however, full-blooded metaphysics has carried on all the same, and more or less self-contained debates over the prospects for realism in the sciences, in mathematics, in ethics, and elsewhere still present live and open philosophical problems. Nevertheless, although global antirealism hasn’t quite carried the day, the Dummettian emphasis on truth, semantics, and particular discourses has been influential ever since in the development of the question of realism and antirealism.

Holding special interest is Crispin Wright’s *Truth and Objectivity*, which undertakes to construct a comprehensive framework for the prosecution of realist-antirealist debates. What’s distinctive about Wright’s ‘minimalist’ approach—and what might best highlight the legacy of Dummett with respect to the present topic—is the junction of realist commitment not with truth *simpliciter* but with the *sort* of truth enjoyed by true statements of the relevant subject matter. It’s a mistake, on Wright’s view, to suppose that the pith of a realist-antirealist debate over some subject matter has to do (as for the noncognitivist) with whether discourse about that subject matter is truth-apt in the first place, or (as for the error theorist) with whether any of the sentences belonging to that discourse are in fact true. Rather, it should be agreed on all sides that an apparently truth-apt discourse *is* truth-apt, and that the assertions within the discourse which meet its internal standards of correctness are indeed true. Then the debate between realists and antirealists concerning the discourse in question can properly take the form of a debate over what, more specifically, truth for that discourse consists in: whether it consists in something akin to
representation of an external reality—as the realist believes—or whether it consists merely in satisfaction of the standards governing the discourse as a linguistic practice—as the antirealist, or anyway a particular breed of antirealist, will want to contend.

Shifting the debate from whether the discourse encompasses true statements to what kind of truth it encompasses opens up theoretical room for pluralism regarding the nature of truth. Whereas the traditional monist about truth holds that truth is uniform across all discourses (and perhaps consists in correspondence with reality, or depends in some way on coherence with other true propositions, or is primitive and unanalyzable, and so forth), the pluralist maintains that various discourses exhibit various kinds of truth. And Wright’s efforts have indeed led to an outpouring of literature on alethic pluralism\textsuperscript{114}—although the emphasis since Wright’s initial foray has tended not to fall on the relevance of alethic pluralism for issues of realism and antirealism in particular. Nonetheless, one of the most important virtues of alethic pluralism is—by design, of course—its ability to accommodate and situate realist and antirealist commitments within the space created by acknowledgement of the contextualizing principle; and in any case, the usefulness of pluralism in clarifying and advancing realism-antirealism disputes will be central here.

Since the emergence of alethic pluralism, another form of pluralism has found its place on the contemporary metaphysics scene: pluralism about existence. Whereas alethic pluralism is the thesis, approximately speaking, that there’s more than one way for a statement to be true, ontological pluralism is the thesis that there’s more than one way for an entity to exist, or that there are multiple legitimate meanings to the existential quantifier. The current attention being given to the prospects for ontological pluralism is due in large part to the exertions of Eli Hirsch and Kris

\textsuperscript{114} Besides Wright, another instrumental figure in the growth of alethic pluralism as a topic of inquiry in its own right is Michael Lynch, especially his (2001) and (2009). A recent attestation of the condition of the literature is the collection in Pedersen and Wright (2013a). Pedersen (2012) summarizes the topic’s recent developments.
McDaniel\textsuperscript{115}, each of whom is concerned (albeit with different agendas in mind) to distinguish between those existence claims which are in some way metaphysically privileged, or which ‘carve nature at its joints,’ and those existence claims which don’t. The ‘joints’ in the foregoing metaphor are meant to correspond with categories—properties, classes, kinds—that really hold good as those very categories independent of the vicissitudes of our conceptual schemes; they’re metaphysically privileged, or so the thought goes, in that their grouping precedes our taxonomic endeavors. To discriminate among existence statements in this manner is therefore to take a stand (or at least to furnish a set of conceptual resources for taking a stand) on what’s fully real, and so to deploy a means of characterizing the realism-antirealism distinction.

In spite of its origins, the applicability of ontological pluralism in marking the difference between realist and antirealist commitments has not received direct and thorough treatment. The aim of the present chapter is to fill that vacancy: to supply a framework for making sense of realism and antirealism on the terms of ontological pluralism. The framework will be patterned after Wright’s presentation of his minimalist approach to truth and (the possibility of) alethic pluralism in \textit{Truth and Objectivity}. In fact, it soon becomes apparent that granting latitude to a pluralism concerning existence, such that the separation between realism and antirealism about some discourse becomes a matter of the \textit{kind of existence} possessed by the objects populating it, is simply a natural extension of that project. The appropriate resources and motivations are, as it were, already latent in the minimalist enterprise as Wright portrays it. One predominant motivation—both for Wright and for the present undertaking—is to clear some common ground for the staging and prosecution of debates between realists and antirealists. Minimalism holds that truth and

\textsuperscript{115} Most contemporary contributors to the literature on ontological pluralism refer back to Hirsch (2002) and (2005), but the first round of sustained defenses of and reactions against pluralistic approaches to ontology was Chalmers et al (2009). See also McDaniel (2010) and (2013), and Turner (2012).
existence per se are neither realist nor antirealist notions, and the minimalist thus seeks to articulate a metaphysically neutral framework capable of querying, with more precision, the particular traits that make particular kinds of truth and existence realist or antirealist. As the minimalist sees it, having a neutral framework lends focus and transparency to the question of realism concerning a given subject matter.

The chapter takes the following course. Section 2 explains Wright’s minimalism, the route from minimalism about truth to alethic pluralism, and the relationship between alethic pluralism and the realism-antirealism distinction. In section 3 I sketch a corresponding minimalist framework for existence. Section 4 argues that a number of ontological debates currently prominent in Anglo-American metaphysics are readily subsumed under the minimalist paradigm. I consider some objections and conclude in section 5.

2. Minimalism, Alethic Pluralism, and the Realism-Antirealism Distinction

Wright gives the name ‘minimalism’ to his position because it holds that a given discourse needs to meet only minimal standards in order to count as being populated with truths. The first half of minimalism’s central thesis is that what’s essential to the concept of truth is a set of platitudes: that “P” is true if and only if P, that to assert a statement is to present it as true, that truth-apt statements have truth-apt negations, that true statements portray things as they are, and so on. The articulation of platitudes like these equips us with what Wright calls an analytical theory of truth—that is, a theory detailing a network of conceptual entailments among statements which describe the nature of truth.\(^\text{116}\) The idea is that once we have the analytical theory of \(x\) in view,
we’ve thereby fixed on what it is, conceptually, for something to be x. On Wright’s approach, then, any property satisfying the alethic platitudes is thus worth regarding as a truth property; and granting this space, at least in principle, for the ‘multiple realizability’ of the concept of truth is precisely what makes the minimalist framework agreeable to pluralism about truth. The second half of minimalism’s central thesis is that a discourse should be considered assertoric just in case it admits of the usual truth-functional syntax (so permitting negation, conditionals, etc.) and exhibits rudimentary discipline, so that its assertions are subject to communal standards of warrant. Then the discourse will be truth-apt at least in the sense that it permits definition of a predicate complying with the platitudes that encapsulate our concept of truth. And this is all it takes to establish, first, that a discourse traffics in truth-apt contents, and second—insofar as some of the discourse’s native statements abide by its internal norms of correct assertion—that some of the discourse’s characteristic statements are indeed true.

Then the question of realism and antirealism with regard to a given discourse is the question whether the discourse is governed by truth only in this minimal sense, or whether its truth property—in addition to satisfying the platitudes and complying with the constraints of syntax and discipline—enjoys further features which constitute (something like) representation of an external reality. It’s these further features, which Wright calls ‘cruces,’ that give content to the adoption of a realist stance concerning the subject matter in question. The cruces to which Wright directs his attention in Truth and Objectivity are i) whether it’s a priori that conflicts of opinion within the

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117 Lynch (2001) expands this idea into what he calls a functionalist account of truth: the relevant platitudes serve to specify the functional role that the truth concept plays, such that any concept playing that role in a domain of discourse is thereby a truth concept for that discourse. Wright doesn’t speak in quite these terms, but the connection with functionalism helps to clarify the relationship between the platitudes as such and their instantiation in a particular discourse.
discourse, given the same informational input, must involve some form of cognitive shortcoming (Cognitive Command); ii) whether best opinion in the discourse tracks or else constitutes truth in the discourse (Euthyphro Contrast); iii) how much explanatory power the truths of a discourse have beyond their ability to explain our beliefs concerning them (Width of Cosmological Role); and iv) whether the truths of the discourse are, in principle, true independent of our recognition of their truth (Evidence Transcendence). Each of these is an attempt to spell out a respect in which the truths of a subject matter might be, to put it intuitively and naively, mind-independent. In the terms laid out in the previous chapter, Wright’s approach is therefore to say that participants in realism-antirealism disputes ought to take the existence dimension of realism for granted and focus their efforts on the independence dimension instead. What’s at issue shouldn’t be whether things are the way they’re professed to be by the discourse in question, or whether the statements belonging to the discourse genuinely profess things to be a particular way (as the noncognitivist will be concerned to deny); what’s at issue should be—if we may indulge in a dichotomy for sake of illustration—whether the surest statements of the discourse hold good as a matter of representation of a self-standing reality, or whether they hold good only as a matter of the projection of our thought onto the world. If the cruces can be decided in favor of the independence dimension, we have something akin to representation; if not, we have something more like projection.

118 Some terminological misunderstanding is possible here. The existence dimension of realism, as explained in the previous chapter, shouldn’t be confused with the metaphysical notion of existence, a minimalist framework for which is given in this essay. To accept the existence dimension with regard to a discourse is just to hold that things are approximately the way (convergent opinion in) the discourse portrays them to be. (And then the realist maintains in addition that things are that way independently of our thought and talk—the independence dimension.) As I see it, the existence dimension of realism has no necessary connection with the metaphysical notion of existence. When I intend to refer to the existence dimension of realism, rather than the rudimentary and general concept of existence, I’ll always use the full phrase ‘existence dimension.’
Accordingly, by shifting the debate away from whether a discourse admits of truth at all and toward the particular kind of truth it has—most fundamentally, whether its truth is representational (thus realist) or merely projective (thus antirealist)—Wright excludes two traditional antirealist paradigms from the debate from the start: namely, the two that challenge the existence dimension of realism. The first of these is noncognitivism, which denies that the discourse is truth-apt at all, and the second is error theory, which acknowledges that the discourse is truth-apt but denies that any of its characteristic (positive) assertions are true. For present purposes, the key maneuver here is just this: on Wright’s reconception of the realism-antirealism debate, what’s at stake isn’t truth as such; rather, truth as such is abundant, having to meet only the minimalist standard, and what’s at stake between realists and antirealists is the particular way in which a given discourse’s truths are true. What I want to suggest is that a parallel conception of existence—a ‘minimalist’ conception, following Wright—could usefully reconfigure some familiar ontological debates. Namely, we should say that what’s at stake isn’t the existence of a disputed class of entities as such; rather, existence as such is abundant, and what’s at stake between realists and antirealists regarding that kind of entity is the particular way in which it exists: whether or not it can be said to exist in its own right, independently of our thought and talk.

But prior to addressing minimalism about existence, it’ll be useful to examine the manner in which minimalism about truth creates space for, and has indeed led to the development of, alethic pluralism—and how alethic pluralism connects back with its theoretical forerunner, the question of realism and antirealism.

Alethic pluralism must be considered in view of the history of the theory of truth, which has furnished the contemporary debate with a variety of candidate analyses of truth. The driving question is simple enough: what does it mean to say that a statement P is true? According to a
correspondence theory of truth, to call P true is to aver that P in some way corresponds with reality, or with the facts; according to a coherence theory of truth, “P is true” is to say that P belongs to a coherent, and presumably global, system of propositions; according to what might be called an ‘ideal justification’ theory of truth, P is true exactly when P would be believed by an ideally rational agent under optimal epistemic conditions of appraisal; and so on. One of the reasons an ensemble of theories of truth have been in the running is that, as has been traditionally recognized, each of these theories idiosyncratically seems better suited to accounting for truth in some discourses and less well suited to accounting for truth in others.\textsuperscript{119} For example, because it’s at least plausible that mind-independent reality includes ordinary physical objects as we conceive of them, the correspondence theory of truth seems to be a comfortable fit for explaining the truth of sentences about ordinary physical objects: the objects are ‘out there’ in such a way that the sentences have something—some external reality—to correspond with in a straightforward and intuitive way. On the other hand, because it’s somewhat less plausible that abstract entities like numbers exist in any objective sense, the correspondence theory seems less prepared to produce an account of mathematical truth; but because so much of the mathematical corpus rests on the notion of deductive proof, and thus the notion of logical consistency, the coherence theory is capable of yielding a crisp explanation of mathematical truth. The observation that different theories of truth are at their strongest in different subject matters has helped to motivate alethic pluralism, which sets aside the monistic orientation of the classical theories of truth and maintains instead that truth isn’t uniform across all domains. The alethic pluralist is thus at liberty to mix and match various accounts of truth according to their suitability for a given discourse. Rather than being constrained to, for instance, the correspondence theory alone, or the coherence theory alone,

\textsuperscript{119} The alethic pluralists have taken to calling this discrepancy ‘the scope problem.’ See, for instance, Pedersen and Wright (2013b).
the alethic pluralist can be eclectic: perhaps truth in *mathematics* is coherence, whereas truth in *physical science* consists in correspondence with the facts.

Of course, while such a distinction is helpful as an illustration, since it uses generally familiar philosophical ideas, and thereby connects the present topic with broader metaphysical tradition, it’s likely that identifying the realist’s conception of truth with the traditional notion of correspondence is needlessly specific. There can be little doubt of the close affinity between the correspondence theory of truth and the realist’s thesis that truth for a given class of statements involves portrayal of the way things objectively stand with regard to the relevant subject matter. Yet the realist may well prefer to abstain from certain other commitments carried by the correspondence theory on its standard interpretation—commitments concerning the precise nature of the relationship between statements and their corresponding facts. It’s presumable that, like the correspondence theorist in particular, the realist in general faces a potentially delicate semantic task: explaining how a piece of language can come to represent an aspect of non-linguistic reality. It’s just such a task that global semantic challenges to realism, in the style of Dummett and Putnam, take to be impossible to complete. But for sake of generality and neutrality, I won’t assume that the realist is invested in anything more definitive than that truth in the given discourse is recognition-transcendent in the sense canvassed in the preceding chapter. My aim isn’t to determine the extent to which recognition-transcendent truth coincides with truth-by-correspondence, and at any rate it seems to me that Wright’s realism-relevant cruces are likewise nonpartisan with respect to whether objective (that is, realist, recognition-transcendent) truth

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120 For instance, it has sometimes been raised as an objection against the correspondence theory of truth that it presupposes an ontology of facts with which true propositions can be taken to correspond. More broadly, one might take issue with the correspondence theory on the grounds that it implausibly requires truthmakers to have a linguistic structure, such that there can exist a kind of isomorphism between them and truthbearers. Whether or not it’s correct to suppose that the correspondence theory involves such commitments, we can avoid getting bogged down in the matter by aligning realism with a somewhat more general account of mind-independent truth.
entails correspondence as classically understood. Hereafter, realism about a discourse shall be associated with the doctrine that truth in the discourse is epistemically unconstrained—not necessarily with the doctrine that truth in the discourse consists in correspondence.

For Wright and other alethic pluralists, distinguishing among various forms of truth lays the groundwork for a principled separation of realist from antirealist perspectives on a given discourse. As an additional benefit, the distinction among various truth predicates enables the pluralist to account for truth in (ostensibly) assertoric contexts about which the pluralist does not wish to embrace a realist stance. The example of mathematical coherentism illustrates both of these points. Suppose we want to maintain, as is plausible, that the sorts of mathematical statements that are widely regarded as true really are true, but at the same time we don’t want to commit ourselves to the view that numbers and other mathematical entities really exist as abstract objects. Naturally, we find ourselves attracted to an account of the truth of mathematical statements which takes their truth to be epistemically constrained, like a coherentist account: true statements about mathematical entities are true in virtue of their systematic coherence with each other and with the rest of human knowledge. This is a way, or so the thought goes, to avoid admitting mathematical objects into our ontology without thereby denying the truth-aptness of mathematical language. And if we adopt alethic pluralism, we can also avoid the unwelcome implication that truth consists in coherence (or is otherwise epistemically constrained) across the board; we are free to hold that the truth of statements concerning everyday objects, for instance, which presumably are in our ontology, is epistemically unconstrained. Already our metaphysical predilections have begun to emerge: the reason we want statements about certain things to have recognition-transcendent truth and statements about other things to have epistemically constrained truth is that we want certain objects to appear in our ontology and others not to. Then the objects that appear in our ontology
are, more or less, the ones we take to be represented or referred to in discourses where truth is epistemically unconstrained. Alternatively, the motivation may be reversed: it may be that the reason we want some objects in our ontology but not others is that we have differing conceptions of the nature of truth in the discourses the objects belong to. But in any case, it’s on this basis that alethic pluralism has been regarded as a means of accommodating realist intuitions concerning one subject matter with antirealist intuitions concerning another, and therefore a means of establishing a tangible and systemic distinction between realism and antirealism. The standard interpretation is that the alethic pluralist is a realist with regard to those domains in which he takes truth to be recognition-transcendent—in the present example, the domain of ordinary physical objects—and an antirealist with regard to those domains in which he takes truth to be epistemically constrained.\textsuperscript{121} The connection is not difficult to grasp, for the notion that a given statement is true regardless of our appreciation of its truth is heavily laden with the connotation that there is, in some robust sense, a mind-independent reality. On this reading, then, the version of alethic pluralism just described seems committed to the position that physical entities are (partly) constitutive of reality while mathematical entities, in some important respect, are not. Crucially, however, it’s \textit{not} committed to the noncognitivist view, unattractive to most, that mathematical statements are neither true nor false, nor to the even less favored error-theoretic view that (positive, atomic) mathematical statements are just always false.

For the alethic pluralist, what establishes the connection between epistemically unconstrained truth and realism is the notion of reference, along with the concomitant notion of ontological commitment. According to Dummett’s semantic formulation of realism\textsuperscript{122}, the

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\item \textsuperscript{121} Pedersen (2014), for example, takes this line, and presumes that realist truth consists in correspondence with reality.
\item \textsuperscript{122} I repeat for reference: “the fundamental thesis of realism, [regarded as a semantic doctrine], is that we really do succeed in referring to external objects, existing independently of our knowledge of them, and that the statements
connection is easy to spell out: those discourses in which truth is epistemically unconstrained are precisely the discourses in which sentences are rendered true or false by the mind-independent state of the things they refer to. If the idea of representational truth is to be understood in a robustly metaphysical way, then I think there’s little doubt that reference must figure prominently in any putative analysis of the representation relation (although the notion of reference surely doesn’t exhaust the notion of representational truth). So if, in some discourse, we take our statements to be true in virtue of their accurate representation of how things are independent of our recognition, then at minimum we posit some sort of systematic link between the expressions of our language and things in the world. This, I take it, is simply part of the concept of linguistic representation. Rudimentarily, then, to espouse a theory of epistemically unconstrained truth for some discourse is to countenance some class of things—be they objects, processes, states of affairs, or whatever else—pertaining semantically to the given discourse. What follows is that a theory of recognition-transcendent truth, inasmuch as it involves representation of the world, brings along some form of reference, and reference brings along some form of ontological commitment. And to the extent that our ontology comprises the class of things we consider real, a theory of recognition-transcendent truth for some discourse entails realism with regard to that discourse—provided, at least, that we follow the gist of Dummett’s semantic formulation of realism. And it’s immediately apparent that the converse entailment also holds: on Dummett’s formulation, the realist supposes that her sentences are “rendered true or false by an objective reality the constitution of which is […] independent of [her] knowledge,” and it’s difficult to imagine what this ‘rendering’ could amount to if it doesn’t somehow involve a relationship of representation between the language used and the world.

we make about them carry a meaning of such a kind that they are rendered true or false by an objective reality the constitution of which is, again, independent of our knowledge.” (1982, 104.)
Before moving on to a minimalist framework for existence, it’s worth noting that, despite the shape that the discussion has taken so far, the form of Wright’s approach to truth and realism allows for the possibility that the distinction between realism and antirealism isn’t sharp or binary. Wright himself offers four realism-relevant cruces for the reader’s scrutiny, and one could easily take there to be still more (or, of course, fewer) without violating the spirit of minimalism. Given that there may in principle be numerous considerations each worth regarding individually as a crux of realist-antirealist contestation, the result could well be that a contested discourse merits a realistic verdict in some respects but not others. This means that the relationship between alethic pluralism and the realism-antirealism distinction is potentially more intricate than I’ve been indicating until now: the pluralist might be obliged to distinguish not simply between realist and antirealist (forms of) truth, but between various degrees to which, or respects in which, the truth pertaining to a discourse is realist or antirealist. Still, I take it that this complication leaves the key point unchanged: that the pluralist is able to discriminate among realistic and antirealistic commitments by discriminating among types of truth.

3. **Minimalism about Existence**

If we’re to follow Wright’s methodology, a minimalist treatment of existence must begin with an analytical theory of existence: a theory describing what’s essential to our concept of existence. The goal, by analogy with minimalism concerning truth, will be to fix upon platitudes expressing what it is to conceive of something as existing, or what’s involved in the affirmation of something’s existence. The concept of existence in the most general sense is, as far as it goes, only a lightweight notion; whether the things conceived as existing have any further metaphysical significance then depends on whether they exhibit any further realism-relevant features—which isn’t a merely conceptual question.
In keeping moreover with much of the recent metaontology literature, I see no better place to begin than from the existential quantifier, as specified in terms of its syntactical and inferential role. Perhaps the first blush can be this: to take something to exist, in the lightweight and thus abundant sense, is to regard it as properly falling within the range of an existential quantifier. Of course, this conception of existence presupposes a logical framework for dealing with objects and their properties, and indeed presupposes the whole edifice of first-order predicate calculus. In a logical context, the syntactical and inferential role of the existential quantifier is, given standard assumptions about its application, inseparable from predication in general. It’s also inseparable from the specification of a domain; and here the notion of a ‘domain of discourse’ can be interpreted in the most straightforward sense as referring to sets of objects subject to predication and quantification. It bears emphasis, however, that the minimalist begins from ‘thin,’ syntactical notions of ‘object,’ ‘property,’ ‘reference,’ and so forth. Although terms like these are often construed as having robustly semantic import, as denoting real entities and genuine relations between linguistic and nonlinguistic items, the minimalist leaves it an open question at this stage whether the ontology of an assertoric discourse is in any sense mind-independent. So while minimalism makes use of purportedly semantic concepts like reference and domain of discourse, it regards such concepts as being ultimately explicable in terms of syntax alone, and thus not necessarily involving anything beyond the structure of the discourse itself.

Such a conception of ontology echoes Wright’s own resurrection of a Fregean philosophy of mathematics. In particular, Wright’s neo-Fregeanism has granted a central role to what Wright calls the ‘syntactic priority thesis,’ which holds, in brief, that the ontology of a discourse is determined by its surface syntax. On Wright’s own formulation:

The lynch-pin of Frege’s platonism, according to our interpretation, is the syntactic priority thesis: the category of objects […] is to be explained as comprising
everything which might be referred to by a singular term, where it is understood that possession of reference is imposed on a singular term by its occurrence in true statements of an appropriate type.\(^{123}\)

Wright espouses the syntactic priority thesis with a specific view toward motivating a species of realism concerning mathematical objects. According to the realism in question, it’s sufficient for reference to mathematical objects, and thus for the existence of such objects, that there be true mathematical statements whose syntactical form involves substantives—singular terms—apt to make reference to such objects. Indeed, this sort of reference-aptitude is, for Wright, simply part of what makes a given lexical item a singular term. So if the expression of a mathematical relationship can be ‘nominalized’—as, in the case of Hume’s principle, the bijection between the Fs and the Gs can be nominalized into talk of the number of Fs and its identity with the number of Gs—then the grounds for countenancing the pertinent class of abstract objects has been attained. A mathematical ontology needs only a correct theory containing mathematical names.

Although Wright’s focus \textit{qua} neo-Fregean is on the metaphysics of mathematics, there’s no conspicuous reason why the syntactic priority thesis should be in force only within mathematical discourse. If our aim is to articulate a minimalist framework for existence, then we ought to regard the syntactic priority thesis as a perfectly general precept about the notion of objecthood (as Wright himself seems to intend), so that the ontology of any discourse whatever is given by the range of nominatives in the discourse’s syntax. But surely this is just another way of describing what the logician would label the ‘domain of discourse,’ the collection of individuals predicated of and quantified over by participants in the discourse. The common substance in the two ontologists’ outlooks is that the concept of existence—of being an entity—is intertwined with our practices of predication and quantification.

\(^{123}\) Wright (1983), 53.
It’s thus worth noting that the syntactic priority thesis, as Wright formulates it, is stronger than it needs to be. For in order to capture the insight that syntax determines domain of discourse, which then determines ontology, we needn’t look only to the singular terms figuring in true statements; it should be sufficient for reference, and thence for objecthood, that a lexical item operate as a singular term in meaningful statements. Irrespective of the truth or falsity of a given statement, its mere conformity with a discourse’s syntactical and disciplinary standards, perhaps along with its employment of concepts germane to that discourse (and all this is simply to say that it’s a legitimate statement within the discourse in question), will secure reference to elements of the discourse’s domain. Naturally, this isn’t to say that the syntactic priority thesis is mistaken or impoverished, since, for straightforward logical reasons, there can’t be a singular term capable of appearing in that role only in false statements124.

So the minimalist conception of existence, as so far developed, is roughly this: wherever we have a domain of discourse, or a subject matter, or a realm of things we talk and think about, there we have existence—that is, a collection of existents—at least in the lightweight sense, provided only that the inferential and syntactic role of quantification and predication conforms (by its own standards of correct assertion) with first-order predicate calculus.125 If that minimal(-ist) standard is met, then whatever functions as a substantive in our discourse, as a singular term liable

124 This is perhaps one of the underappreciated consequences of Wright’s decision to include, in his analytical theory of truth, the platitude that “any truth-apt content has a significant negation which is likewise truth-apt” (1992, 34.) If we’re guaranteed the preservation of truth-aptitude under negation, then the particular truth value of a statement has no bearing on the semantic status of the statement’s subsentential components—that is, it has no bearing on their meaning or reference relations. Thus the syntactic priority thesis ought, more strictly, to attach objectual reference to singular terms figuring in truth-apt (i.e., meaningful) statements, not necessarily in true statements.

125 A view kindred with this is developed by Amie Thomasson with respect to fictionalia (2001, 2003) and works of art (2005) and by Stephen Schiffer with respect to such ‘pleonastic’ entities as properties and propositions (2003). One might characterize the minimalist framework proposed here as, at least in some rudimentary sense, a complete generalization of Thomasson’s and Schiffer’s positions (along with Wright’s Neo-Fregeanism, of course).
to be predicated of, is in the business, at least in the lightweight sense, of denoting an object. That’s the core of our concept of existence, and so the centerpiece of our analytical theory of existence.

John Divers and Alexander Miller have argued that Wright’s minimalism “yields a conception of being which is at once too wide and too light to be acceptable.” The problem, as they see it, is that Wright’s Neo-Fregean argument for the existence of mathematical entities offers a template for an indiscriminate ontological explosion. Entities won so effortlessly, the thought goes, must have an ‘unbearable lightness’ to them.

Our concern is that Wright’s approach to ontological questions threatens to yield a commitment to an ‘allist’ ontology—i.e., to the existence of all such objects as may appear to constitute the subject matter of any discourse in which we indulge or could contrive. Certainly there is a large range of controversial objectual ontology which Wright is prepared to accept as the upshot of direct analogues of the argument to arithmetical platonism […] But many who may be prepared, in the spirit of minimalism, to accept the ontology of numbers […] may yet balk at further ontology which allism brings in its wake—ontology including impossibilia, possibilia, fictional objects, God(s) and private Cartesian mental objects. By analogy with Wright’s minimalist approach to the metaphysics of mathematics, the rationale for including all these things in one’s ontology, and much more besides, is straightforward: we engage in discourse concerning them which satisfies the minimal syntactic constraints required for truth-aptitude, and our discourse is moreover communally regulated in a way that distinguishes internally between correct and incorrect assertions about them. Fictional objects (Divers and Miller’s chosen example, but the point rightly generalizes) populate domains of discourse in the formal structure of some of our ways of thinking and speaking, and that fact seems sufficient, according to the minimalist theory of existence given here anyway, for ontological commitment to them, along with ontological commitment to—in a certain sense—everything else. As Divers

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127 Ibid., 130-131.
and Miller note, the minimalist can respond in one of two ways to the accusation of ‘allism’: she can embrace it, and perhaps attempt to stifle the explosion by emphasizing that the notion of existence thereby implicated is a lightweight one, or she can seek in a more traditional vein to distinguish syntactically or normatively between those discourses whose ontological commitments are genuine and those whose aren’t.

Divers and Miller are primarily concerned to defend their claim that the second of these responses isn’t a viable option for the minimalist. It seems to me that this much is quite correct; the minimalist’s grounds for affirming the existence of mathematical objects ought also to bring her to affirm the existence of fictional objects\(^{128}\), merely possible objects, and the rest, apparently without limit. In consequence, Divers and Miller conclude that the minimalist is unable to recover any semblance of what they call, following Lewis, some-but-only-someism—that is, an ontological stance that discriminates, as presumably anyone should want to, between what there is and what there isn’t. Having thus excluded any alternative to allism for the minimalist, Divers and Miller briefly consider the fate of the minimalist who accepts the ontological implications of minimalism about fictional as well as mathematical discourse:

[T]o embrace standards of ontological commitment which are acknowledged to give rise to allism—or acknowledged even to give rise to some approximation of that position which makes room for the existence of Holmes and Hamlet, as well as for the existence of numbers—is to embrace standards which threaten a quietism about ontological questions.\(^{129}\)

\(^{128}\) Fictional objects present an apt example. There’s a sense in which it’s (publicly, intersubjectively) correct to say that Superman has X-ray vision and incorrect to say that Batman does, and furthermore the syntactical properties of the two assertions are entirely pedestrian. Maybe some philosophers of language or metaphysicians would want to point out important linguistic differences between statements like these and nonfictional statements—differences that lie deeper than the statements’ surface syntax—but it seems that the minimalist in particular has no leg to stand on in that respect. If the same criteria yield that numbers exist, then surely Superman and Batman (and X-ray vision) exist as well.

\(^{129}\) Divers and Miller, op. cit., 136.
But this assessment of the minimalist’s metaphysical outlook is needlessly terse. Perhaps it’s fair enough to charge the minimalist with quietism if she advances no further provision for regaining a kind of basic metaphysical distinction that seems to have been lost—a distinction between what we discover out there in a world not of our making, on the one hand, and what has its basis only in the inventive exercise of our conceptual capacities on the other. Surely, among the minimalist’s endless existential commitments, she would do well to differentiate the mind-independent from the mind-dependent entities, or the representational from the projective forms of discourse; and to the extent that she declines to do so, she does appear to have opted out of entire swaths of metaphysical inquiry.

Wright’s theory of truth would likewise be susceptible to accusations of quietism if it consisted in nothing more than his analytical theory of truth—the alethic platitudes—plus his minimalism concerning truth-aptitude of a discourse. Such a meager account would certainly leave untouched a number of central questions about the nature of truth and its relationship with other topics in metaphysics. What confers gravitas on an otherwise ‘unbearably light’ form of truth, however, is Wright’s notion of a realism-relevant crux. It’s by acknowledging that the truths belonging to certain privileged discourses might be more than just minimally true—and may additionally deal in representations of reality—that Wright provides for the traditional distinction, typically central to realism-antirealism debates, between objectivity and subjectivity. After all, the purpose of bringing in the realism-relevant cruces is to supply, as it were, a battery of tests—a crucible—that distills those truths with the marks of objectivity from the cheaply gotten, merely minimal truths which are, as the case may be, too lightweight to have any metaphysical significance. So I agree with Divers and Miller that minimalism concerning truth and truth-aptitude is properly extended, when combined with a logical-syntactical conception of ontological
commitment, to encompass minimalism concerning existence as well. And I agree that a remarkably abundant conception of existence follows. Divers and Miller are mistaken, however, in supposing that the minimalist must thereafter abandon the sorts of questions, concepts, and distinctions that have traditionally occupied metaphysicians. What the minimalist about existence needs, in order to remain in good standing with the tradition, is a realism-relevant crucible that contrasts the merely minimal existents from their more objective counterparts. Thereby, ontological disputes which have been regarded as a matter of whether some class of entity exists simpliciter can be recast as disputes over the kind of existence the entities enjoy. If we have reason to believe that the subject matter of a given discourse possesses realism-relevant features in addition to its minimal syntactic and assertoric-normative status, then to that extent we have reason to believe that the subject matter comprises objects in a robust, metaphysically heavyweight sense. We’re thus obliged to distinguish between what exists per se and what’s real.130 And my claim is that this distinction, between existence that’s only minimal and existence that’s more robust, entitles the minimalist to the some-but-only-someism that Divers and Miller think she can’t have. Some, but only some, things exist in a more than minimal way, and this distinction gives us everything we need to escape allism in any sense worth worrying about.

4. Cruces for Existence: Some Examples from the Literature

It remains to be explained what we should regard as suitable realism-relevant cruces pertaining to existence. How, that is, should we grant content to the idea that some sorts of things have, to put it loosely, a mind-independent way of existing? One criterion of objectivity that looms

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130 Cf. Fine (2001), (2009), who likewise separates the straightforward ‘quantificational’ question of what there is, in Quine’s sense, from the much less straightforward metaphysical question of what’s real. Although there’s an obvious kinship between Fine’s metaontological orientation and the minimalist thesis developed here, I don’t wish to endorse Fine’s particular analysis of what it is for something to be real.
large in the recent metaontology literature, deriving from the Lewisian tradition, is *naturalness*. Some ways of describing reality, so the thought goes, are more ‘natural’ than others in that they do a better job of carving the world at its joints, or of drawing distinctions and positing categories that are objective features of the world. Lewis and his followers have appealed to the notion of naturalness as a defense against the antirealist contention that descriptively equivalent statements, no matter how arbitrary or gerrymandered the concepts belonging to them, are on a theoretical par. An antirealist of this latter stripe maintains that although there may be *pragmatic* reasons favoring one conceptual scheme over another—ease of communication, force of habit, logical transparency, etc.—there’s no further sense in which one empirically adequate theory can be superior to another. Here the Lewisian realist rejoins that even if two theories account for the phenomena equally well, in some sheer operational sense, it’s still possible for one theory to be better than the other on the grounds that it employs more natural concepts—concepts that come closer to carving at the world’s mind-independent joints.

The notion of naturalness might be variously applied, perhaps with more or less interchangeable results, to predicates, quantifiers, or languages taken as wholes, but one prominent strain of thought has associated a realistic stance in metaphysics with the doctrine that some or other existential quantifier (and not necessarily one that sees use in everyday language) is perfectly natural. If such a quantifier can be singled out, then whatever singular terms fall within its scope—

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131 Lewis (1983) is a *locus classicus* of the sort of theoretical role that Lewis envisions for naturalness. Incidentally, at 344 ff. Lewis seems to construe the naturalness of properties as something structurally analogous with Wright’s idea of the realism-relevant crux: whereas he recognizes an extensional sense in which properties are abundant, with one property corresponding to every class of objects whatsoever, Lewis also recognizes that some properties have the additional characteristic of naturalness, and are thus sparse and metaphysically elite. By disanalogy, however, he doesn’t appear to hold that the *merely* abundant properties are mind-dependent or unreal in any conventional sense.

132 This thesis is often associated with Nelson Goodman, and the notions of ‘grue’ and ‘bleen,’ coined in his (1983), offer a notorious example, in the minds of Lewisian realists, of why something like the criterion of naturalness is needed in the assessment of theories.
in true statements having that quantifier as its main operator—refer to the entities which most fundamentally and objectively exist. Ted Sider, for instance, follows this course; he explicitly connects realism with whether a given existential quantifier has a natural meaning in this sense:

The central question of metaontology is that of whether there are many equally good quantifier meanings, or whether there is a single best quantifier meaning. It is a question about nature’s joints; it is a question of how much quantification structure the world contains. [...] I think there is indeed a single best quantifier meaning, a single inferentially adequate candidate meaning that (so far as the quantifiers are concerned) carves nature at the joints. That is: I accept ontological realism.\(^{133}\)

Sider here speaks more generally than the metaphysician interested especially in the existence of abstract objects or fictional objects, for example, might wish, but it’s plausible that we can arrive at a corresponding realism-antirealism distinction for a particular domain simply by restricting the scope of Sider’s formulation. So construed, the particular application isn’t difficult to draw out: to be a realist concerning abstract objects is to hold that (some) true existence claims countenancing abstract objects employ the quantifier with an altogether natural meaning, so that abstract objects comprise part of the ‘distinguished structure’ of the world—mutatis mutandis for fictional objects, mathematical objects, or any other class of objects whose reality might be in question.\(^{134}\)

Sider, however, doesn’t profess to be an ontological pluralist; his position holds that there’s just one maximally privileged, because perfectly joint-carving, existential quantifier. Naturalness, on this type of view, exhibits a kind of uniformity: a single quantifier expression is suitable for describing the way the world most fundamentally is, and for doing so in a way that exemplifies

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\(^{133}\) Sider (2009), 397. Emphasis in original. Sider (2011) is a further major development of Sider’s endeavor to ground metaontological realism in the Lewisian conception of naturalness.

\(^{134}\) Sider (2011), Ch. 6, however, makes the case that the concept of naturalness ought to be generalized so that it pertains not only to the existential quantifier, and not only to predicates as in Lewis’ own theory, but moreover to expressions of any grammatical category. Most broadly, naturalness, or joint-carving, is potentially a feature of languages in their entirety. (Of course, this isn’t to say that naturalness is merely a matter of language; the naturalness or unnaturalness of a language, as Sider tells it, is determined by the objective characteristics of the world it describes.)
unadulterated naturalness. In principle, though, one could take there to be more than one realism-relevant way in which existence can consist in something beyond the lightweight notion countenanced by the minimalist. A possible view is that there are multiple natural, and thus realism-implicating, readings of the quantifier such that none is reducible to any others or eliminable in favor of the others. Such a position would be a form of ontological pluralism, and furthermore a form that adopts a realism-relevant crux from Lewisian metaphysics.

Kris McDaniel, who professes ontological pluralism and who has become a pioneer of the doctrine within the Anglo-American tradition, takes a view along just these lines, sketching a position according to which the various kinds of existence correspond with various metaphysically privileged existential quantifiers. Those quantifier expressions, on his view, correspond with disparate ‘ways of being.’ Some care must be taken here, though, since McDaniel recognizes that there are degrees of metaphysical privilege—degrees to which an expression succeeds in carving reality at the joints. It’s thus possible that some expressions are relatively metaphysically privileged (maybe the ever-sharpening conceptual repertoire of the sciences, for instance) without being absolutely metaphysically privileged, or without being maximally natural. For McDaniel, ontological pluralism requires not simply the acknowledgement that there are multiple relatively privileged quantifier expressions; that much is hardly contestable for anyone who’s willing to take on the notion of naturalness. His suggestion, instead, is that “one believes in ways of being [i.e., ontological pluralism] just in case one believes that there is more than one fundamental [i.e., completely natural] quantifier expression.”

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136 Ibid., 314. Emphasis mine.
This formulation of ontological pluralism enables McDaniel to rebut a particular monistic objection: that what he regards as distinct ways of being are actually just restricted versions of a solitary, utterly unrestricted quantifier expression that comprehends everything encompassed by the purported multiple ways of being. Yet, as McDaniel then replies, if the latter were arrived at by restriction of some more general quantifier expression, then they wouldn’t be completely natural. For McDaniel maintains that one of the central features of completely natural quantifier expressions is that they’re semantically primitive: although alternative quantifier expressions can well be legitimate, these further expressions are derivative in meaning from the fundamental expressions, and therefore aren’t fully natural in themselves. So even if some existential quantifier is indeed perfectly general (and presumably the minimalist about existence needs to hold that we do have some generic concept of existence: the one specified by the analytical theory of existence, which spans all discourses), and even if the perfectly general quantifier is also perfectly natural, the ontological pluralist—by McDaniel’s definition—can’t allow that other basic modes of existence are mere restrictions of it.

By contrast with both Sider and McDaniel, Eli Hirsch is an ontological pluralist who, at least with regard to present purposes, adopts what may be considered, if generalized, a global antirealist stance: although he avers that the quantifier admits of multiple (relevantly existential) meanings—a phenomenon he calls ‘quantifier variance’—he denies that any of its meanings is metaphysically privileged, or gets at the intrinsic structure of reality. Hirsch takes as one of his

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137 Hirsch (2002). It should be noted that Hirsch goes to great lengths to argue that he’s not what he terms a ‘linguistic idealist’; his position is that the world is how it is independently of our linguistic or conceptual practices (52 ff.). At the same time, he’s clearly an antirealist in the sense that Sider repudiates ontological antirealism with his appeal to naturalness. That is, Hirsch rejects a realistic stance toward the project of ontological theorizing itself, for he denies that reality contains any joints that are ready-made for an optimized language. On the other hand, one might interpret Hirsch as rejecting the crux of naturalness while accepting some other crux—perhaps something more basic, like recognition-transcendence—that substantiates his claim to be a kind of realist.
primary examples the debate between mereologists and anti-mereologists. In this context, the mereologist is one who holds that any two objects compose a further object, regardless of whether those two objects are spatially or temporally contiguous, while the anti-mereologist is one who takes the everyday view that sets of objects compose further objects only under much more specific conditions. Thus, as in Hirsch’s illustration, the mereologist will affirm the statement “There exists some object composed of the Eiffel Tower and Bill Clinton’s nose,” whereas the anti-mereologist will deny it. Both the mereologist and the anti-mereologist agree that the Eiffel Tower and Clinton’s nose are existent objects, and agree otherwise with respect to all the physical facts, but they disagree on what ‘there exists’ means: the mereologist interprets ‘there exists’ in a way that renders the statement true, while the anti-mereologist gives a differing interpretation that renders the statement false. Thus the existential quantifier is variable in its use, and what things we take to exist depends on how we understand and employ it; put another way, the notion of existence, or the notion of ‘object’ or ‘entity’ (that is, ‘existing thing’) is subject to a variety of interpretations, each of which yields its own ontology potentially incompatible with the ontologies of competing interpretations.

And it’s just here that Hirsch demurs from the criterion of naturalness: if there were an interpretation of the existential quantifier that carved nature at its joints, then the dispute between the mereologist and the anti-mereologist could in principle be settled rather easily—the winner is the party (if either) whose use of ‘exists’ accords with the natural quantifier. Hirsch’s contention, however, is that no assignment of truth conditions to the existential quantifier yields a ‘metaphysically privileged’ sense of ‘exists.’ To the extent that an ontological dispute is treated as a contest among quantifier interpretations for recognition as the interpretation that uniquely gets to the bottom of things, or the interpretation that alone expresses what ‘really’ exists, the nature of
ontological disputes has, according to Hirsch, been fundamentally misconceived. If such disputes are going to be decided at all, they won’t be decided by how objectively correct the rival interpretations of the quantifier are. Indeed, because no interpretation of the quantifier is inherently any more correct than another, there could be any number of legitimate senses of ‘exists.’ Hirsch thus exemplifies a limit case of minimalism about existence in that he holds that existence is merely minimal across the board, in all domains of discourse. True existence claims, on his view, are only ever projections of our syntactical and conceptual practices onto the world, and never genuine representations of categories or entities that are out there in the world anyway. Nonetheless, in expressing his stance as the view that no quantifier meaning is metaphysically privileged, he seems to agree with Sider and McDaniel that naturalness is a realism-relevant crux—or that something akin to it would be, were it an acceptable notion.

A second candidate for a realism-relevant crux from recent metaphysics is the notion of ground. An account of grounding relationships is likely to have a close affinity with an account of naturalness, and perhaps the metaphysician whose theorizing employs one of the two notions—naturalness or grounding—will take herself to be thereby implicated in the other by an innocuous exchange of terminology. But it’s still worth taking separate note of the prominence of grounding in the contemporary metaphysician’s conceptual inventory. A salient example is Kit Fine\textsuperscript{138}, who expressly identifies realism about $x$, or ascription of the property reality to $x$, with the determination that $x$ is metaphysically basic, not being grounded in anything further. In Fine’s vocabulary, that which has no further metaphysical basis is what’s fundamental, and the sum of what’s real just is the sum of what’s fundamental. This isn’t to say that everything existent is fundamental, however, for Fine distinguishes, as I do here, between what exists and what’s real.

\textsuperscript{138} Fine (2001).
Some things, for instance, can properly be said to exist, but their existence is grounded in—that is, reducible to—the existence of something else, and this chain of grounding will eventually lead back to the fundamental, where it ends.

Similarly, Jonathan Schaffer argues that the focus of metaphysics ought to be not what there is, but what grounds what. Schaffer envisions grounding (in keeping with philosophical consensus, I take it) as an irreflexive, asymmetric, and transitive relation, and thus as a partial ordering of the world’s constituents—what Schaffer calls ‘the great chain of being.’ Presumably, there are a few different ways, all reasonable, in which someone concerned to distinguish realism from antirealism in ontology might seek to apply the image of an ordering. A first question is whether to characterize as ‘real’ only what has no predecessor in the chain of being, as in Fine’s terminology, or whether instead to countenance degrees of reality, determined by relative location in the chain, in the same way that a Lewisian may opt to speak of degrees of naturalness. In the latter case, the thesis will be that an entity in the chain of being is more real than its successor (that is, what it grounds) and less real than its predecessor (that is, what grounds it). Another question is whether to characterize as real every entity that has no predecessor in the chain, or whether instead to say that only fundamental entities of a particular sort are real—or real in the fullest sense, if reality admits of gradation. On Schaffer’s formulation, the grounding relation isn’t total, with the result that there might be entities $x$ and $y$ such that neither grounds the other and no entity is a common ground of both. Thus it might not be the case that all grounding relationships can be traced back to a single ultimate ground, and it might even be the case that

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139 Schaffer (2009).
140 Ibid., 376.
141 And note that, due to the transitivity of the grounding relation, this is to say that $x$ is absent from the entire set of predecessors of $y$, and vice versa, not merely that neither is the immediate ground of the other.
142 Schaffer’s own view, however, is that they can, and that the single ultimate ground is the world as a totality—see Schaffer (2010).
‘the chain of being’ is actually a group of unconnected chains, so that some pairs of fundamental entities have no successors in common. Surely this is a desirable consequence: regardless of the positive stance we advocate, our conception of grounding should leave space for the possibility that some realms of fact—the ethical or the semantic, perhaps—are metaphysically *sui generis*. Nevertheless, the grounding theorist may wish to hold that fundamental entities aren’t all on a par—that some are more constitutive of reality than others, or something along such lines. So even if moral facts, for instance, are indeed *sui generis* and have no grounding in any further facts, one might still want to say that the moral is less real than the physical or the mathematical, perhaps because moral facts are ‘high-level’ facts in comparison with the ‘low-level’ facts of physics or of the formal sciences. (Of course, someone who took this kind of view would need to provide some explanation of ‘levels’ of facts that doesn’t simply fall back on the notion of grounding, or else make out the important distinction between some classes of fact and others in an entirely different way, rather than by appeal to the notion of level.) Arguably, though, to adopt a position like this would be to countenance more than one realism-relevant crux: realism and antirealism aren’t *only* a matter of one’s account of what grounds what, but also have to do with one’s account of the levels into which the world divides, or whatever else is supposed to distinguish crucially between some classes of fundamental entity and others.

Naturalness and fundamentality, then, construed as realism-relevant cruces, are attempts to straightforwardly explicate a respect in which something’s existence might be epistemically unconstrained, or independent of our cognitive activity. But it’s worth discussing another, perhaps less direct, realism-relevant feature that’s been of traditional importance in ontological debates, and which will probably at least lurk in the background of any attempt to distinguish between the ‘level’ that, say, physical facts occupy and the one that, say, moral facts occupy (according, at
least, to some familiar ways of thinking about their relationship). This crux carries forward virtually unchanged from Wright’s minimalist framework: what he calls *Width of Cosmological Role*. On Wright’s account, ‘cosmological role’ serves as a measure of the explanatory potency of a disputed class of truths; if a class of truths is sufficiently potent in this respect, the thought goes, then that gives us reason to suppose that they depict self-standing states of affairs, and are therefore not simply minimal.\textsuperscript{143} Likewise, as pertains to existence, a longstanding touchstone for realism regarding a class of entities has been the extent to which those entities figure essentially in explanations of other sorts of phenomena. Thus, to take a particularly famous case, the Quine-Putnam indispensability argument for the existence of mathematical entities appeals to the basic and far-reaching theoretical role that mathematics plays in the sciences (and maybe elsewhere), contending that such a wide cosmological role is grounds for realism about mathematics.\textsuperscript{144} On the other hand, the traditional importance of cosmological role is also demonstrated negatively by the great attention that’s been given to prospects for *reductionism*. The basic motivation appears to be this: to show that one domain of discourse is reducible to another is to show that it (the reduced domain) has no cosmological role in its own right—that it is, after all, dispensable—and thus anyone seeking to avoid realism with regard to that domain has a shot at doing so via theoretical reduction. If the reduction is successful, then perhaps the verdict is that a given context of predication and quantification yields existence only in the lightweight sense.

\textsuperscript{143} One who sympathizes with global skepticism will probably want to deny that the centrality of a class of truths in our worldview gives any indication of their agreement with objective reality. If global skepticism is a live possibility, then it might be that even our most fundamental, most pragmatic, or most informative theoretical posits are only accidentally in accord with external reality—if they are at all. So I take it that Wright tacitly envisages *Width of Cosmological Role* in a conditional form: *provided that* we have some means of achieving knowledge of the external world, it’s our most explanatory theories that have the best chance of affording such knowledge or of approximating the objective facts.

\textsuperscript{144} See, *inter alia*, Quine (1981) and Putnam (1975).
It’s worth noting in this connection that the minimalist’s treatment of cosmological role, should it assume the form just outlined, is in some ways a reversal of what’s commonly taken to be the Quinean method in ontology. According to the usual interpretation of Quine, ontology must be prefaced by a process of culling away inferior theories and modes of discourse, and only thereafter, once we have only our best theories in view, are we permitted to read our ontology off of their logical syntax. To take this route is to sidestep the distinction between heavyweight and lightweight notions of existence: our ontology contains just what we, upon reflection, most wholeheartedly and scrupulously take the world to consist of. On the other hand, the minimalist puts the logical-syntactical conception of existence into action right at the start, and then marks a crucial distinction between heavyweight and lightweight ontology. Of course, once that distinction is brought aboard, it’s then open to the minimalist to appropriate for her own ends whatever criteria the traditional Quinean employs in determining which are our best theories; those criteria can naturally be put into the service of separating the theories with heavyweight ontological significance from those with lightweight ontological significance. The parity that emerges is this: while the minimalist and the traditional Quinean ontologist follow different (because, at least, differently ordered) procedures, they arrive at more or less the same result, provided simply that the Quinean ontologist’s criteria of theory choice figure in the minimalist’s account as realism-relevant cruces. This is the preeminent point of contrast, as I see it, between the minimalist’s approach to ontology and the mainline approach deriving from the Quinean tradition.

So I submit that putative examples of realism-relevant cruces for existence are already present in the contemporary literature and in the history of Anglophone metaphysics. They haven’t quite been described in the terminology of the account given here, but once we examine them with the notion of a crux in mind, their reifying function is unmistakable. It should be noted that I
present these only as examples; one might opt instead for an entirely different set of cruces in accordance with one’s other theoretical commitments, or one might even take the pessimistic view that there’s no such thing as even evidence of something’s existing in a realist way—that there can be no recognizable indication of objectivity. All these kinds of stances are perfectly within the bounds of minimalism about existence. My intention has only been to give a general indication of the form that the minimalist framework takes, and the framework’s merits are independent of which realism-relevant cruces, if any, can be shown to be epistemologically sensible.

5. Assessing Minimalism: Merits and Objections

The foregoing has extended Wright’s minimalist account of truth and truth-aptitude to incorporate existence, explained the connection between minimalism concerning existence and the realism-antirealism distinction, and pointed out some respects in which contemporary and recent metaphysicians are—in fact though not in name—paying heed to realism-relevant cruces in their work. It remains to discuss more broadly the ramifications of and potential objections to a conception of existence as abundant; both of those ends will be served, or so I intend, by an appraisal of the relationship between a minimalist theory of existence and some traditional philosophical problems.

A particular advantage of the minimalist framework, as I see it, is that it bypasses a host of linguistic problems that have long beleaguered philosophers. One prominent example is the chronic concern over semantic reduction; many have found cause to worry that a particular discourse is illegitimate if it contains terms we don’t want to construe realistically and if we can’t show how to express the corresponding meanings in more acceptable, perhaps reductionist, vocabulary. As a result, many theorists have sought to demonstrate that the discourse in question can—or could, in principle—be carried on without making use of whatever the troublesome
expressions are taken to be, or else to exclude the discourse from playing any role in a strict and literal account of the world. Some have held that sentences containing intensional or normative locutions, for instance, must either submit to semantic reduction of some kind or be expunged from our best theories. An especially famous instance of this difficulty is the problem of nominalistic paraphrase: those who don’t wish to countenance abstracta find themselves obligated, challenging as it may be, to reformulate their theories without mentioning anything abstract. In some restricted cases, such a project is relatively straightforward, but it’s hardly controversial to remark that the total elimination of reference to abstract objects from comprehensive theories of the world has proved elusive. A further linguistic problem is that posed by empty reference: according to certain traditional (and still popular) understandings of meaning and reference, it’s not clear how there can be meaningful statements some of whose terms don’t refer to anything in reality. A particularly vexing instance of this difficulty is the problem of singular nonexistence claims: there seem to be many statements of the form “x does not exist,” where ‘x’ purports—at least in virtue of its grammatical role—to name some specific individual, such that the statements are both meaningful and incontrovertibly correct. But on the usual first-order regimentation, there can be no singular nonexistence claims; they’re barred not merely from being true but from being well-formed at all.

What these linguistic difficulties have in common is an insistence that sentences be translated into (something approximating) an ideal language—one enshrining a certain favored logic and semantics—before they can be gauged for their philosophical (or otherwise) significance. The complication is that there’s sometimes little coincidence between everyday linguistic practice, from which the assorted discourses emerge, and whatever the ideal language is supposed to be; so deciding how to render diverse classes of statements into ‘canonical form’ poses a number of challenges.
I don’t contend that these problems are fatal for theorists against whom they weigh. To the contrary, a great deal of commendable philosophical effort has been expended in attempts to overcome them, and some of that effort may even have been successful. Moreover, many of these linguistic concerns are, or are intimately connected with, philosophical topics that are worth investigation in their own right, quite independently of their bearing on the metaphysical and conceptual issues that are in focus here. Still, although more and less helpful solutions have been offered, it’s dialectically undesirable that these linguistic problems should need solving before any pertinent questions about realism and antirealism can be pursued.

There’s another traditional problem which is easily addressed and set aside on the current proposal: what Thomas Hofweber calls the ‘puzzle of ontology.’ The puzzle is familiar: it seems that ontological questions, understood quantificationally, are too easily answered. For a standard example, it’s a facile result from number theory that there are prime numbers, odd numbers, rational numbers—from which it appears to follow a fortiori that there are numbers. Yet the metaphysician who asks whether there are numbers seems to be trying to ask a deeper question than whether mathematicians quantify over numbers in their theories, a question properly answered by philosophy and not simply by mathematics. If existence, or taking to exist, is identified with quantification, however, it becomes difficult to state exactly what the metaphysician is after; ontological questions in general then threaten to become superficial, although we seem to have a pretheoretical grasp on what makes them worth asking. According to the minimalist account on offer here, the quantificational question is indeed easily answered—any mathematician can answer it for us—but the specifically metaphysical question is to be carefully distinguished from the quantificational question. The specifically metaphysical question isn’t

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whether numbers exist, but whether numbers exist in more than just the lightweight sense—that is, whether numbers are real. If we make this distinction, the puzzle is solved, for the question the metaphysician seeks to ask is clearly whether numbers are real, and there’s no longer any conflation between that question and the question whether numbers are subject to quantification.\footnote{Hofweber’s own resolution of the puzzle of ontology takes a similar shape, distinguishing between heavyweight and lightweight forms of quantification (2000, 2005). He also ties in his metaontological view with Carnap’s (1956) famous distinction between internal and external questions: Hofweber holds that when we engage in lightweight quantification we speak in the internal mode, whereas heavyweight quantification is in the external mode. By extension, one might also note that my distinction between lightweight and heavyweight existence has an affinity with Carnap’s internal-external distinction. Existence in the internal sense, from the point of view of discourses having domains, is thin and abundant; existence in the external sense, transcending the perspective of any particular theory or discourse, is thick and sparse. A major disparity between my position and Carnap’s, though, is that I (like Hofweber) don’t claim that the external mode is without cognitive content (being, for Carnap, governed only by pragmatic considerations)—I leave it open that some sense can be made of the notion that our thought and talk is in alignment with objective reality.}  

This manner of resolving such linguistic issues isn’t new, of course. Meinong recognized over a century ago that distinguishing among more and less robust ways of being enables us to explain our ability to think and talk about things which, in his terminology, don’t exist. His terminology differs from mine in this regard, since I take existence as such to be abundant while he reserves ‘exists’ for a privileged subset of what there is (according to what I take to be the now-orthodox interpretation, at least\footnote{For instance, in Routley (1980), Parsons (1980), and Jacquette (1996).}). But, setting that difference aside, the reader will perhaps have noted already the broad similarity between Meinongian metaphysics and the minimalist conception of existence, so the relationship between my proposal here and Meinongianism merits some discussion. While the two do have some basic features in common, as I understand them, it’s instructive to see where they differ. 

In the first place, there can be no doubt that minimalism and Meinongianism are akin in their \textit{motivation}, for both seek to provide an account of entities, or of objecthood, which stands independently of whether the entities thus accounted for exist in reality. For Meinong, this was a
task made salient by his phenomenologist forebears\textsuperscript{148}, who laid emphasis on the directedness of thought toward its objects and were disposed to say that thought generally has such an intentional structure regardless of whether its object is real. In spite of differences in phraseology and intellectual context, the resemblance between the phenomenological notion of intentionality and a basic impetus of the realism-antirealism distinction is unmistakable—the impetus being the recognition that our thought and talk generally \textit{purports} to concern objects, properties, and states of affairs \textit{whether or not} those objects, properties, and states of affairs are in any respect mind-independent. Without this recognition, or something much like it, the question whether to adopt a realist or an antirealist stance on a given subject matter is unintelligible, since then the metaphysics of the subject matter will already be determined one way or another merely by the fact of its being a subject matter. The independence in principle of a discourse from its metaphysical ramification is for Meinong encapsulated in the notion of the \textit{Aussersein} of the object; this is the thesis that “The Object is by nature indifferent to being,” or that a thing’s characteristics can be considered separately from its ontological status.\textsuperscript{149} Therefore, the mere fact that an object seems to figure in our thought doesn’t itself decide whether realism about that object is true; the ‘figuring’ in question is, as far as it goes, metaphysically neutral. This neutral status Meinong terms ‘givenness’: “All that is knowable is given—namely, given to cognition. To this extent, all objects are knowable. Given-ness as a most general property can be ascribed to Objects without exception, whether they are or are not.”\textsuperscript{150} Meinong’s notion of givenness corresponds, then, with the minimalist’s notion of existence: each serves in its respective theory as a metaphysically lightweight quality appertaining to everything whatsoever. In contradistinction, each theory also employs a

\textsuperscript{148} Brentano is the predominant example, and in particular his (1874).
\textsuperscript{149} Meinong (1904), 86.
\textsuperscript{150} Ibid., 92.
heavweight notion that discriminates between the robust and the fictitious entities; for the minimalist, the heavyweight notion is that of being real, and for the Meinongian, that of being existent. Up to this point, at least, I’m inclined to say that the disagreement between the two as to the nature of existence—whether it ought to be construed in a lightweight or in a heavyweight manner—is merely verbal.\footnote{One might wonder whether the distinction between the two views in fact extends beyond terminology when it comes to the treatment of quantification. It seems \textit{prima facie} that the Meinongian will be obliged to deviate from classical predicate logic with regard, for instance, to existential generalization: in Meinongian terms, from “Superman has X-ray vision” \textit{it doesn’t} follow that “there exists an \( x \) such that \( x \) has X-ray vision”, whereas the minimalist (who, I maintain, is at liberty to use the standard predicate logic without reservation) will make no objection to such inferences. But Richard Routley (1980, 75 ff.) argues that it’s open to the Meinongian to retain the \textit{formalism} of classical predicate logic by amending the \textit{interpretation} of the quantifier—\textit{in particular}, by holding that quantified statements aren’t ‘existentially loaded.’ Roughly this is what I envision for the minimalist with respect to logic, although the minimalist will of course prefer to say that the quantifier \textit{isn’t} to be construed as ‘\textit{metaphysically} loaded,’ or something similar. In any case, the point is that the classical formalism is retained while the domain is understood as not being restricted to what’s real. Presumably, both the Meinongian and the minimalist will want to designate a special predicate whose extension contains precisely the heavyweight entities: for the Meinongian, an existence predicate, and for the minimalist, a reality (mind-independence, etc.) predicate. So it appears to me that there need be no logical or metalogical distinction between the two theorists. (Routley’s own position, however, is that the Meinongian should choose what he regards as the predominant alternative to the formalism-preserving approach: namely, to keep the interpretation of the quantifier, more or less, but to change the formalism, with the result being a kind of free logic. I suppose that this route is likewise available to the minimalist, but I myself see no need for such a revisionary approach.)}

Nevertheless, there may in addition be some substantive theoretical discrepancies between minimalism and Meinongianism. For the minimalist, the distinction between heavyweight and lightweight existence turns on the question of objectivity, or of recognition-transcendence: whether, in principle, the existents in question are independent of our epistemic capability. Thus, whether or not minimalism ought to be counted as a brand of Meinongianism depends on what, according to the Meinongian, the metaphysical status of objects is: whether, and in virtue of what, they’re to be regarded as mind-dependent or mind-independent. Minimalism is Meinongianism only if the latter allocates the heavyweight notion and the lightweight notion in the same way, so that what (in the Meinongian’s terms) exists is epistemically unconstrained while what doesn’t exist is epistemically constrained. Perhaps it’s natural for the Meinongian to hold that the real
objects—the ones which ‘exist’ rather than not—are mind-independent (though taking this position is by no means mandatory), but it’s not clear to me that Meinongianism, insofar as it has an orthodox form, regards the ‘nonexistent’ objects canonically and systematically as mind-dependent. A ready interpretation of Meinong’s theory, at least, is that it takes the wingedness of Pegasus to be a self-standing fact, a feature of the world discovered by our thinking and not invented by it. And it’s particularly implausible to say that Meinongianism considers nonexistent objects mind-dependent if the theory includes a principle of plenitude, so that with every set of properties there corresponds an object, existent or otherwise.\textsuperscript{152} For then the range of objects far exceeds, both in number and in complexity, what could in practice be the accusatives of our mental acts.\textsuperscript{153}

Thus construed, Meinongianism is a metaphysical thesis; it contends that things generally and fundamentally are a particular way. The minimalist conception of existence, on the other hand, isn’t a metaphysical thesis as I understand it—not a first-order metaphysical thesis, anyway. The minimalist, as I envision him, doesn’t advance a claim concerning the nature of reality, but merely proposes a metaontological framework for the situating of realist versus antirealist positions concerning disputed classes of entities. So while the minimalist’s ontology is expansive (provided that lightweight entities are to be counted in one’s ontology—a verbal question, ultimately), as we’ve seen, there’s a sense in which it’s more modest than the Meinongian’s plenary ontology. For while the minimalist countenances whatever is in fact the accusative of some thought, or a singular term of some discourse, the Meinongian countenances whatever could in principle meet

\textsuperscript{152} This is the sort of approach developed in detail in Terence Parsons’ (1980) reconstruction of a Meinongian metaphysics.

\textsuperscript{153} Perhaps a Berkeleyan solution is on offer: the Meinongian jungle is mind-dependent after all, but God’s omniscient intentionality sustains it. I don’t suppose that any Meinongian takes this thesis as an essential tenet, though, so I set it aside.
such criteria—and perhaps holds also that the items countenanced have their existence (or at least their *Sosein*, their essence) independently of our cognitive and discursive practices. If this contrast is accurate, then minimalism is logically weaker and more versatile than Meinongianism. In fact, minimalism may even be able to accommodate in its own terms the thesis of Meinongianism, given that questions of mind-independence and mind-dependence can be agreeably settled in the fashion I’ve suggested: in that case, Meinongianism emerges as a form of realism about absolutely everything, or about every object specified by a set of properties. (In order to retain the distinction between, in the Meinongian’s usage, existent and nonexistent objects, we’ll then need to appoint more than one realism-relevant crux: one along the lines of ‘having a *Sosein*’ and one along the lines of ‘having concrete being,’ or whatever the difference between existent and nonexistent objects is supposed to amount to for the theory.) And since minimalism and Meinongianism are in many respects alike in their motivations and desiderata, it’s worth asking whether the slimmer theory can match the bulkier’s putative accomplishments without the extra bulk. Namely, logical or metaphysical systems in the Meinongian style are often lauded, if at all, for their circumvention of the linguistic quagmires mentioned earlier and for their straightforward analysis of fictional (or otherwise antirealist) discourse. It’s plausible, I suggest, that minimalism fares at least as well in these matters while positing only the conceived—not the unconceived—entities, and that it thereby has an advantage over Meinongianism as here construed, but pursuing the point further would take us afield.\textsuperscript{154} It suffices to note that Meinongianism is importantly distinct from minimalism inasmuch as the former, but not the latter, is a first-order metaphysical proposition.

\textsuperscript{154} It also merits consideration whether the minimalist offers a cleaner account of incomplete or indeterminate objects than the Meinongian can. It’s widely recognized that fictional objects in particular suffer this condition, maybe even without exception: for fictional object $x$, there’s some property $P$ such that $P x$ is undecided by the fiction to which $x$ belongs. For example, according to the fiction created by Arthur Conan Doyle, Sherlock Holmes neither has nor lacks a mole on his back—that is, it’s *not* the case that Holmes has such a mole according to the fiction, and it’s *not* the case that he lacks one according to the fiction. Rather, the fiction is silent on the matter, and
Lastly, it’ll be helpful to consider whether the minimalist is susceptible to a type of objection that has traditionally been raised against Meinongianism, and to see how the minimalist might respond if so. Namely, Meinongianism has often been charged with incoherency on account of positing impossible objects—the round square, for instance, is ostensibly an object of thought and so an item in the Meinongian ontology. Even apart from any connection with Meinongianism, the minimalist appears to invite grievances of this sort with his generous attribution of existence; at face value, we quantify over round squares (or the round square) with ease, and there do seem to be some communal standards of assertion concerning them: our audience will at least understand why we call them round or geometrical, but be perplexed when we call them triangular. The singular term ‘round square’ isn’t simply gibberish, eccentric though it may be to talk about round squares, so the minimal syntactic and normative standards for existence are presumably met. But the worry is that a commitment to impossibilia is a strike against the theory, and perhaps even a fatal blow.¹⁵⁵

A few different routes are available to the minimalist here. One is to take a more conservative outlook on discourses, or on what ought to be counted as a discourse, than what I’ve been suggesting until now. On the more conservative view, it’s not just any verbalization recognizable as a set of sentences of some natural language that qualifies as a discourse (or,

¹⁵⁵ As Parsons (1980, 38 ff.) points out, we should take note of the distinction between merely impossible objects and outright contradictory objects. An object is contradictory just in case it’s logically inconsistent with respect to its properties; an object is impossible just in case it’s contradictory or has properties that are incompatible in some nonlogical respect (in respect of meaning, for example). So an object that’s entirely red and entirely blue is impossible though not contradictory, while an object that’s entirely red and not entirely red is contradictory (and thus also impossible—the contradictory objects are a proper subset of the impossibilia). In any case, I’ll only address the more general concern over impossible objects.
uncountably, as discourse); instead, the set of sentences must play some genuine role in the unfolding of our lives, or develop naturally from our shared cognitive habits. Discourses, in other words—along with their accompanying meanings, concepts, rules, domains—must be in some sense organic rather than contrived. If discourses are rarefied in this way, then the minimalist might seek to argue that round squares and other outré entities—apt examples because so far removed from the mundane sphere—don’t belong to the domain of any discourse, and thus don’t need to be counted as existent. The minimalist who takes this line will of course owe a more detailed account of what makes a bit of language legitimate, so that the line can be drawn more precisely and more informatively. While tightening the standards for counting as a discourse may forestall commitment to impossibilia and thereby rebuff allegations of incoherency, one wonders whether it’s in keeping with the spirit of minimalism, or even with its explicit principles, to deny the *prima facie* meaningfulness, or the *prima facie* semantic structure, of statements about what’s impossible. Taking an abundant view of things like truth, reference, existence, and so on while taking a sparse view of the discourses in which such things are found is liable to seem *ad hoc*, if not self-undermining. So for someone intrigued by the theoretical benefits of accepting our modes of thinking and speaking at face value, narrowing the range of available discourses is likely to be an unsatisfactory choice.

Of course, the minimalist can always just defer the question and leave it for the semanticists or the philosophers of language to settle: whether the round square exists, or should be regarded as existent by the minimalist, turns on whether talk of the round square is genuinely meaningful. If the verdict is that such talk isn’t meaningful, then that’s as good a reason as one could hope for to say that the round square isn’t (and can’t be) in the domain of any discourse (or rather, that ‘the round square’ has no significance in any discourse, or something to that effect); if the verdict is
otherwise, then it might be argued that whatever rationale there is for taking ‘the round square’ to be meaningful is also rationale for taking the round square to exist at least minimally. This route is likewise precarious for the minimalist, since whoever the issue is entrusted to might be working with a semantic theory incompatible with the assumptions of minimalism. Whether the verdict as to the meaningfulness of ‘the round square’ is positive or negative, to relinquish the issue is to rest the integrity of the theory (and the objector, at least, has it that the integrity of the whole theory is at stake when commitment to impossibilia is in question) on philosophers not guaranteed to be sympathetic to the minimalist’s motivations. So the minimalist should have something positive to say about impossibilia from his own perspective.

It seems to me that the most promising option for the minimalist is simply to accept that impossibilia have minimal existence—to regard it as a datum that impossible objects, properties, and states of affairs are at least available as subjects of discourse, with no need to attempt to explain away our apparent ability to collectively reason about them.\textsuperscript{156} The objector who contends that countenancing impossibilia is problematic relies on the conventional wisdom that what’s impossible can’t be. The conventional wisdom certainly has some plausibility, and might, with a bit of elaboration, even be a candidate for an analytic truth: what does it mean to call something impossible, after all, if not to avouch that it can’t be? But the minimalist will maintain that any plausibility attaching to a principle like “what’s impossible can’t be” depends entirely on reading “be” in a metaphysically loaded sense—that is, “what’s impossible can’t be real,” or something much similar. If we widen the sense of “be” along the lines that minimalism calls for, then it’s at least no longer a mere truism that what’s impossible can’t be, for on the wider interpretation, the claim becomes, more or less, that what’s impossible can’t even be the target of thought. Far from

\textsuperscript{156} Indeed, some have even held that impossibilia serve vital theoretical and practical functions. Berto (2013) provides a survey.
being an obvious and trivial truth, this claim is controversial and even dubious on its face, just like the claim—reviled by the Meinongian—that there’s no such thing as thinking about what doesn’t exist. So once we clarify what’s supposed to be entailed by the notion of impossibility, it’s much less apparent that the minimalist should be concerned with incoherency on account of ontological commitment to impossibilia. Perhaps including impossibilia in one’s heavyweight ontology would be bothersome, but the minimalist isn’t committed to that by any means. If the minimalist’s standing here differs from the Meinongian’s, it’s because the Meinongian construes impossible objects as being mind-independent—as being more than mere epiphenomena of a particular way of speaking and thinking. If it’s true, as against the Meinongian thus construed, that what’s impossible can’t be real, then the minimalist can accommodate that principle by specifying an antirealism-relevant crux: to consider an entity (here I include states of affairs, events, classes of properties, etc.) impossible is to take an antirealist view of it.

I conclude that the received objection to Meinongianism is no objection at all for a minimalist conception of existence. (Insofar as Meinongianism can also escape the objection, it does so—assuming the hard bullet regarding impossibilia isn’t bitten—by means of a lightening maneuver analogous to the minimalist’s.) To the contrary, the objection can be adapted into another resource—an antirealism-relevant crux—for spelling out what’s at stake in disputes between realists and antirealists, and for assigning to the parties in such disputes clearer criteria of application for terms like ‘realism’ and ‘antirealism.’ This, in the last analysis, is the foremost advantage of adopting a minimalist framework and the ensuing ontological pluralism: in doing so, we sharpen the focus of realism-antirealism disputes by directing attention away from the potentially vague question whether something exists and toward the potentially precise question whether the thing has some reifying property in particular.
Chapter Three

Combining Pluralisms through a Theory of Facts

1. Introduction

The preceding chapters introduced the themes of realism and pluralism. The first dealt with how the distinction between realism and antirealism has generally come to be understood in recent Anglophone philosophy; and the second examined Wright’s pluralist theory of truth—considered as a device for demarcating realist from antirealist commitments—and developed an analogous pluralist theory of existence. Both of those forms of pluralism, the alethic and the ontological, were construed as consequences of a basic kind of methodological outlook which I, following Wright, have called ‘minimalism.’ In the strictest sense, alethic and ontological pluralism are separate in their derivations: as I’ve formulated them, alethic pluralism results from a minimalist conception of truth and truth-aptitude, whereas ontological pluralism results from a minimalist conception of existence. Someone might, in principle, accept the minimalist’s approach to theorizing about one of truth or existence but not the other, if some reason to make such a distinction should come up; and in that case one could endorse a pluralist theory of truth, or of existence, but not be committed to pluralism about both. Nonetheless, I’ll assume for the present purpose that anyone interested in one or the other will be interested in both, and that this is because the methodological outlook common to both provides a means of expressing what’s at issue between realism and antirealism.

Yet it’s in precisely this respect—the capacity of the minimalist’s approach to productively situate realism and antirealism—that the theorist who combines alethic pluralism and ontological pluralism encounters a problem. At face value, each form of pluralism seems to present a dilemma: either the other form of pluralism is ruled out, or the realism-antirealism distinction loses its stability; put in other words—and at face value, again—combining the two forms of pluralism
threatens the intelligibility of the contrast between realist and antirealist points of view. The short explanation of why this is so is that an intuitive understanding of the connection between alethic pluralism and the realism-antirealism distinction requires a univocal conception of existence, while an intuitive understanding of the connection between ontological pluralism and that same distinction calls for a univocal conception of truth. The problem will be explained in more detail in the next section, but it’s worth pointing out now that I describe this as a ‘face-value’ problem because it’s not, in my estimation, an insurmountable obstacle to combining the two forms of pluralism into a cohesive theory. Indeed, the task of the present chapter is to show how such a combination can be achieved, and the purpose of calling attention to the *prima facie* problem with conjoining pluralisms is to show the need for a calculated theoretical unification of the two. Bare conjunction is likely to prove unsatisfactory.

Section 2 explains more fully why there’s a face-value problem with combining the two forms of pluralism, and thus why a theoretical outlook that’s pluralist about both truth and existence needs further elaboration if the realism-antirealism distinction is to be retained. Section 3 begins this elaboration by proposing a minimalist doctrine of facts. Then section 4 shows how facts so construed can serve to unify alethic and ontological pluralism. Finally, in section 5, I conclude with a discussion of how such a theory of facts comports with an infamous enemy of theories of facts: the so-called slingshot argument.

2. The Problem with Double Pluralism

For abbreviation, I’ll call the position that embraces pluralism about both truth and existence *double pluralism*. The face-value problem with double pluralism is that alethic pluralism and ontological pluralism appear, on sensible construals at least, to be mutually exclusive unless we relinquish the realism-antirealism distinction. That is, an interpretation of alethic pluralism that
connects it with the realism-antirealism distinction in an intuitive way requires that existence be regarded as univocal rather than plural, and vice versa: an interpretation of ontological pluralism that connects it with the realism-antirealism distinction in an intuitive way requires that truth be regarded as univocal rather than plural. A final rephrasing: the face-value result is that, on pain of inconsistency, we can choose up to two of alethic pluralism, ontological pluralism, and the realism-antirealism distinction. To explain why, I’ll first have to say something about the ‘intuitive’ connection between each form of pluralism and the realism-antirealism distinction.

In the case of alethic pluralism, much of its relevance for the realism-antirealism distinction has already been explained in the previous chapter (section 2), so most of the discussion here will only sum up what’s already been said. We’ve seen that the fundamental distinction between realist and antirealist kinds of truth is that realist kinds are in some relevant respect epistemically unconstrained (or recognition-transcendent); that is, if a statement is true in a realist way, then it’s true regardless of our capacity to enter into justified apprehension of its truth. (This conception of realist truth is of course an application of the more general idea of realism, canvassed in the first chapter, according to which what’s real is mind-independent, or in some way independent of our language and thought.)

Now, it’s a platitude—it’s part of the concept of truth—that a true statement portrays things as they are. So to regard a statement as true in a specifically realist way is, it seems, to take it as portraying how things stand objectively, in a world not of our making. In cases of realist truth, then, we’re obliged to take this talk of ‘portrayings’ with ontological seriousness: if the truth in question is of a realist sort, then there really is something represented by the true statement, some constituent or aspect of reality. So we can say that what forges the link between alethic pluralism and the realism-antirealism distinction is the notion of ontological commitment; it’s characteristic
of statements possessing realist truth that they carry the weight of commitment to something’s existing and being a particular way. Conversely—so the thought goes—a statement whose truth is antirealist carries no ontological commitment, or at least fails to carry the sort of ontological commitment it would have if its truth were realist. And thus what distinguishes realism from antirealism concerning some discourse is this contrast in ontological commitment between the two positions. Unsurprisingly, there’s much room for debate regarding how best to determine the ontological commitment of a given realist-true statement, and doing so might turn out to be far from straightforward. Whatever the outcome of that debate, however, I’ll take it as simply part of the import of realist truth that, in some sufficiently generic sense, a realist-true statement points to what there is in an objective world.\textsuperscript{157}

The role played by the notion of ontological commitment is perhaps easiest to see in the case of the correspondence theory of truth, which is often considered the paradigm of a realist theory of truth.\textsuperscript{158} According to the traditional interpretation of that theory, to regard a statement as true by correspondence is explicitly to take something to exist—namely, whatever the statement corresponds with (a state of affairs, objects instantiating their properties, etc.). Provided, as it usually is, that the worldly correspondents of true statements are construed as being metaphysically real, there’s no doubt that what makes the correspondence theory a realist account of truth is that

\textsuperscript{157} It’s worth noting, however, that we can recognize this general connection between realist truth and the mind-independent world without presuming that there’s any systematic correspondence between subsentential units (or Fregean concepts, etc.) and discrete objects in the world at all. Cf. Sher (2013), who defends a correspondence theory of truth that permits a diversity of ‘routes’ from features of true sentences to features of the world. If we accept such a view, there may be no quite general method of deriving a statement’s ontological commitment from its linguistic structure, but this fact doesn’t diminish the point that realist truth brings along an ontological commitment to \textit{something or other}.

\textsuperscript{158} Some deflationist-leaning commentators, perhaps taking Tarski (1936) for inspiration, have suggested that any theory of truth can be counted as a correspondence theory if it upholds the equivalence schema: P if and only if it’s true that P. When I speak here of the correspondence theory of truth, I have in mind a metaphysically robust conception of correspondence as a relationship between language (thought) and the nonlinguistic world. Let me also register in passing that, for present purposes, I take no position on whether a correspondence conception of truth is necessary for realism with respect to a given discourse. In the sense just canvassed, however, it does appear to be sufficient.
it entails a kind of ontological commitment, thereby lending metaphysical weight to ascriptions of truth. So the alethic pluralist, who’s concerned to distinguish among various types of truth, will naturally mark the difference between realist and antirealist types by observing that some types carry ontological commitment while others don’t.¹⁵⁹

The problem—for the double pluralist—with construing ontological commitment as the connection between pluralism and realism is that the notion of ontological commitment depends on the notion of existence. In order to draw a sharp distinction between realist and antirealist kinds of truth, the pluralist needs there to be a similarly sharp distinction between cases in which truth brings ontological commitment and cases in which it doesn’t. This latter distinction, in its turn, hinges on the difference between something’s existing and its not existing. If the alethic pluralist is a monist concerning existence, then securing the realism-antirealism distinction is straightforward: there’s a clear and binary contrast between existence and inexistence, so there’s a clear and binary contrast between cases where truth imposes ontological commitment and cases where it doesn’t, so there’s a clear and binary contrast between realist and antirealist sorts of truth. For the ontological pluralist, however, the foregoing chain of reasoning becomes much more obscure. Pluralizing existence means pluralizing ontological commitment: even if we establish that belief in some statement P entails ontological commitment to a specified class of entities, we have yet to establish in what way we’re obligated to take such entities to exist if we believe that P. That is, given that acceptance of P entails countenancing a particular class of entities as existent, what type of existence should the entities be taken to have? It’s then a murky question how we should decide what sort of existence to attribute to the obligatory entities—and whether the resulting

¹⁵⁹ For one prominent example, Pedersen (2014) takes this line, identifying realist truth with correspondence truth within a pluralist framework.
position is best classified as realist or antirealist.¹⁶⁰ I don’t want to suggest that such issues couldn’t
be satisfactorily settled; the point is only that one intuitive way of understanding the link between
alethic pluralism and the realism-antirealism distinction becomes much more complicated, and
much less serviceable, once ontological pluralism is in effect as well. This is because the intuitive
understanding relies on the implicit assumption that the notion of existence is univocal—so that
there can be a well-defined contrast between existence and nonexistence—and that assumption
must be withdrawn on double pluralism. So if we incorporate ontological pluralism into our alethic
pluralism, we find ourselves compelled to revisit the relationship between pluralism and the
realism-antirealism distinction.

The same holds if we begin from ontological pluralism and then seek to incorporate alethic
pluralism. In this case, and analogously with the former case, the source of the face-value problem
is that an intuitive understanding of the link between ontological pluralism and the realism-
antirealism distinction seems to presuppose a univocal conception of truth—a conception which
is thus in conflict with alethic pluralism. The intuitive understanding in question begins from the
thought that ontological pluralism is best expressed as a thesis concerning the existential quantifier:
because the existential quantifier admits of a number of different uses, statements asserting
something’s existence can be given a number of distinct readings.¹⁶¹ The ontological pluralist is

¹⁶⁰ Perhaps the prior question is whether belief in P even settles the ontological pluralist’s question at all: conceivably, one might be ontologically committed to the concomitant entities, perhaps on merely formal grounds, and yet be at liberty to postulate that the entities exist mind-independently, mind-dependently, or however. In a case like this, where belief in P is indifferent as to the metaphysical status of its corollaries, the notion of ontological commitment seems to have been stripped of its metaphysical weight entirely. Without that weight, the notion of ontological commitment is unsuited for explaining the connection between alethic pluralism and the realism-antirealism distinction.

¹⁶¹ Hirsch (2002, 2005) and McDaniel (2009) favor this approach, construing the variety of notions of existence as a matter of giving different interpretations of the existential quantifier. (Unlike McDaniel, Hirsch doesn’t label his position ‘ontological pluralism,’ opting instead to speak of ‘quantifier variance.’ I take it that this point of nomenclature has no bearing on Hirsch’s relevance for the present topic.) While this is a natural way to state the import of ontological pluralism, it’s worth keeping in mind that it’s by no means mandatory. Rather than holding that existential statements are semantically non-uniform because of alternation in the quantifier in particular, one
then at liberty to explain what, by way of semantics or logical form, distinguishes one allowable reading of existential statements from another allowable reading.

What’s of particular interest for my purposes here is that such statements can be understood in realist or antirealist ways, as asserting that the entities specified exist in realist or antirealist senses. This much has already been elaborated in the previous chapter; there I developed a theory maintaining that the distinction between realist and antirealist kinds of existence is to be conceived, by analogy with Wright’s minimalist account of truth, as a matter of whether the posited entities possess realism-relevant properties. On the minimalist conception of existence, any putative thing is worth regarding as existent, at least in the minimal sense, if its role in the discourse conforms with basic syntactical and normative standards. Provided that those standards aren’t overly stringent, one direct consequence of the minimalist conception of existence is that a posited entity will generally count as existent—at least minimally—just by virtue of being posited. Then the question of realism, asked with respect to the posit, is answered affirmatively if the posit enjoys realism-relevant properties in addition to its minimal existence; alternatively, to ascribe no further realism-relevant properties to it is to take an antirealist point of view with regard to it. So although there are of course other sorts of distinctions one might wish to draw with regard to admissible ways of interpreting existential statements, what’s important here is the distinction between realist and antirealist modes of interpretation.

In any case, it’s necessary to take note of what ‘interpretation’ amounts to in the present context. To say that there are various ways in which an existentially quantified statement could be interpreted is to say that there are various ways of understanding what proposition the statement might think that some existential statements vary semantically from others in virtue of differences among subject matters, contexts of utterance, the discourses in which the statements occur, and so on. There’s no need to settle this question here, however.
expresses, or what the statement presents as being the case. So if the ontological pluralist allows that a statement like ‘There are Xs’ admits of multiple interpretations, then she’s granting that there’s more than one acceptable way of construing what it’d be for Xs to exist. In other words, the ontological pluralist is allowing more than one way of construing under what conditions Xs exist. And this is just another way of remarking that when the ontological pluralist permits a variety of interpretations for a given existential statement (while perhaps favoring one interpretation over its rivals), she permits a variety of assignments of truth conditions to the statement. In general, to speak of a plurality of interpretations for an existentially quantified statement is to countenance a plurality of truth conditions which the statement might be understood to have; and to speak of a plurality of interpretations of the existential quantifier is to countenance multiple ways in which the quantifier could contribute to the truth conditions of statements in which it appears.¹⁶²

The ontological pluralist interested especially in the realism-antirealism distinction will thus be concerned to distinguish between those assignments of truth conditions to existential statements that are realism-implicating and those that are antirealism-implicating (or that fail to be realism-implicating), and this distinction will be a means of marking the difference between realist existence and antirealist existence. Suppose the pluralist has selected some realism-relevant property as a crux on which the realism-antirealism distinction (for existence) rests; then the pluralist will hold that Xs exist in a realist way just when they exist in the minimalist sense and they moreover possess the selected realism-relevant property. Through semantic ascent, the pluralist will further hold that a statement like ‘There are Xs’ is given a realist interpretation just when it’s assigned the conjunctive truth condition that Xs exist in the minimalist sense and they

¹⁶² Hirsch (2002) offers an extended discussion of this approach to permitting various readings of existential quantification. While he credits Putnam for inspiration, Hirsch may be the first to explicitly formulate an ontological pluralist thesis in terms of the truth conditions of existential statements.
possess the selected realism-relevant property. Contrariwise, existentially quantified statements are given antirealist interpretation just when they’re assigned truth conditions making no reference to any realism-relevant property. So the ‘intuitive understanding’ of the connection between ontological pluralism and the realism-antirealism distinction—as I’ve been referring to it—has it that the contrast between realist and antirealist kinds of existence is to be explained by appeal to the notion of truth conditions: the heart of the matter is whether the truth conditions of existentially quantified statements include any realism-implicating features.

But this is where the pluralist who begins from ontological pluralism and then attempts to incorporate alethic pluralism encounters some difficulty. For the intuitive understanding of the link between ontological pluralism and the realism-antirealism distinction avails itself of the notion of truth—by appealing to the notion of truth conditions—and it tacitly relies on a univocal conception of truth. In order for there to be a sharp contrast between realist and antirealist existence, as the intuitive understanding has it, it must be a binary matter whether it’s true that the entity in question exists and has the selected realism-relevant property. And if truth is univocal, then (setting aside any issues having to do with vagueness or other forms of indeterminacy) the matter is indeed binary, and so differentiating realist from antirealist existential commitments is unproblematic. If truth is pluralized, however, then so is the notion of a truth condition: the complete interpretation of an existentially quantified statement needs to specify not merely the condition under which it’s true but also the sort of truth it has when that condition obtains. So even when it’s been established that a realism-implicating condition for the truth of an existential statement obtains, it still remains to be settled in what sense the statement has thereby been rendered true. This latter task is a potentially delicate one, and even once it’s completed, there may be additional perplexity with regard to whether the view expressed by the statement ought to be classified as realist or antirealist.
(Suppose, for instance, that the truth condition cites a realism-relevant property but the statement comes out true only in an antirealist way when the condition is met.) My goal isn’t to argue that such problems can’t be solved; my goal is just to motivate the idea that supplementing ontological pluralism with alethic pluralism will demand careful theoretical attention if the resulting standpoint is to be stable and coherent.

Indeed, my contention is that the face-value problem for double pluralism—which arises, as we’ve seen, when double pluralism is approached from either direction—can after all be dealt with satisfactorily. But dealing with it requires that we recognize and, in one way or another, account for the basic source of the difficulty. It’s no coincidence that the intuitive understanding of alethic pluralism’s use as a guide to realist and antirealist outlooks makes tacit appeal to the notion of existence; and that the analogous understanding of ontological pluralism makes tacit appeal to the notion of truth. The notions of truth and existence have a deep bond, and the double pluralist who wishes to be sensitive to, and preserve the significance of, realist commitment would do well to lay the foundations of double pluralism in a more general theory of the relationship between truth and existence. In the next section I propose one method of doing just that—a method which continues the project of minimalism.

3. **The Minimalist Doctrine of Facts**

It’s clear by this point that minimalism can be regarded as a theoretical approach with broad application, not limited by any means to the notions of truth and existence. As construed here, to take up a minimalist approach to some philosophical topic is to begin from the topic’s conceptual significance in common discourse—to begin from the role that the corresponding concept plays in our general thought and talk—so as to fix upon a set of basic criteria that anything must meet in order to fall under the concept in question. Then, having delineated the concept only by reference
to its role in common discourse, without building in any philosophically sectarian criteria, the minimalist looks for signs of the concept’s instantiation in various contexts, keeping in mind that one instantiation of the concept may have additional, *nonessential* features that another instantiation lacks. (Of course, *how to recognize* such instantiations is a separate epistemic question, concerning which the minimalist as such may remain noncommittal.) And this variability in nonessential features, as has become apparent in the cases of alethic and ontological pluralism, is what makes minimalism a natural precursor to pluralism.

So it’s plausible that the minimalist approach could be applied to far more than the notions of truth and existence.\(^\text{163}\) Here the aim is to outline a minimalist theory which, however, isn’t essentially divorced from the minimalist theories laid out in the previous chapter: a minimalist doctrine of *facts*. The ultimate goal of making appeal to the notion of fact is to provide a conceptual common ground capable of unifying alethic and ontological pluralism into one coherent theory free from the face-value problem raised in the previous section. The reason I consider a doctrine of facts to be the right direction to turn for such common ground—and the reason I’ve just remarked that the minimalist approach to facts isn’t divorced from the minimalist approaches to truth and existence—is that the concept of fact is intimately connected with the concepts of truth and existence. Indeed, it serves as a kind of bridge between them, helping to establish analytical entailments between statements concerning truths and statements concerning existents; and this,

\(^{163}\) Perhaps minimalism isn’t a suitable approach to just any philosophical topic, though. I’ve noted that the minimalist begins from the specified concept’s role in common discourse, and it’s plausible that a concept needs to be fairly rudimentary—like the concepts of truth and existence—in order to be adequately defined by common discourse. The more specialized a philosophical concept is, the less likely it is to be determined by its syntactical and normative profile in discourse, as the notions of truth and existence are. If this is correct, then perhaps we can say that minimalism works best when its target can be analyzed as part of the underlying—one might call it ‘formal’ or ‘grammatical’—*structure* of discourse, not merely as part of its content.
in my view, is why it behooves the double pluralist to seek theoretical underpinnings in a minimalism about facts.

After the account of existence given in the previous chapter, the minimalist’s methodology should already be familiar. The first question, as that methodology has it, asks what the everyday notion of fact comprises, or what sort of role the notion of fact plays in our thinking. In keeping once again with Wright’s platitude-based approach, I propose to start from the truism that a fact is something’s being the case. Alternatively, we might say that a fact consists in something’s being a particular way, or—to use a more formal but, I maintain, equivalent expression—that a fact is an object’s having a property.164

At any rate, this is a fine first pass at characterizing the concept of fact, and it highlights the sense in which the concept of fact is tightly bound with, and indeed depends on, the concepts of truth and existence as construed by the minimalist. Consider first the minimalist conception of existence: the existent (at least in the minimal sense) is that which falls under the syntactical category of the singular term. Facts plainly constitute one class of singular term: it’s essential to a fact that its content is expressed, as I have above in schematic fashion, in the form of a noun phrase (“something’s being the case”), or perhaps more canonically as a that-clause (“that something is the case”), which has a similar nominalizing effect. So insofar as the minimalist theory of facts takes facts to be the referents of singular terms, it stems from and relies upon the minimalist conception of existence. But facts are moreover a particularly important class of singular term, and they’re important in a respect that underscores their connection with the minimalist account of

164 In this locution, though, ‘object’ and ‘property’ should be understood in the same minimalistic spirit as ‘fact.’ Although there may be facts, or putative facts, which don’t consist in an object’s having a property in any metaphysically robust sense, the point is that to regard something as a fact is to regard it as an instance of an object’s having a property. Also, while I mention only the unary case for simplicity, I take it that the extension of these remarks to facts involving relations is straightforward.
truth. For it’s also essential to the notion of a fact that its content is assertible—indeed, that factual content (that is, the sort of content that’s a candidate for constituting a fact) is precisely what’s assertible, since the scope of what can be taken to be the case coincides, in principle anyway, with the scope of what can be affirmed to be the case.\textsuperscript{165} The minimalist conception of truth purports to delineate, by appeal to the familiar syntactical and normative constraints, the range of what can be regarded as a discourse’s truth-apt contents; and such constraints on truth-aptitude take their cue, in large part, from the practice of advancing and operating upon assertions. In this respect, therefore, the notion of fact stems from and depends upon the notion of truth. But whereas the asserting of a true statement is a speech act whose significance is represented by a complete sentence, to conceive of propositional content in factual form is to conceive of it as a singular entity, and thus as occurring on the subsentential level. And the benefit of rendering assertible content as a noun (or noun phrase), of course, is that it’s then capable of being itself an object of thought, suitable for embedding within contexts of predication and quantification. So inasmuch as the conception of fact canvassed here consists in the nominalization of assertoric content, we can remark that it consists in the application of the minimalist’s idea of existence to the minimalist’s idea of truth. It’s in this sense that minimalism concerning facts can be seen as an outgrowth of minimalism concerning truth and existence; and it’s fair to say that insofar as the notions of truth and existence, as conceived by the minimalist, are fixtures common to diverse discourses, so is the notion of fact. The idea of something’s being the case is at the very core of any assertoric discourse.

\textsuperscript{165} Here I’m assuming that the extent of what’s assertible includes all, and only, propositional content; I take it that this much is simply a conceptual truth. But a further assumption I make, and one that’s perhaps more substantive, is that facts, like assertions, also involve propositional content, and that it’s possible for the very same propositional content to be implicated in both an assertion and a fact. My position is thus aligned with a well-known saying from McDowell: “there is no ontological gap between the sort of thing one can mean, or generally the sort of thing one can think, and the sort of thing that can be the case” (1994, 27). Propositional content is factual content—but by ‘factual content’ I mean the total import of the fact \textit{qua unity}. If it makes sense to speak of a fact as having ‘parts,’ such as the objects it involves, then those decidedly aren’t under the heading of what I intend by the term ‘factual content.’
A further aspect of the concept of fact is the synonymy, in the general parlance at least, between “it’s true that P” and “it’s a fact that P.” So a second platitude regulating the concept of fact, echoing the equivalence schema in the case of truth, is that there’s a direct transformation between ascribing truth to a that-clause and calling the content of the that-clause a fact. This equivalence displays the sort of nominalization adduced in the previous paragraph—the property ‘true’ comes to coincide with the existence of a kind of object, ‘a fact’—but it also indicates that the facts are only a subset of nominalized assertible contents: those which, in addition to being assertible, are true. Naturally, then, just as not everything assertible is true, so not all nominalized contents can be counted as facts. Nonetheless, it still makes sense to speak of nominalizations of assertible contents generally, quite independently of the question of truth, and for the more general concept I’ll use the term states of affairs. So we have that for all singular terms a and all predicates F, it’s assertible that Fa if and only if a’s being F is a state of affairs. Every nominalization of assertible content introduces a state of affairs, but only nominalizations of true assertible contents introduce facts. And for sake of continuity with philosophical usage, we can thus say furthermore that a fact is a state of affairs that obtains, where for a state of affairs to obtain is just for the corresponding assertible content to be true. The picture that emerges is that inasmuch as facts are, in some sense, the ontological correlate of truth, states of affairs are, in the same sense, the ontological correlate of truth-aptitude: states of affairs are apt to obtain.

166 On this point I follow terminology traditionally associated with Wittgenstein and the system he articulates in the Tractatus (1922).

167 Much like a fact, a state of affairs is typically conceived of as something’s being the case, or as an object’s having a property, and this conceptual overlap might bring one to worry that the present account is conflating distinct notions, or perhaps failing to posit a distinction where one should be posited. It’s correct that one and the same basic platitude governs both the notion of fact and the notion of state of affairs: both can be characterized as the notion of something’s being so. But this is because to conceive of a state of affairs just is to conceive of it as obtaining: to conceive of the moon’s being larger than the earth, for instance, is to conceive of its being the case that the moon is larger than the earth. At the purely conceptual level, therefore, there’s no distinction between fact and state of affairs. (A closely related point, as I understand it, is familiar from Kant’s famous rebuttal to Anselm’s ontological argument: there’s no difference between conceiving of a unicorn and conceiving of an existent unicorn;
The metaontology underlying this conception of facts and states of affairs calls for some elaboration, however. It’s clear enough that the minimalist notion of existence licenses at least a lightweight ontology of states of affairs: regarding them as objects, as the referents of singular terms, is syntactically unproblematic, and this is so regardless of whether a given state of affairs obtains. Thus there’s no obstacle to countenancing the state of affairs in which the moon is larger than the earth; it’s just that (in the absence of independent theoretical reasons for ascribing reality to nonactual states of affairs) we should say that such a state of affairs exists only minimally. Considered apart from the question whether they obtain, states of affairs quite generally may be brought aboard on minimalist grounds. And there’s no reason why our lightweight ontology of states of affairs shouldn’t be plenary: whenever it’s assertible that P, the correlated state of affairs—that P—exists at least minimally.

This metaontological picture becomes a bit more complicated, though, in its treatment of the notion of obtaining, which is supposed to be what marks the difference between states of affairs in general and that special subset thereof: the facts. From the minimalist’s point of view, a plenary lightweight ontology of facts is likewise licensed, and for the same syntactical reasons that license a plenary lightweight ontology of states of affairs, so that whenever it’s assertible that P, we may take it that the correlated fact, that P, exists at least minimally. But in the case of facts, it seems, to conceive of it at all is to conceive of it as existing—but, of course, this by no means commits one to believing that it exists in reality.) The distinction between fact and (mere) state of affairs arises only when we ask whether a given state of affairs actually obtains—whether the corresponding assertible content is, in actuality, true. And in the general case, this question isn’t simply a conceptual one.

There are plausibly some exceptional cases, though. What ought the minimalist to say, for example, about contradictory states of affairs? Insofar as contradictory propositional content is thinkable and assertible, it seems that the minimalist is committed to countenancing impossible states of affairs, at least in the lightweight sense. In my estimation, the minimalist should adopt essentially the same attitude here that I endorse at the end of the second chapter, where I discuss an apparent Meinongian problem for the minimalist conception of existence. The gist will then be that contradictory states of affairs are impossible in that they can’t obtain, but they can nonetheless be the objects of thought, and so are allowable within the lightweight division of one’s metaphysical theory without trouble. Their impossibility establishes for them, if one likes, an antirealism-relevant crux. (See chapter 2, section 5 for a fuller discussion.)
we’re obliged to make a basic distinction between facts which exist (only) minimally and those which, because their contents are actually true, exist *not merely* minimally. So while a minimalist approach to ontology permits us to say that any given fact (that is, any assertible content *described* as a fact) *exists*, it never, in itself, authorizes the claim that the fact or state of affairs *obtains*. This distinction—between existing and obtaining—is essential for connecting the present theory with the ways in which concepts like truth and fact are ordinarily used. In ordinary usage, it’s definitively not a fact that the moon is larger than the earth, and this is because it’s not true that the moon is larger than the earth. Nonetheless, ‘the fact that the moon is larger than the earth’ is a syntactically acceptable singular term, and hence it’s intelligible—that is, it’s not meaningless—to speak of the fact that the moon is larger than the earth. So the conceptual connection between truth and fact *can’t* just be that to take P to be true is to take the fact that P to exist; rather, on the approach developed here, to take P to be true is to take the fact that P to exist *not just minimally*.

The upshot of these considerations is that the minimalist doctrine of facts is inadequate if it takes facts to be lightweight in the purest sense. The notion of fact relevant here—the notion of an *obtaining state of affairs*—must carry *some* weight, and more weight than is carried by something that exists only in the minimalist’s lightweight sense. The reason for this is that to regard a statement as true rather than false, *even in cases of antirealist truth*, is to take on a substantial commitment, no matter how slight the commitment turns out to be from a metaphysical point of view. And even if it turns out to be slight indeed in certain cases, the commitment should be reflected in the minimalist conception of fact, so far as metaontology is concerned. For the minimalist, the notion of fact that holds special interest isn’t a merely minimal one, but comes along with one further feature already included: the assertible content of the fact is indeed true. But since *truth itself* needn’t be understood in a realist way, this feature hardly commits the
minimalist to facts that are metaphysically real in any strong sense. Although the requirement that facts genuinely obtain, and not merely exist in the syntactical sense, isn’t to be taken lightly, it needn’t be construed as a realism-relevant crux per se, as it needn’t invoke any sort of realist commitment at all. In cases of antirealist truth, it won’t.

To take stock, then: the minimalist doctrine of facts holds, quite generally, that it’s a fact that P just in case it’s true that P, where the locution ‘it’s a fact that P’ is to be construed as making reference to a particular kind of entity, a fact or obtaining state of affairs. This is the substance of the minimalist doctrine of facts. In the context of the current literature on facts as entities, such a theory of facts—according to which there’s a complete, one-to-one correspondence between truths and facts—is likely to seem ontologically extravagant at first glance. But this appearance is assuaged when we consider that there’s a difference between adopting a minimalist doctrine of facts and adopting a general realism about facts; the minimalist approach leaves it a possibility that many, and perhaps even the vast majority, of facts will turn out to exist in an antirealist way, thus lightening their ontological burden tremendously.  

As in the cases of minimalism about truth and minimalism about existence, the substantive metaphysical ramifications of the theory hinge on the question of realism and antirealism, and this latter question—far from being one that the minimalist settles qua minimalist—hinges on what sorts of realism-relevant cruces are brought into play. It follows that, so far as minimalism about facts is concerned, the only additional commitment incurred by speaking of facts is a commitment to the acceptability of nominalizing truths, or of referring with seriousness to something’s being the case.

168 I’ve already noted that, according to the account given here, truths bring along facts even when the kind of truth in question is an antirealist kind. In such cases, commitment to the facts in question needn’t hold any more metaphysical significance than commitment to the truths in question (that is, to their being true). It bears mentioning as well that when the kind of truth in question is a realist kind, one still needn’t hold that the corresponding facts exist in any metaphysically weighty sense; we’re obliged to say that the facts exist, but it’s open to us to say that they exist in an antirealist way if saying so is theoretically appealing.
Because the minimalist doctrine of facts is metaphysically neutral in this sense—neutral with regard to the question of realism—it’s worth pointing out that, by contrast with much of the historical and contemporary literature on facts (or states of affairs), the minimalist doesn’t necessarily conceive of facts as truthmakers, or as entities whose existence or obtaining explains truth.\footnote{Armstrong (1997, 2004) has recently championed this conception, arguing that a robust ontology of states of affairs is in order for explaining the truth of true statements (and for a number of further explanatory tasks besides, such as underwriting a theory of causation and physical law).} Although the minimalist would agree with the truthmaker theorist’s slogan that truth supervenes on the facts, the minimalist would also add that the facts supervene on truth—indeed, that the two covary exactly.\footnote{Here I refer to supervenience in the merely logical sense: A supervenes on B just in case any difference in A requires a difference in B. (This is opposed, for instance, to a metaphysical notion of supervenience as involving asymmetrical dependency.) So in holding that there’s a mutual supervenience between truth and the facts, the minimalist is simply taking there to be a material biconditional relationship between truth and the facts.} (Despite this, though, there are important conceptual and theoretical distinctions between truth and fact.) Of course, insofar as the conception of facts as truthmakers is philosophically profitable, the explanatory dependence of a truth on a fact might be selected as a candidate realism-relevant crux for the given fact. In general, however, it should be recognized that the minimalist doesn’t have to posit any asymmetrical grounding relationship between facts and truths. In the same vein, one of the pivotal concerns of recent discussions of facts has been to consolidate the theory of facts so that as many truths as possible are accounted for by reference to as few facts as possible; in paradigmatic cases, the targets for reduction or elimination have been negative, universal, logically complex, and ‘emergent’ truths.\footnote{Beebee and Dodd (2005) and Lowe and Rami (2008) offer overviews of attempts to streamline the ontology, or widen the explanatory reach, of theories of facts as truthmakers. Armstrong shares in this ambition, seeking to show how logically complex states of affairs—along with states of affairs involving particulars or universals he takes to be non-fundamental, and thus ontologically suspect—can be, in many kinds of cases, reduced to the more basic states of affairs on which they supervene. In parallel with our distinction between lightweight and heavyweight commitments, Armstrong calls the supervenient states of affairs ‘second-class’ states of affairs, and what they ultimately supervene on are ‘first-class’ states of affairs.} Insofar as such efforts are successful, so that more truth is explained by appeal to fewer facts, the minimalist about facts can
incorporate the theoretical reduction of these kinds of facts into her own position: for instance, it might be counted as a realism-relevant crux that a given fact can’t be reduced away via other facts. A crux like this one, when used in conjunction with a crux holding that a fact has more metaphysical weight when it possesses explanatory power as a truthmaker, would allow the minimalist—qua metaphysician—to import the most promising results from the literature on truthmakers. Therefore, I maintain that the minimalist doctrine of facts is compatible with more metaphysically-minded theories of facts; it’s just that the metaphysical commitments aren’t part of the minimalism per se, being posterior to the more general conceptual framework that the minimalist offers. This mirrors the dialectical position of minimalism about truth and minimalism about existence: the initial conceptual system is abundant and thin, but leaves room for a variety of ways of taking on sparser, thicker metaphysical commitments in light of whatever further theoretical considerations are deemed relevant and cogent.

Not all such commitments are of the same sort, however. Along one dimension, there’s the question whether the statement expressing the fact’s content is true mind-independently or mind-dependently; along another dimension, there’s the question whether the objects figuring in the fact exist mind-independently or mind-dependently. Patently, these are both realism-relevant questions. On my construal, one virtue of appealing to a theory of facts is that it enables the expression of metaphysical commitments both with regard to truth and with regard to existence—and this is why the minimalist doctrine of facts is suitable for merging alethic and ontological pluralism into a unified scheme. The next section proposes a way of using minimalist facts to capture realism-relevant distinctions concerning both truth and existence simultaneously, thereby facilitating a coherent double pluralism.
4. Realism-relevant Cruces for the Doctrine of Facts

On the minimalist’s conception, facts are *pleonastic*, which is to say that they stand in a one-one relation with true propositions, and are straightforwardly derivable from true propositions in every instance. For all propositional contents \( P \), whenever it’s true that \( P \), we can ‘disquote’ from the truth claim and conclude that it’s a fact that \( P \). (I assume here, as above, that the selfsame propositional content is capable of figuring both in the proposition and in the fact—both in the assertion of truth and in the assertion of facticity.) A notion familiar from the previous chapter, and which has already seen much play in the minimalist approaches to alethic and ontological pluralism outlined there, is that of (assertoric) discourse—or better, because countable, the notion of an assertoric discourse. If we analogize our thought and talk as a kind of map of the world, it’s convenient to imagine that the map is carved up into various territories pertaining to different topics or subject matters, with boundaries sharper or fuzzier in certain places, and with many areas of overlap. The minimalist’s contention is that insofar as human behavior within these territories, the discourses, is generally assertoric in its form, the discourses in question satisfy the basic syntactical and normative constraints on truth-aptitude. Meanwhile, the pluralist’s contention, which needn’t disagree with minimalism, is that what truth consists in is liable to vary from one discourse to another. Nonetheless, despite such variation as there may be, truth *simpliciter* is to be found all over the map, so that to each assertoric discourse there belongs its own class of true propositions.\(^{172}\) Given the minimalist doctrine of facts, then, it follows that the entirety of facts is likewise divided up by discourse, and carved up along precisely the same territorial lines. The thrust of the current proposal is that if we want to embrace pluralism with respect both to truth and

\(^{172}\) Again, though, *this* relation—between discourses and classes of truths—most likely isn’t one-one; a great many true propositions plausibly belong to more than one discourse, and some discourses are plausibly included within others. But all that matters here is that each discourse is correlated with a class of true propositions, whether there’s overlap among discourses or not.
to existence, and we also want to retain the realism-antirealism distinction, then realism-relevant questions concerning some discourse should be asked of the class of facts pertaining to the discourse. There are two axes of inquiry, corresponding to truth and existence: along the truth axis, we ask realism-relevant questions about the status of the facts with respect to the discourse, and along the existence axis, we ask realism-relevant questions about the status of the facts with respect to the objects in the discourse’s domain.

With regard to the truth axis, one predominant crux of realist commitment has to do with a distinction mentioned in the previous chapter, a distinction which has sometimes been construed as indicating the basic difference between realist and antirealist forms of truth: that between representation and projection. What’s at issue is the direction of fit between the mind and the world: to hold that a discourse is representational is to hold that within the discourse our thought, when true, conforms to a self-standing reality; on the other hand, to hold that a discourse is projective is to hold instead that best opinion within the discourse is true because, in some ultimate sense, our thinking it makes it so. Especially relevant for present purposes is that the distinction between representation and projection can be understood as a distinction between ways in which a discourse can relate to its accompanying class of facts. And when the matter is described in terms of facts, I take it that the central question is one of metaphysical priority. That is, the central question is whether the facts precede, in an appropriate sense, the discourse, and are thus independent of it (as in the case of representation), or whether the facts are as they are on the basis of our discursive practices, which come first in the order of explanation (as in the case of projection).

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173 One should be careful to note the possibility of middle ground here. While it’s expedient to introduce representation and projection as a dichotomy, a more theoretically cautious claim is that they’re two ends of a spectrum with successive degrees lying intermediate.
This distinction, or something much like it, is also echoed in Kit Fine’s discussion of the theory of facts, where he differentiates between what he calls the ‘propositional’ and the ‘worldly’ conceptions of fact.\textsuperscript{174} According to the propositional conception, facts are plausibly seen as projections from true propositions, since they’re “derivative from or posterior to the propositions. The proposition will enter, in a certain essential way, into the explanation of the identity of the fact to which it corresponds.”\textsuperscript{175} By contrast, the worldly conception of facts has it that the identities of the facts “will not be explained in terms of propositions. [Fact identity] will either be taken as primitive or, more plausibly, will independently be explained. On the most natural view of this sort, facts will be structured entities or complexes, built up in certain characteristic ways from their constituents.”\textsuperscript{176} And insofar as the ‘building up’ of facts, with respect to some particular discourse, is accomplished without reliance on social or conceptual processes, the relationship between the discourse and the facts is (at its epistemic best) one of representation. Given only Fine’s gloss on the worldly conception of facts, however, there’s no guarantee that the building up of facts is mind-independent in this sense; it’s possible, for instance, to hold both that the facts pertaining to some discourse are mind-dependent in their provenance and that their identity or individuation has nothing to do with propositions. So while Fine’s distinction between propositional and worldly conceptions of fact is in some respects consonant with the crux of realist debate under consideration here, the two don’t quite coincide.\textsuperscript{177}

\textsuperscript{174} Fine (1982), 51.
\textsuperscript{175} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{176} Ibid., 52.
\textsuperscript{177} Maybe they could be made to coincide given a few further assumptions. For example, if we take it that propositional content is in some way mind-dependent—perhaps because logical form is to be found only in the mind, and not in the world—then the propositional conception of facts plausibly renders facts dependent on the discourse to which they pertain. And if we assume that the constituents of facts, along with the constitutive unity of the facts, are mind-independent, then Fine’s worldly conception of facts portrays them as likewise mind-independent. But the reason that my account doesn’t exactly align with Fine’s is that, after all, assumptions like these aren’t mandatory on my account.
In its most straightforward form, that crux has to do with the relationship between the discourse and its pertaining class of facts, where those facts stand in a one-one correspondence with the true propositions of the discourse. The question, put generally, asks which direction the dependence goes: does the discourse (aim to) track facts which are as they are autonomously, or do the facts instead depend—for their being the facts—on the nature of the discourse? Broadly speaking, the former is the realist option, while the latter is the antirealist option, and these are realism and antirealism with specific regard to truth. One may apply here whichever realism-relevant cruces\(^\text{178}\) one favors for distinguishing realist from antirealist notions of truth; what those cruces will amount to, on one way of framing things, is a means of discriminating between those discourses which are prior to, and those which are posterior to, the truths of their respective subject matters. An immediate complication, though, is that some theorists, and especially those in favor of a realist outlook, may wish to hold that some, but not all, of a given discourse’s pertaining facts are autonomous: there’s a basic array of facts that merit a realist treatment, but other facts pertaining to the same discourse are somehow unreal—perhaps because they’re entirely derivative from the basic facts (where this is supposed to tell against them metaphysically), or because they’re dependent on our discursive practice in a way that the basic facts aren’t.\(^\text{179}\) Room should be made for this sort of position, and it’s clear that it opens up many potentially useful theoretical

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\(^{178}\) Some of Wright’s own recommendations for realism-relevant cruces (from his 1992) are discussed briefly in the preceding chapter.

\(^{179}\) For example, imagine someone who holds that descriptions of physical phenomena are mind-independently true only when expressed in the language of fundamental physics, and that statements concerning macroscopic physical phenomena, while true, are true in a way that depends on our customs of conceiving and speaking of such phenomena. Nonetheless, this imagined person still takes there to be a single discourse concerned with physical phenomena in general. A view of this sort can be considered realist with regard to physical objects even though it disdains certain anthropocentric ways of thinking about physical objects and assigns to them a metaphysically inferior status. (On the other hand, we can always simply say that such a metaphysical distinction is itself sufficient reason to hold the two sorts of statements—about fundamental physical phenomena and about macroscopic objects—as belonging to distinct discourses. I take no position on whether discourses should be demarcated in this way.)
possibilities, but anyone who maintains that at least some of a discourse’s facts are discourse-independent is probably worth classifying as a realist, regardless of whatever further qualifications are made.

Because only alethic pluralism has been at issue so far, no mention has been made of entities and their status in relation to facts that involve them. And what creates space for ontological pluralism, on the current theory of facts, is potential variability in the status of entities in relation to facts. The notion of ‘involvement’ here—we can speak of facts’ involving, including, containing, comprehending, etc. objects—should be understood along the same lines as the previous chapter’s conception of a domain of discourse. Whenever a noun or substantive appears in the statement of a fact, that noun or substantive purports to refer to an object in the fact’s ‘domain.’ Given the minimalist’s idea of existence, the objects referred to in the statement of a fact may be said to exist at least in the syntactical sense, and these are the objects that the fact involves. All of this is only a conceptual matter, however; the metaphysically significant question has to do with whether the objects thus involved in the fact exist merely in the minimalist’s syntactical sense, or whether they have any realism-relevant features in addition. As the current proposal has it, one especially important and basic sort of realism-relevant feature hinges on the direction of dependence between facts and their accompanying objects. This is the other realism-relevant axis in the mixed pluralist’s theory of facts: realist and antirealist commitments with regard to existence are expressed in terms of the relationship between facts and the objects that they encompass.

Once again, a distinction due to Fine at least gestures in the right direction. With regard to internal structure, he distinguishes between what he terms the ‘objectualist’ and the ‘anti-objectualist’ conception of facts, where the objectualist approach holds that facts have objects as
constituents and the anti-objectualist approach denies this. I take it that there’s an important difference between the case in which a fact merely involves an object and the case in which the fact has the object as constituent. The relation of constitution implies a certain direction of dependence: if the object (is part of what) constitutes the fact, then the object is metaphysically prior to the fact—or, as one might put it, the fact is at least partially grounded in the object. In contrast, if we say only that the fact involves the object, then the direction of dependence remains to be specified. If the direction of dependence is left open, then it may be that the fact involves the object because the object is a constituent of it, or it may be that the fact, quite to the contrary, is metaphysically prior to the object, serving as its ground. (In the latter case, we might wish to say that the fact is a ‘constituent’ of the object.) And this is the contrast that enables the fact theorist to express a distinction between realism and antirealism with regard to existence: given a fact and the objects it involves, the generally realist position (that is, realist with specific regard to existence) is to hold that the fact depends on the objects, which are in some sense independent of the fact, whereas the generally antirealist position is to hold that the objects depend on the fact.

And in general, whether objects are dependent on or independent of the facts into which they enter is to be determined by realism-relevant cruces for existence along the lines of those canvassed in the previous chapter. Indeed, one plausible way of understanding what it means to say that an

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180 Fine, op. cit., 43, 64-65. Again, however, my account demurs from some details of Fine’s. On his construal of objectualism, “individuals, as opposed to their concepts, can actually be constituents of facts.” (64-65) This gloss posits a distinction between the realms of sense and reference that I see no reason to include in the present theory, although I take the present theory to be compatible with it. For my account what matters is simply the constitution of facts, not the ontological category to which the constituents belong (beyond their objecthood).

181 It must be noted that this contrast alone doesn’t necessarily bring us all the way to the mind-independent existence of objects, and thus doesn’t necessarily give expression to one prominent form of traditional realism. For even if a class of objects is prior to their pertaining facts, one might still wish to maintain that those objects exist mind-dependently—and that the facts are a fortiori mind-dependent themselves. And even if a class of facts is prior to their pertaining objects, one could still hold that those facts are mind-independent—and maybe this would suggest that the objects are as well. As will become clear momentarily, the picture is more complete when these realism-relevant considerations regarding existence are combined with those regarding truth.
entity exists in its own right—that its existence is of a realist rather than antirealist kind—is to hold
that selfstanding entities exist simply in themselves, regardless of whatever states of affairs obtain
or don’t obtain concerning them.

So the double pluralist’s theory of facts, in complete outline, takes the following form. Along the truth axis, the question of realism has to do with dependence and independence relations
between a class of facts and the discourses to which they correspond; along the existence axis,
meanwhile, the question of realism has to do with dependence and independence relations between
a class of facts and the objects that the facts involve. Very broadly, therefore, there are four
basic types of position that can be taken with regard to a complementary selection of discourse,
facts, and objects.

On what could reasonably be considered the traditional realist configuration, objects take
ultimate priority: self-existent entities are the substance of the world, and they serve as the
ontological basis for the facts which concern them, which facts in turn are the representational
target of the pertaining discourses and the standard by which those discourses are to be evaluated.
In the philosophy of mathematics, for example, the traditional realist (or platonist) maintains that
the aim of mathematical discourse is to discover independent mathematical facts, and that such
facts obtain in virtue of real mathematical objects and their properties. So the direction of
dependence, in the most rudimentary sense, is from discourse to facts and from facts to objects.
The traditional antirealist configuration, then, is just the reverse, with discourse taking ultimate
priority: the facts of the subject matter are projected from our ways of thinking and speaking

182 To sound a familiar refrain: we ought to recognize at this point at least the possibility in principle that such dependency relations may come in gradations along a spectrum, rather than forming a neat binary. So it’d be most circumspect to say, for example, that with respect to truth, we hold a realist position regarding a class of facts to the extent that we hold the standards pertaining to the corresponding discourse to depend on the class of facts. For ease of exposition, however, I’ll continue to speak as if dependency relations between discourses and facts, and between facts and objects, can only be binary.
(where this includes crucially our ways of segregating assertions as correct or incorrect), and the objects composing the discourse’s domain are constructed out of the discourse’s facts—that is, their existence consists in their figuring in those facts. This is the approach taken by some familiar kinds of mathematical antirealism, like intuitionism and (certain interpretations of) formalism, which hold that mathematical truth is only a reflection of the structure of our thought, and that mathematical objects are artifacts distilled from the rules governing our thought—rules that don’t necessarily hold in their own right.

Thus we can remark that traditional realism takes the realist option both with regard to truth—the discourse purports to represent the facts—and with regard to existence—objects take ontological precedence over facts involving them. And we can note further that traditional antirealism takes the antirealist option in both of these respects. So construed, traditional realism and traditional antirealism are directly antithetical in their orientations. What’s more, neither grants metaphysical priority to facts: traditional realism has facts dependent on objects, while traditional antirealism has them dependent on discourse.

There’s a third configuration, however—which, following Armstrong, I’ll call factualism—that gives facts preeminence, making both discourse and objects subsidiary to them. On a view of this type, the selected discourse aims to represent facts that hold independently, but those facts are the ontological ground of the objects they involve, rather than the reverse. Thus, as pertains to a specified subject matter, the factualist is one who takes the realist option with regard to truth but takes the antirealist option with regard to existence. In very general terms, this seems to be Armstrong’s own outlook across the board, and the stance is also associated with the metaphysics of Wittgenstein’s Tractatus. The factualist approach, however, makes available a theoretical opportunity that neither Armstrong nor the early Wittgenstein is inclined to take, but
which has seen some play in recent years: it offers a natural way of reconciling realist truth with nonstandard (which is to say non-Tarskian) semantic theories. On the version of factualism found in Armstrong and the early Wittgenstein, facts are straightforwardly analyzable, via their logical structure, into objects and properties, and these must be genuine objects and properties in order to be apt for participation in facts. This picture is amenable to the familiar Tarskian semantic theory (once the relevant logical structure is made apparent, anyway), and thus likewise amenable to a theory of truth as direct correspondence between linguistic items and worldly items (objects and properties).

But the factualist needn’t accept this analysis of the semantic structure of facts. An alternative approach is to conceive of truth in certain areas as an ‘indirect’ or ‘composite’ correspondence between linguistic and worldly items, so that the truth of a statement of the form \( Fa \) isn’t, or isn’t ultimately, to be explained in terms of an object named by \( a \) having a property named by \( F \) (where this of course generalizes to non-atomic cases).\(^{183}\) Indeed, the factualist of this stripe might wish to hold that, strictly speaking, no object \( a \) exists and the predicate \( F \) is empty (momentarily setting aside, in both cases, the counsel of minimalism). But to take this approach isn’t necessarily to deny that it’s a fact—even a mind-independent fact—that \( Fa \). Instead, at least on one way of articulating the position, \( Fa \) is the case in virtue of further facts involving further objects and properties.\(^{184}\) Any of these further facts can likewise be suitable for obtaining objectively, and so the factualist can take the route of indirect correspondence without relinquishing realism with regard to truth.


\(^{184}\) An important distinction should be noted here. Especially from a minimalist orientation, the factualist who rejects direct correspondence for a statement \( Fa \) doesn’t have to deny that \( a \) is \( F \), but she does have to deny that \( Fa \) holds true in virtue of \( a \)’s being \( F \), provided that the phrase ‘in virtue of’ is meant to signify some sort of robust dependence relation.
Call the version of factualism that permits a direct correspondence between language and the world—the traditional version associated with Wittgenstein and Armstrong—direct factualism; and call the version that eschews standard semantics indirect factualism. The clear benefit of indirect factualism is that it enables one to adopt a realist stance on the truth of a class of statements without having to hold a realist outlook on their face-value ontology. Once again, recognizable application can be found in the philosophy of mathematics: someone might wish to affirm that mathematical statements are mind-independently true, and moreover that they represent a world not of our making, while denying that mathematical objects, qua individuals as specified in mathematical theorizing, have any real existence. One way to balance these interests is by recourse to a theory of facts: true arithmetical statements, for example, represent genuine arithmetical facts, but those facts don’t depend on any such objects as numbers.\textsuperscript{185} And there are, of course, straightforward applications of indirect factualism to other areas in which someone might be inclined toward realism with respect to truth but toward antirealism with respect to existence: in ordinary-object ontology, social ontology, mental or psychological ontology, and so on.

Given a class of facts, we’ve examined three of the four combinations, construed in the broadest sense, of realism or antirealism regarding truth, on one hand, and realism or antirealism

\textsuperscript{185} I leave it to the factualist to decide what, if anything, facts must depend upon. One option, for those who prefer not to take any facts to be metaphysically self-sufficient, is to hold that a fact whose complement of objects aren’t real must be reducible or somehow equivalent to a fact that does involve real objects. Sher (2015), for instance, seems to favor this approach in the philosophy of mathematics, maintaining that facts concerning numbers (represented as first-order objects) have their basis in facts concerning higher-order cardinality properties, so that true statements ostensibly dealing with numbers are actually true in virtue of such cardinality properties. On the other hand, someone might prefer to say that at least some sorts of facts can be self-sufficient; even if some facts are somehow reducible to other facts, there can be cases in which it’s just facts ‘all the way down,’ with no level at which the facts involve selfstanding objects. This type of position has recently gained some popularity in the philosophy of science under the heading structural realism. As epitomized by Worrall (1989), French (2006), and Ladyman and Ross (2007), structural realism is the thesis that reality consists most fundamentally in the obtaining of structural relations, not in the existence of objects. (And while explicit mention of this is seldom made, there’s also a tacit assumption that those structural relations can, at least in principle, be faithfully represented in our thought and talk, so that there’s room for realism with respect to truth.)
regarding existence, on the other. Traditional realism favors the realist option in both cases (discourse represents facts, facts are grounded in objects and their properties); traditional antirealism favors the antirealist option in both cases (objects are constructed from facts; facts are projected in discursive practice); factualism opts for realism concerning truth and antirealism concerning existence (discourse represents facts; facts are prior to the objects they involve). The remaining broad-strokes combination, if such a view can be made out, opts for antirealism concerning truth and realism concerning existence.

But whether such a view can be made out is open to question, and it’s not clear that such a position can be made coherent with respect to one and the same class of facts. For according to this type of position, the facts in question depend both on the relevant discourse and on the relevant objects, where the discourse and the objects are independent of each other. The picture that emerges, then, for the selected class of facts, is that our discursive practices seize upon an autonomous domain of objects and then construct a body of truths concerning those objects. What makes this sort of view especially peculiar, and perhaps unacceptable for some, is that these discursively constructed truths hold not in virtue of how things stand independently with the objects they’re about, but merely in virtue of our ways of speaking and thinking about them. Of course, this is compatible with holding that there are discourse-independent facts concerning the objects; it’s just that some facts, concerning those objects, are mind-dependent. The discourse thus constitutes a kind of mythology, but one whose subject matter—its domain of objects—is itself real rather than mythical. The apparent fundamental difficulty with this sort of view, which could be called mythicism for lack of a better term, is that it holds that certain statements concerning certain objects are true or false on grounds independent of the ways those objects are (with no denial, moreover, that there are ways those objects are). One might surmise that such a view does
violence to the concept of truth: it just follows from the concept of truth—so the worry goes—that when truth-apt statements are about things, the statements are true or false in accordance with whether they express how things are with the things they’re about. So inasmuch as a class of statements has a domain of objects as its subject matter, and inasmuch as those objects are real (as the mythicist maintains, contra the traditional antirealist), those objects and their features automatically form the proper standard for assessing the truth or falsity of the class of statements; it’s a conceptual confusion in this case (but, again, not necessarily in the case of traditional antirealism) to suppose that our discursive practices could enter into the determination of the statements’ truth or falsity in any metaphysically relevant way. I leave it open here whether this consideration renders the mythicist option incoherent, or whether some sense or use could be made of it after all.

These, then—traditional realism, traditional antirealism, factualism, mythicism—are the four possible combinations of realism or antirealism with regard to truth and realism or antirealism with regard to existence. For the purpose of outlining the four combinations, I’ve treated the choice between realism and antirealism rather simplistically as a binary choice, but it should be kept in mind, here as always, that the distinction between realism and antirealism is more like a motley continuum than like a neat pair of mutually exclusive opposites. In particular, the import of espousing a realist conception of truth or of existence for a given area of thought will in each case be fixed by the selection of realism-relevant cruces that one takes to pertain to that area, and the cruces can be specified and put together at one’s discretion. So traditional realism, traditional antirealism, factualism, and mythicism are perhaps better regarded as categories or families of positions that could be endorsed with respect to the mind-dependence or mind-independence of a selected region of thought, not as four jointly exhaustive individual positions.
It was argued above that the face-value problem for double pluralism stems from the fact that alethic pluralism’s connection with the realism-antirealism distinction is intuitively explained by appeal to a univocal conception of existence (via the notion of ontological commitment), whereas ontological pluralism’s connection with that distinction is intuitively explained by appeal to a univocal conception of truth (via the notion of truth conditions). The concern, therefore, was that embracing pluralism with respect to both truth and existence simultaneously would vitiate the distinction between realism and antirealism—the distinction that the two forms of pluralism were supposed to be useful for illuminating in the first place. But it’s clear that incorporating the two forms of pluralism into a theory of facts circumvents the face-value problem, for the fact-based double pluralism construes the realism-relevant implications of each form of pluralism alike in terms of its relationship with facts. So connecting alethic pluralism with the realism-antirealism distinction requires no appeal to the notion of existence (or to the notion of ontological commitment), whether univocal or equivocal; and vice versa. When facts are made central to the framework of double pluralism, they’re capable of serving as a kind of theoretical meeting ground for explaining the metaphysical significance of various conceptions of truth and of existence, and the face-value problem is thereby averted. The contention, though, isn’t merely that the theory of facts is able to thwart a potential difficulty, but furthermore that the incorporation of the two forms of pluralism into a theory of facts constitutes a positively helpful articulation of double pluralism in its own right.\footnote{Although this goes beyond the scope of the current chapter, I propose that the minimalist’s theory of facts has application to a third form of pluralism as well: \textit{logical pluralism}, which I take to be the thesis that there are multiple logical frameworks having, in some philosophically interesting sense, a proper use. Following the standard minimalist methodology, the logical pluralist first delimits the \textit{concept} of logical consequence, or perhaps of inference, by reference to the relevant norms of ordinary linguistic practice. Presumably, certain basic logical notions like \textit{consequence} can be specified schematically in terms of syntactical and normative constraints on assertoric discourse, just like the notions of truth, existence, fact, and so on. The pluralist’s contention (perhaps best exemplified by Beall and Restall 2006) is that logical consequence, thus elementarily specified, can be recognized as coming into play in a number of formally distinct (and non-classical in particular) patterns of reasoning.}
All the same, one quite general problem remains. A traditional adversary of theories of facts is the slingshot, an argument to the effect that there can be at most one fact underlying all truths. The argument is no real menace to a minimalist theory of facts like the one presented here, but it’s instructive nonetheless to examine the argument and see why it fails to pose any threat. I do so in the next and final section.

5. The Slingshot

Although the argument in its most general form is often traced back to Frege, the standard and most influential formulation of the slingshot argument is due to Davidson. On his construal, what the argument purports to demonstrate is that insofar as true statements correspond with facts at all, every true statement corresponds with the same fact: the Great Fact. But if it’s indeed the case that facts are so coarse-grained—maximally coarse-grained—then, so the thought goes, they have no interesting metaphysical role to play, and in particular aren’t useful for illuminating the nature of truth and falsity. Thus the slingshot argument presents a threat that any theory seeking to explain truth by appeal to facts must deal with.

reasoning in various areas, and that none of these modes of reasoning suffers from fatal defect. From a metaphysical point of view, one might wonder whether any of these distinct logical systems captures entailment relations that hold objectively among propositions or other truthbearers, or whether, say, correct inference is merely a matter of compliance with sociolinguistic norms or psychological rules that are peculiar to human beings. This, or something along quite similar lines, is the question of realism with respect to a system of logic, and the logical pluralist, much like the alethic and ontological pluralists, is in a position to favor the realist stance in some areas while preferring antirealism in others. And here’s where the theory of facts comes in: the minimalist can construe logical consequence as a relation on a class of facts—or, for generality, since the minimalist’s facts are obtaining states of affairs, as a relation on states of affairs. For a simple example, classical logic would have it that a compound state of affairs with the form [(P ∨ Q) ∧ ¬P] stands in the consequence relation to the state of affairs signified by Q, but a paraconsistent logical framework would deny that such a consequence relation holds. Of course, if the logical pluralist wishes to endorse realism about any logical framework, then the notion of consequence in question must carry some special metaphysical weight. And that metaphysical weight, as before, is to be explained in terms of realism-relevant cruces pertaining to consequence, inference, or whatever other notions lie at the base of the theory. Traditionally, for instance, one prominent realism-relevant crux concerns the extent to which the formal structure of states of affairs as represented in the logical system matches the formal structure of the world—however the congruity is spelled out. At any rate, this route, albeit hastily charted, is open to the alethic and ontological pluralist who’s also interested in bringing logical pluralism aboard.

The argument proceeds as follows.\textsuperscript{188} Where P and Q are any two true statements, consider the sequence of statements:

1. P
2. \{x: x = x \text{ and } P\} = \{x: x = x\}
3. \{x: x = x \text{ and } Q\} = \{x: x = x\}
4. Q

The thrust of the argument is that, provided two modest assumptions regarding the conditions under which one true statement corresponds with the same fact as another, all four of the above statements can be shown to correspond with one and the same fact. In other words, there are (what might be called) \textit{transformation principles} entailing that each of the above statements corresponds with the same fact with which its neighbors correspond.

Notice, first, that 1 and 2, as well as 3 and 4, are logically equivalent to each other, where two statements are logically equivalent just in case they have the same truth value in all circumstances. This is because \{x: x = x \text{ and } P\} is identical with \{x: x = x\} exactly when P is true, and \textit{mutatis mutandis} for Q. So the first transformation principle, which permits us to move between 1 and 2 and between 3 and 4, is what I’ll call Logical Equivalence:

\begin{equation}
\text{(LE) If two true statements are logically equivalent, they correspond with the same fact.}
\end{equation}

Second, notice that each of 2 and 3 can be obtained from the other by substitution of coreferential terms, for if P and Q are both true, then the terms ‘\{x: x = x\},’ ‘\{x: x = x \text{ and } P\},’ and ‘\{x: x = x \text{ and } Q\}’ all refer to the same set: the set of all self-identical things. The second transformation principle, then, is what I’ll call Coreference:

\begin{equation}
\text{188 My presentation of the slingshot argument is based on those found in Joseph (2004) and Mulligan and Correia (2013).}
\end{equation}
(CR) If one true statement can be obtained from another by substituting one referring term for another having the same referent, the two statements correspond with the same fact.

Given LE, CR, and the semantic relationships holding among 1 through 4 above, it can therefore be proved that all four statements correspond with the same fact, if they correspond with any fact at all. And since P and Q are two arbitrarily chosen true statements, the slingshot argument concludes that all true statements correspond with the same fact.

In evaluating the significance of the argument for a minimalist account of facts in particular, we must pay special attention to the notion of correspondence that it employs. While one could attempt to block the argument by disputing whether sentences 1 through 4 stand in the semantic relationships that the argument ascribes to them—perhaps by offering an alternative account of logical equivalence or of sameness of reference—it’s difficult to deny the intuitiveness of the claim that those relationships obtain. More plausibly, the heart of the matter has to do with the acceptability of the transformation principles LE and CR, and whether it makes sense to accept them depends almost entirely, I maintain, on what the notion of correspondence between statement and fact is taken to imply. Indeed, it’s only by interrogating the concept of correspondence that one could find substantial reason to endorse or reject the transformation principles. And the conception of correspondence for which the transformation principles are most likely to seem plausible—the target at which the slingshot has generally been aimed—comes from

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189 Taylor (1985), 34-39 proposes this means of forestalling the argument, offering a strict conception of logical equivalence whereby a sentence having the form \( \{x: x = x \} \) isn’t equivalent to one having the form \( P \).

190 For example, the argument is often thought to founder when descriptions are treated, as on Russell’s analysis, as quantified sentences in disguise, rather than as devices of direct reference. For then the coreference relationships among ‘\( \{x: x = x\} \),’ ‘\( \{x: x = x \text{ and } P\} \),’ and ‘\( \{x: x = x \text{ and } Q\} \)’ are only superficial, and such expressions turn out not to be names at all. While this is perhaps a feasible means of escaping the argument’s conclusion in the broadest sense, the Russellian theory of descriptions isn’t a comfortable colleague with minimalism, so I set this option aside. For present purposes, we’ll allow that statements 2 and 3 really are interchangeable through substitution of coreferential expressions.
certain traditional versions of the correspondence theory of truth, according to which the relation of correspondence is a *truthmaking* relation. That is, on this traditional conception, facts are taken to be whatever it is whose existence necessitates the truth of true statements—that in virtue of which true statements are true—and, moreover, the need to fill the truthmaking role is supposed to be the primary reason for positing facts at all. The orientation of the traditional conception of facts, therefore, is in clear and stark contrast with that of the minimalist conception outlined in the present writing: the minimalist adopts a pleonastic (or, in Fine’s terminology, a propositional) conception of facts according to which its being true that P is sufficient for its being a fact that P. For the minimalist, facts thus aren’t required, just in themselves, to serve as metaphysical or explanatory grounds for truth. Strictly speaking, then, the minimalist is under no obligation to accept LE and CR, since facts are, in the most basic sense, as fine-grained as true propositions, so that each true proposition ‘corresponds with’ its own fact.

Nonetheless, while serving as explanatory ground isn’t a requirement on facts *in general* for the minimalist, one might suspect that the double-pluralist account of realist truth outlined above—the case in which a selected discourse depends for its truth on the pertaining class of facts—attributes to facts an explanatory role very much like the role of truthmaker. Further, I noted in section 3 that insofar as the minimalist is interested in making metaphysical distinctions among facts, so that certain types of facts are to be regarded as real entities, and not mere relics of our ways of speaking, the minimalist would be prudent to seek realism-relevant cruces for facts in the literature on facts as truthmakers. So while someone who takes a minimalist approach to the theory of facts faces no immediate threat from the slingshot argument, the minimalist who hopes to make space for realism with regard to some classes of facts ought to give the argument a careful look.
My own view is that the best defense against the slingshot argument is to challenge LE, both for the generic proponent of facts as truthmakers and for the minimalist who wishes to allow that facts may, under certain conditions, play a truthmaking role. It’s worth considering first, however, exactly why someone might be inclined to accept LE to begin with—what it is about facts conceived as truthmakers that makes LE seem a plausible transformation principle. The answer, or the beginning of an answer, is to be found in what’s now a standard argument for countenancing facts or states of affairs as truthmakers. The argument starts from the truthmaker principle, which can be expressed in slogan form as the dictum that truth supervenes on being. Less cryptically, the truthmaker principle holds that whenever a statement is true, there must exist something whose existence makes the statement true, and therefore whose existence explains why the statement is true. (One might give this thought more general statement by saying that truth and falsity depend on what things there are and how those things are.) If we endorse the truthmaker principle, then we need to ask what type of thing is suited to making a statement true, where ‘making true’ is understood to involve a kind of necessity, viz: if x makes P true, then whenever x exists, P is thereby made true. Take a true sentence like ‘The cup is on the table’; its truthmaker must be an entity whose existence guarantees that the sentence is true. But this means that the truthmaker can’t be the set or sum of the cup and table, or of the cup, the table, and the relation of on-ness, since the collection of cup, table, and relation might exist even in situations in which the sentence is false: suppose that the cup and table exist, but the cup isn’t on the table (and the relation of on-ness is instantiated, but elsewhere). What guarantees the truth of the sentence isn’t merely the collection of two objects and a relation, but their arrangement in a particular fashion: the cup’s being on the table. And the cup’s being on the table—more generally, in the atomic case, an

191 Armstrong (1997) presents what’s likely the most influential instance of the argument, but earlier statements of it are due to Fox (1987) and Bigelow (1988).
object’s having a property—is a state of affairs, and thus a fact when indeed it obtains. So if the truthmaker principle is right, the best candidates for truthmakers are facts or states of affairs.

If this is the extent of one’s motivation for speaking of facts at all, then it won’t be difficult to find motivation as well for the claim that logically equivalent truths correspond with one and the same fact. For the fact with which a true statement corresponds is supposed to be that in virtue of which the statement is true. So when two statements P and Q are logically equivalent—true in precisely the same circumstances—there can be no ontological distinction between the case in which P is true and that in which Q is true. That is, given that truth is to be explained in terms of what there is and what it’s like, there can be no case in which P’s truthmaker exists while Q’s doesn’t, or vice versa: their truthmakers are necessarily coexistent inasmuch as they exist at all. Now, if the truthmaker principle is the only constraint on the individuation of facts, then the state of affairs corresponding to a statement is simply whatever exists in every case in which the statement is true, and there’s no reason to distinguish between necessarily coexistent truthmakers. Therefore, where P and Q are logically equivalent, it’s one and the same state of affairs which would render them true should it obtain. LE is thus vindicated.

The fact theorist, however, ought to reject the assumption that the truthmaker principle, as stated, is the only constraint on the individuation of facts. Certainly the minimalist can’t abide such coarseness of grain; the minimalist holds that facts are to be individuated in a way that parallels the individuation of propositions, so that whenever it’s true that P, it’s a fact that P. (Someone who takes a minimalist approach to theorizing about facts may, of course, wish to hold for metaphysical reasons that in some situations distinct propositions are to be assigned to a single fact, or that certain classes of facts are reducible to others, in accordance with favored realism-relevant cruces. But these considerations aren’t part of the minimalist’s framework of facts as such.) Even apart
from a methodological commitment to minimalism, though, the fact theorist has reason in some cases to distinguish between necessarily coexistent truthmakers. Consider, for example, the statements ‘Socrates is identical with Socrates’ and ‘There are more real numbers than natural numbers.’ I take it that both of these statements are necessarily true, and are thus logically equivalent—true in exactly the same cases. According to the truthmaker principle alone, there are thus no grounds for holding that the truthmaker for one of these statements is distinct from the truthmaker for the other: there’s no ontological difference between the cases in which the one is true and the cases in which the other is true. (That is, there’s no ontological difference between what’s common to all the cases in which the one is true and what’s common to all the cases in which the other is true.) Still, one might reasonably contend that what makes the former sentence true is some fact about Socrates, along with the logical nature of identity, whereas the latter is made true by some fact concerning the properties of the real numbers and of the natural numbers. If we take this line, we’re denying that ‘true in the same cases’ implies ‘true in virtue of the same thing’; while the truthmaker for ‘Socrates is identical with Socrates’ necessarily coexists with the truthmaker for ‘There are more real numbers than natural numbers,’ this is a circumstance in which two things are necessarily coexistent without being identical. To take this line is also to add a second constraint—a relevance constraint—on the individuation of truthmakers: when we pick out the fact that makes ‘Socrates is identical with Socrates’ true, we’re looking for a fact which has something to do with Socrates in particular.

All of this is to suggest that the truthmaker for P must, in some systematic way, have as its focal point whatever P is about. If P ascribes an n-ary relation to n objects, for instance, then the truthmaker must concern those n objects specifically, and their standing in the aforementioned relation specifically. To the extent that it’s plausible to subject one’s theory of facts to a relevance
constraint, the threat posed by the slingshot argument dissipates, since LE is undermined: there’s no reason to suppose that logically equivalent truths correspond with the same fact. And the generic fact theorist does have reason to include a relevance constraint on facts as truthmakers, for not only is it independently credible to presume that a statement, when made true, is made true by what it’s about, but the theorist might also regard the trouble caused by LE as itself justification for a more fine-grained individuation of facts—in which case, the slingshot argument becomes a *reductio* of LE.

The minimalist about facts, in any case, already recognizes a relevance constraint on the correspondence between true statements and facts. The constraint, or something much to the same effect, follows from the pleonastic conception of facts along with the notion of an object’s involvement in a fact. Whenever ‘P’ is a true statement, it’s a fact that P; simply put, then, the objects involved in the fact that P (as picked out syntactically, recall) are what the statement ‘P’ is about. Once this identification is made, the result is what could be called a disquotational account of truthmaking: if a sentence is true, it’s true because what it’s about is the way the sentence says it is. So if ‘Fa’ is true, for example, it’s true *because* what it’s about—a—is F, or, in equivalent factual terms, *because of* a’s being F. Of course, such ‘because’ clauses do little more than express a platitude; the disquotational notion of truthmaking is distinct from the metaphysical notion, which posits a robust and asymmetrical *grounding* relation between truths and facts. While minimalism can incorporate the metaphysical notion where prudent through the use of realism-relevant cruces, its starting point conceives of facts as having a relevance constraint already built in.

This observation raises a final question: will the relevance constraint be *preserved* when the minimalist moves beyond analytic entailments and seeks to make robust metaphysical
discriminations among facts? If not, then the threat posed by the slingshot argument seems to loom just as ominously as ever. Ultimately, whether some sort of relevance constraint remains a part of the theory of facts after the application of realism-relevant cruces—or whether instead LE holds good after all when an account of facts is made metaphysically stringent—will hinge on various methodological questions that can’t be settled here, and which aren’t the responsibility of the minimalist per se to discharge anyway.

But there’s still one respect in which minimalism is prepared to offer its own remedy for the affliction apparently wrought by the slingshot argument. For another way of responding to the argument, not yet considered here, is simply to accept its result—to accept that every true statement, on some level, corresponds with the Great Fact, and with it alone. By the lights of most approaches to theorizing about facts, admitting the correctness of the slingshot’s conclusion is disastrous, because doing so undercuts the notion that was supposed to be the rationale for countenancing facts in the first place: that talk of facts helps to illuminate the nature of truth. The minimalist, though, has a way of making the slingshot’s conclusion palatable for the proponent of facts: the minimalist’s framework enables us to hold, if we like, that with respect to what’s most metaphysically real, the only fact is the Great Fact, without denying the correctness of distinguishing among more specific and pedestrian facts, which are then interpreted as being less than maximally real. An option of this sort will be attractive to anyone harboring sympathy for the metaphysical outlook which maintains that at the most fundamental level of reality, the world is an absolute unity.¹⁹² Indeed, for someone willing to grant the slingshot argument’s assumptions, perhaps the slingshot argument could be seen, and even welcomed, as the basis for embracing a

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¹⁹² Such an outlook has recently been defended by Horgan and Potrc (2000, 2008) and Schaffer (2010), although this brand of monism has historically been attributed to a number of philosophers from the canon—Bradley, Spinoza, Plotinus, etc.—who’ve argued, similarly, for a oneness at the very bottom of things.
form of ontological monism. What the minimalist contributes, then, is a means of embracing it without losing the rationale for speaking of facts—a *plurality* of facts—corresponding with true statements. The minimalist conceives of assertoric discourse as, so to speak, having a life of its own, as an activity capable of carrying on meaningfully even when its concepts and categories don’t quite agree with how things strictly and literally stand in objective reality. From such a perspective, it’s natural to hold that in cases of antirealist truth—cases in which objects, properties, truths, etc., are *projected onto* the world by our own cognitive enterprise—the facts pertaining to the discourse’s truth are to some extent unreal. So even in what the fact theorist might regard as a worst-case scenario, the scenario in which facts are shown to be so coarse-grained that LE is (along with the less contentious CR) a plausible principle to hold, the minimalist is in a position, and perhaps uniquely so, to take the slingshot argument in stride.
Conclusion

The Methodology in Retrospect; Directions for Future Research

The purpose of this conclusion is, first, to give general comment on the methodological approach undertaken in chapters 2 and 3 of this dissertation and, second, to indicate some natural extensions of this inquiry as directions for future research.

The fundamental theoretical approach of this project has been what I’ve referred to (following Wright’s usage) as minimalism. I’ve explained and adopted Wright’s minimalist account of truth and extended it, according to Wright’s own methodological principles, into an account that incorporates the notions of existence and fact as well. The aim, of course, has been to develop a (meta-)metaphysical framework suitable for serving as a staging ground for various debates between realists and antirealists, especially where these debates can be construed as pivoting on the truth of some disputed class of statements or the existence of some disputed class of entities. What all these minimalist theories—of truth, of existence, of facts—have in common, at what I consider the deepest and most general level, is a sort of methodological liberalism: the minimalist opts to take our thought and talk at face value, at least at the beginning of inquiry, and to grant theoretical notions like truth and existence (as well as the corollary notion of fact) to discourses simply on the basis of something like their grammatical form. To favor this approach is thus to make the usual metaphysical considerations a secondary matter, so that, for instance, the concept of truth may be legitimately applied to a discourse regardless of whether that discourse traffics in metaphysically robust (that is, realist) truth.

But one of the virtues of the minimalist’s approach is that it maintains this liberal attitude without denying the intelligibility or importance of questions pertaining to realism and antirealism;
to defer metaphysical considerations isn’t by any means to neglect them. The minimalist *would* be guilty of neglecting metaphysics proper if she were to hold simply that truth (for example) is universal to assertoric discourse as such, and that this is the end of the matter; the resulting position would then be a form of quietism that many are sure to find unsatisfying. The minimalist escapes quietism in metaphysics, however, by acknowledging a *plurality* of ways of being true and ways of existing. And in thus embracing pluralism, the minimalist is able to recapture worthwhile metaphysical contrasts that might’ve otherwise been lost in the liberal recognition of truth and existence across various discourses. So I take it that what characterizes the minimalist’s outlook, as construed here, is this balance between, on one hand, a *broad*-mindedness that respects the truth-like and existence-like *forms* apparent in our use of a whole array of discourses and, on the other, a *tough*-mindedness that respects the distinction between discourses that do, and those that don’t, portray an objective world (in whatever regard and to whatever degree).

I consider it the principal advantage of minimalism that it integrates an element of broad-mindedness and an element of tough-mindedness. But a further advantage, and one that’s essential to the character of the framework, is that it gives methodological priority to the broad-minded element: the alethic and ontological features of a discourse are to be taken at face value *before* any specifically metaphysical question about the discourse’s relationship with mind-independent reality is to be raised. This way of prioritizing makes minimalism, very broadly speaking, an *ordinary language* methodology. A contrasting methodology—one which puts tough-mindedness first, and then lets its breadth be (often unilaterally) constrained by its toughness—is the *ideal language* methodology. Whereas the ordinary language approach seeks to understand philosophical concepts like truth and existence on the basis of their practical employment in everyday contexts, the ideal language approach holds that such concepts can be properly
understood only subsequent to the construction of a rigorous representational system intrinsically (and often uniquely) apt for mapping onto objective features of the world. The proponent of the ideal language approach, for an ontological example, maintains that we should acknowledge as existent only what’s to be found in the domains of our best theories. And this is what places the minimalist in the camp of ordinary language, rather than ideal language: the minimalist recognizes the complete ontology of all our theories—while also, indeed, granting special place to what our best theories talk about, provided that ‘best’ has been satisfactorily defined.

But, as tends to be the case with contrasting pairs, the ordinary language approach and the ideal language approach constitute a spectrum, rather than a binary (if even this one-dimensional characterization isn’t too simplistic), so it’s probably more circumspect to say that minimalism is somewhere on the ordinary language side of the continuum, instead of a pure instance of that approach. In fact, there are a few respects in which minimalism, as expounded here, isn’t a pure case of the ordinary language orientation. For the minimalist begins by interpreting (assertoric) discourses in terms of the standard first-order predicate logic, and fixes upon the notions of truth and existence on the basis of that regimentation. It’s an open question to what extent this method respects the latent form of the discourse in its actual use, or else imposes an artificial structure on it from the outside in the service of a theoretical preconception. Even if the latter, the minimalist will contend that a slight idealization is worth the facility gained in clarifying and situating realist-antirealist debates, and that at any rate the minimalist’s outlook does less violence to our practice than the ideal language outlook is prone to do. Presumably, though, the minimalist will be concerned to argue that everyday (again, I limit myself here to assertoric) discourse really does conform to the guidelines of first-order logic, and that recognition of this fact is the entire extent
to which theoretical idealization is appropriate for the purpose of prosecuting debates between realists and antirealists regarding some subject matter.

The minimalist has a case to make against the ideal language theorist who seeks to take the idealization any further: to go any further along those lines, argues the minimalist, is to risk the loss of methodological neutrality. The essential point of the minimalist’s approach is that it allows the discourse in question, in its own terms, to serve as a kind of raw datum, a metaphysically neutral common ground between the realist and the antirealist concerning the discourse. To demand, as the ideal language theorist does, that the statements of the discourse be recast into some sort of canonical form prior to their metaphysical assessment is to invite distortion—the introduction of concepts and devices that are in fact foreign to the discourse as it actually carries on, or the suppression of those concepts and devices which are definitively germane to the discourse. But even if a method of paraphrase is found which preserves the timbre of the discourse—and even if, what’s improbable, it’s agreed on all sides, by realists and antirealists alike, that the results of the method are properly regarded as canonical—it’s likely that any given method of paraphrase will already be shot through with metaphysical presuppositions. Indeed, it seems that the primary motivation for paraphrasing (or, perhaps more generally, for not taking the deliverances of some discourse at face value) has typically been the desire to mold the discourse so that it fits with preconceived views of how meaning, reference, and truth (among other things) should work, or of what kinds of things there are in the world. The proponent of the ideal language approach considers it the foremost goal of the metaphysician to establish something like a best theory (of the world, of the given subject matter, etc.), but the minimalist is worried that any a priori conception of what the best theory must look like will be fraught with assumptions that hinder realists and antirealists from speaking in common terms on the topic.
So one benefit of being able to set aside the need for canonical translation is that we can escape, at least to some extent, the bias that would be smuggled into the debate, right from the beginning, by metaphysically partisan criteria for translation. The minimalist framework strives to be *ecumenical*, to afford a global frame of reference for situating realist and antirealist positions and conducting the debates between them. The minimalist therefore ought to aim for as much neutrality as possible, and I maintain that the way to do so is to start by taking the data—the various discourses under dispute—at face value, rather than requiring that they be reinterpreted before the inquiry can proceed. This also has the benefit that debates regarding realism and antirealism don’t need to be postponed in cases where it’s still an open question what the ‘true’ logical form of a class of sentences is. Some discourses might never receive decisive, systematic translation into their canonical forms, after all, or there might never be a consensus regarding what the ideal language for a given subject matter should look like. I don’t claim that philosophers should cease their attempts to gain insight into the latent formal structure of various discourses, but surely it’s preferable that questions of realism and antirealism not be held hostage to the success or failure of such attempts. The way to ensure that realism-antirealism disputes can be pursued independently of anxieties over canonical translation into an ideal language is to affirm that discourses—given the minimalist’s basic syntactical and normative constraints, anyway—are already fully legitimate, meaningful, and ready for metaphysical appraisal as they are.

And in laying the theoretical foundations for pluralism, the minimalist framework provides for a peculiar kind of metaphysical appraisal. The upshot of achieving a balance between broad-mindedness and tough-mindedness is that the minimalist is able (though there are ways besides the minimalist’s way of doing this) to countenance a variety of alternative conceptual schemes without abandoning the idea of objective truth. For the methodology presupposes that
representation of objective reality isn’t the only target worth aiming at when we engage in
discursive practice, that on the contrary there are discursive standards apart from objective truth
which can still be properly regarded as alethic standards, and that a discourse has genuinely
ontological significance even apart from any reference to real entities. Importantly, however, in
contrast with a number of antirealist strains in historical and contemporary metaphysics (classified
under such headings as idealism, subjectivism, relativism, constructivism, etc.), the minimalist’s
approach opens this road without instituting a sweeping overhaul of notions like truth and
existence that leaves them always and everywhere merely mind-dependent. Minimalism thus
promotes an ideal of tolerance—but it does so while preserving the possibility of distinguishing
between those discourses that do and those that don’t depict an objective world.

But talk of tolerance here may seem empty: if we were worried that it’d be ‘intolerant’ to
privilege some conceptual schemes over others in that some involve truth (etc.) and the others
don’t, isn’t the minimalist still privileging some conceptual schemes over others—but now on the
basis of objective truth, rather than truth per se? How is this a meaningful improvement with
respect to toleration? But the minimalist has the resources to give an answer here. For a general
type of position which (isn’t mandatory, but nevertheless) naturally suggests itself given
minimalism is that there’s a mind-independent reality but there isn’t necessarily just one correct
way of conceptualizing it. This is an especially natural position for the minimalist to arrive at if
there are multiple realism-relevant cruces, for then it might turn out that one discourse does well
with respect to one realism-relevant crux while another (ostensibly competing) discourse does well
with respect to another, where the two cruces are incommensurable as metrics. (Of course, if we
permit ourselves to take this sort of pluralist position when alternative conceptual schemes appear
to be in conflict with each other, we may thereby be obliged to adopt a theory of meaning that
entails that such schemes don’t genuinely disagree—or else to adjust our logical framework to accommodate inconsistencies of this character.) The pluralist, in this sense, can acknowledge the legitimacy—even the utmost legitimacy, the mind-independent truth—of numerous points of view on the world without having to say that their legitimacy comes merely from their being points of view, but rather comes, in certain cases at least, from their fidelity to the way things really are. Minimalism, inasmuch as it leads to pluralism, thus illuminates a principled and flexible middle path between a rigid dogmatism on one side and a limp relativism on the other. To many, this is a welcome balance.

The two most conspicuous directions for future research, taking the present project as a point of departure, are to extend the inquiry (as it were) upward into the epistemology of objectivity and downward into a theory of discourse.

The development of minimalist theory thus far has remained epistemologically neutral wherever possible. This has been intentional, since the purpose of the minimalist framework has always and only been to provide a setting in which metaphysical debates between realists and antirealists can be impartially staged, and such a purpose is best served when questions about the prospects for substantive metaphysical knowledge are left unbegged. As far as the minimalist alone is concerned, whatever arguments there are for the possibility or impossibility of metaphysical knowledge should be part of—perhaps a product of—the first-order debate that takes place in the setting the minimalist has constructed. Whatever answers to the epistemological question can be found shouldn’t be built into the setting of the debate itself. Still, the minimalist’s framework does include a place for epistemic considerations, should they come up in due course of the debate; this is the function of the realism-relevant cruces. To call them ‘realism-relevant’ is to indicate that
they constitute epistemic criteria for the justified acceptance or rejection of realism regarding the discourse in question.

While I’ve discussed several candidates potentially worth considering as realism-relevant cruces (some of them originally Wright’s, some of them my own), I’ve tried to make it clear that mere adoption of the minimalist’s methodological framework doesn’t commit the theorist to any such cruces in particular. Adoption of cruces is secondary to the prior step of embracing the form of the framework. In fact, it’d violate the desideratum of epistemological neutrality to include any realism-relevant cruces in the description of minimalism itself, since whether there even are such criteria is likely to be an item of debate between realists and antirealists to begin with. An antirealist of a certain stripe, at least, mounts an epistemic argument against realism, grounded in suspicion of the possibility of metaphysical knowledge (as concerns the specific subject matter in question, anyway) in the first place. The skeptical antirealist, in other words, denies that there are any criteria available for ascertaining whether the discourse under dispute corresponds with a mind-independent world. But such a position is clearly compatible with acceptance of the minimalist framework, and there’s no obvious reason why the skeptical antirealist would need to reject the polemical setting that the minimalist introduces. Thus the minimalist ought to make room in the framework for the possibility of realism-relevant cruces, but shouldn’t presuppose (qua minimalist) that any are actually at hand.

A salient avenue for future research, therefore, takes up the matter of whether there is, or could be, a defensible epistemology of objectivity—and correspondingly, whether the minimalist framework can indeed be outfitted with defensible realism-relevant cruces. Addressing this question would presumably require addressing general challenges to the possibility of realism, like the semantic challenges to realism discussed in the first chapter. For if such challenges are
successful—especially when they cut as deeply into the subject as semantic challenges purport to do—then an immediate consequence seems to be that no putative realism-relevant crux could ever be justified in its admission into the minimalist framework.

The other obvious direction for future research—the direction that seeks a deeper foundation in the theory of discourse that underlies the minimalist’s framework—could thus serve a function complementary to the aim of addressing the epistemological question. The minimalist framework relies centrally on a conception of discourse as the medium of our thought and talk, and it holds that what’s essential to our notions of truth and existence derives from the roles these notions play in the structure of our practices of asserting and inferring. I’ve suggested that, according to the minimalist’s approach, the conceptual basis of the notions of truth and existence (along with the subsequent notion of fact) is to be found in the intrinsic grammar of assertoric discourse. The meanings of ‘truth’ and ‘existence,’ that is, stem from the syntactical form in virtue of which a discourse is properly regarded as assertoric. Moreover, the minimalist seeks a syntactical basis (which, however, must thereby also be a normative basis, since the minimalist holds that syntax is regulated by norms governing proper use) for a variety of notions, in addition to the notion of truth, commonly considered to be semantic rather than syntactical notions. It’s plausible to suppose that the minimalist is obligated to explain the notion of reference (or reconstruct a notion of reference), for example, in terms that don’t necessarily venture outside the sphere of syntax alone. In any case, insofar as a notion’s being semantic rather than syntactical confers metaphysical weight on it—as involving relationships between merely linguistic items and really existing, non-linguistic, worldly entities, for instance—the minimalist seeks as far as possible to reduce semantics to syntax.
The theoretical status of syntax, however, merits further investigation in light of the minimalist’s methodological outlook. Perhaps the minimalist’s purposes (or, in case this line now takes us beyond the scope of minimalism as such: the purposes of the theorist sympathetic to minimalism elsewhere) would be best served by a proposal to ground syntax itself in communal standards of correct and incorrect linguistic practice. Something, at any rate, must be offered in account of the pragmatics of discourse, and the relationship between the minimalist’s conception of discourse and theories of meaning—use theories of meaning in particular—ought to be clarified.

An important upshot of such an investigation is that it’d give the minimalist occasion to comment on the nature of non-assertoric discourse: how it differs from assertoric discourse, whether it’s constituted in essentially the same way as assertoric discourse, what role it has in our lives and our thinking as distinct from the role of assertoric discourse. More broadly, the minimalist could seek a grounding for the theory of assertoric discourse in a general theory of our use of language.
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