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TRUTH AND MODALITIES (I)¹

Fabrice Pataut

CNRS, UMR 8011 Sciences, Normes, Démocratie
Paris

ABSTRACT. I contrast two construals of the thesis that truth is independent of verifiability in principle: a modal one and a non modal one. I argue in favor of the modal construal and then, on that basis, that independence holds across the board, i.e., even for statements that are verifiable by us relative to familiar, customary, non-skeptical standards.

KEY WORDS AND NAMES. Bivalence, Contingency, Disquotation, Knowability, Modalities, Necessity, Possibility, Semantic Realism, Truth ; Bernays (Paul), Dummett (Michael A. E., Sir), Hilbert (David), Loar (Brian), Peirce (Charles Sanders).

1. *Realism and independence*

2. *Possibilities*

3. *Contingencies*

4. *Conclusions*

Bibliography

1. The article will be published in three separate installments. The first includes section 1 only.

1. Realism and independence

In what might turn out to be the fundamental sense of the word “realist,” inherited from Michael Dummett, a realist about a given class of statements holds that the statements of that class could be true even though we ignore that they are. Their truth, the realist claims, is independent of our ability to recognize the fact by the appropriate means (see, e.g., *Dummett [1973] 1978*).

This formulation of the doctrine raises a crucial issue for both realists and their opponents. Should the realist be ready to argue for the independence claim and the antirealist for its rejection even when we happen to be able to acknowledge the truth of the statements of some disputed class? Or, on the contrary, should the realist restrict its scope so that the claim applies to pro tempore undecided statements only, and the antirealist rest content with it as far as statements that are verifiable by normal, customary, non-skeptical standards are concerned? Dummett and most of his opponents share the conception that the realism vs. antirealism debate exists for pro tempore undecided statements only and that decidable or verifiable statements are immune to the disagreement, so that whenever, e.g., proofs are available in mathematics, or data (behavioral or otherwise) may be gathered for statements about the mental states of others, or evidence pro or con may be recovered now or at some later time for statements about the past, the statements belonging to these particular classes are immune to the disagreement. This, I shall argue, is mistaken.

If the modal construal of the realist doctrine is chosen, the realist is de facto committed to the view that the statements of some disputed class, if true, are so whether or not we are in a position to acknowledge their truth or are able to put ourselves in that position. At first blush, it seems that this is what independence means, implies or is about, and that the realist's contentious claim must accordingly be construed as holding across the board, i.e., for classes of decidable statements and for classes of pro tempore undecided ones alike without discrimination. The claim to the effect that the two cases are substantially dissimilar would be invidious and the reason for this lies in our understanding of the notion of independence. Independence is a matter of autonomy or self-sufficiency. For a thing *A* (say, truth) and another thing *B* (say, its recognizability by us) to be independent from each other, it must be the case that *A* could obtain, or be instantiated, or make sense, without *B* also obtaining, or being instantiated, or making sense.

In the case we're considering here, it isn't so obvious the converse should hold. It might seem on the contrary that if *B* obtains, *A* thereby does simply because when the appropriate recognitional abilities with respect to truth are correctly activated, or could be, truth is thereby secured, or could be (provided skepticism isn't an option). If it turns out that some statement is true once our inquiry has reached completion, or would should we decide to inquire, then its truth *isn't* independent from its actual recognition or in principle recognizability by us (at least not anymore). In other words, one might complain that whenever the appropriate capacities are successfully

activated, or may be, *dependence*, rather than independence, is our lot.

Now if one is generous and lenient rather than strict and inflexible with respect to the notion that should replace truth or constrain it in the antirealist perspective, a different conclusion might be drawn. If one takes truth to be truth à la Peirce in the long run of scientific discovery (see *Peirce [1905] 1998*), it still might be argued that since *B* doesn't yet obtain and will obtain only in an idealized epistemic state we still are very far from, *A* is in a perfectly legitimate sense independent from *B*. Only a strict construal of the antirealist position according to which truth is to be acknowledged in a finite number of steps, say by way of verification in polynomial time so that the feasibility of the verification is guaranteed, would warrant the conclusion to the effect that the converse also holds.

Although the disagreement about the weak vs. the exacting construals is a genuine one as far as the strength of the position to be defended by Dummett's antirealist is concerned, it would be a mistake to argue that the dissent threatens in any way the workableness or intelligibility of the opponent's position. A realist defending the modal claim isn't disputing the truth of actually verified statements (whether or not the verification is carried out in polynomial time, or in some non polynomial yet suitably short time). The crucial point, rather, is that statements that are either conclusively verifiable in the long run of our inquiry, or actually verified by us in some specified short span of time, *logically* could be true even though not (as in fact they are), either verifiable in principle or actually verified by us *hic et*

nunc (see, e.g., *Loar 1987: 85*)².

If that is so, then it would seem that for any *s* of some disputed class:

(1) $\diamond (s \text{ is true} \bullet s \text{ is unverifiable by us})$

holds just because there is no link or connection, either conceptual or practical between truth and its recognition. The two are mutually independent in two different albeit related ways : in the sense that no notion or *concept* of recognition, either feasible or in principle, may be extracted from the notion of truth, as if were analytically, and in the sense that no *practical* use or exercise of recognitional capacities fitted for *s*'s area of discourse may constrain truth (or allow us to eschew it altogether).

Several points might be at stake here, related either to concepts or practices, and we must accordingly distinguish between them.

First, there is the claim that no inconsistency, or logical contradiction, or paradox, is implied in our holding (1) or follows from it: (1) is consistent with the laws of logic and nothing downright illogical follows, either from its assertion or from what logically follows from it.³

Secondly, there is the contention that no entrenched cognitive shortcoming makes it impossible for us to grasp one (the truth of *s*) without

2. Whether or not this also commits us to the view that truth is a substantial property, over and above disquotation, is a further problem I shall consider later on.

3. There is, of course, a disagreement regarding which laws have to be counted as the laws of logic, so that one might object that what is consistent with the laws of *some* logic, or what logically follows from them, turns out to be inconsistent with the laws of *another one* and not follow at all from its laws. I shall go back to this crucial point of this particular formulation or aspect of the independence claim later on.

thereby grasping the other (the verifiability of s by us).⁴ This may be construed as a negative claim about concept formation: there is no reason to believe that we cannot form a bona fide concept of truth *not* constrained by whatever appropriate epistemic notion would constrain it in the antirealist perspective, given the area of discourse the statement belongs to, e.g., proof in the mathematical case.

One may also give a Kantian flavour to the debate and turn it into a debate over whether or not it is necessary for us to conceive of truth, or to represent truth as being constitutively linked to the conditions of its recognizability by us. Under that construal of the realist proposal, the advocate of (1) would be opposing a Kantian or neo-Kantian point to the effect that in order for truth to be a proper object of cognition, some a priori conditions have to be met regarding its accessibility to us. In yet other words, the advocate of (1) would be rejecting the view that in order for the truth of any s to be grasped at all, the following epistemic necessity should hold:

$$(2) \Box (s \text{ is true} \rightarrow s \text{ is verifiable by us}).$$

The modal notion to be rejected by the realist would have to be epistemic because the necessity at play here would have to be unpacked as a notion that embeds the conditions that have to be satisfied or fulfilled in order for

4. This formulation is the one closest to Dummett's concern. Dummett's antirealist claims that our understanding of a statement, or of a statement's meaning consists in a mastery of its verifiability conditions, so that we have no bona fide grasp or understanding of its verification-transcendent truth conditions, i.e., of what it would be like for that statement to be true independently of our possibly acknowledging its truth. See, e.g., *Dummett [1973] 1978* and *Loar 1987*, especially at pages 85-86.

truth be known or grasped at all *by us* (as opposed to a notion that would have to be grasped by other beings with a different cognitive set up), so that a bona fide notion of truth must abide by (2).

One might want to recall here the Kantian distinction between the conceptual properties that objects of kind *X* possess in general (as opposed to the individual properties that some particular instances of *X* don't share with other particulars of the same kind) from the *intuitional properties* that all *X* possess insofar as they are objects of our intuition. The Kantian point is that these so-called intuitional properties may not be extracted, either from the general concept or from the individual instances. The neo-Kantian point would be that for the truth of any *s* to be grasped or acknowledged at all, the truth-conditions of *s* must possess properties that allow these conditions to be the object of our cognition (whether or not of an intuitional kind). So there is no choice: the modal operator \Box in (2) *must be read as epistemic*. In yet other words, given the relevant information we are able to gather about how the world is, i.e., given the way the truth-conditions of our statements about the world are fulfilled when they are, our claims regarding these conditions must be construed as being about how things must be given our information about *how the world in fact is*, rather than claims about how things must be in *all the various ways the world could have been*.

There are of course crucial differences between these standpoints, to which I shall return. For the time being one might perhaps unpack the realist

standpoint at stake in the debate in the following way. One difficulty in this respect is due to the difference between the view according to which the concept of verifiability in principle, or of actual verification, is already included in the notion of truth, and the view according to which the capacities that have to be activated in order to establish truth constrain the semantic notion. The first one might be called a *containment* view, the second, a *recognition* view.

Independence with respect to the possibility of truth determination doesn't as it were vanish, when, as a matter of contingency, the possibility becomes actualized, i.e., when we happen to possess the abilities which must be activated in order for us to decide the truth of statements of a given class and when we succeed in carrying out proofs, or in gathering empirical evidence. The possibility of recognition, verification or acknowledgement is a genuine or natural one (provided that we disregard skeptical standards) and there is no reason to think that it may (or indeed must) always be activated, or that we can't make sense of evidential relations between us and the truth of some *s* breaking down so that *s*'s truth conditions are divorced from its assertability conditions.

If that line of argument is correct, the realist is indeed committed to the view that what makes the statements of the disputed class true is something which is not intrinsically connected to the means of recognition we must appeal to when acknowledging truth, i.e., proofs in the mathematical case and the identification and gathering of defeasible, partial and gradual

evidence in the empirical case.

This lack of constitutive or intrinsic connection between the truth-makers of statements and our human capacities of recognition might perhaps be illustrated by the platonist standpoint in the philosophy of mathematics when, e.g., mathematical statements of an axiomatized theory are taken as privileged examples.

Paul Bernays, comparing Euclid's axiom system to Hilbert's, writes:

[...] Euclid speaks of figures to be *constructed*,* whereas, for Hilbert, system of points, straight lines, and planes exist from the outset. Euclid postulates: One can join two points by a straight line; Hilbert states the axiom: Given any two points, there exists a straight line on which both are situated. "Exists" refers here to existence in the system of straight lines.

This example shows already that the tendency of which we are speaking consists in viewing the objects as cut off from all links with the reflecting subject.

Since this tendency asserted itself especially in the philosophy of Plato, allow me to call it "platonism."

* The italics are provided by Charles Parsons in his translation from the French.

Paul Bernays [1935] 1983: 258-259

Should anyone holding (1) and rejecting (2) follow that tendency and view both the objects and the statements about them as cut off from all links with the abilities we have at our disposal in our capacity as reflecting subjects?

Dummett's antirealist quite naturally resists the inclination Bernays writes about here. The question we're asking now is whether his opponent should

be in agreement with him when considering classes of decidable or verifiable statements.

Dummett's views on meaning strongly suggest that he should. This is where what I've called the recognitional view, as opposed to the containment view, comes into the picture. If, as Dummett's contends, our understanding of the meaning of any statement whatsoever, either decidable or not, consists in a mastery of its verifiability conditions, it follows that we cannot have any mastery or bona fide understanding of what it would be like for a statement to be both true and unverifiable by us. There is just no way for us to master such conditions, or indeed form in any way a bona fide concept of them.

Part of the explanation of why a Dummettian antirealist will reject the modal claim under *any* construal comes from the way the satisfiability of the manifestability requirement for the decidable cases is construed. We may agree with Dummett's antirealist that when the statements are decidable, our grasp or mastery of their verifiability conditions is exhaustively manifested by our actually deciding the statements or by showing that we are in a position to do so. This is obviously not something we may do when the statements are *pro tempore* undecidable. A knowledge that a statements's truth-conditions are satisfied, no matter how it may be manifested, cannot be equivalent to a knowledge that the very same conditions could be fulfilled unbeknownst to us.

In yet other words, we cannot achieve a mastery of the verification-

conditions of either (1), or of the non-modal

(3) (s is true • s is unverifiable by us).

The proposal, as offered by Dummett in *Dummett [1973] 1978*, is nevertheless unsatisfactory as far as independence is concerned for the following reason.

The observation that the first knowledge or mastery may be manifested in a certain way gives us no clue as to how the second might be manifested. If we unpack the contrast put before us at the disadvantage of the pro tempora undecided cases, what we are being offered is a remark to the effect that a knowledge or a mastery of the truth-conditions of particular instances of “it is possible that s is true although we ignore it” is not something that may be construed on a par with a knowledge or a mastery of the truth-conditions of instances of s when s is decidable. It cannot indeed because if we were to look for a justification of our inability to verify s , we would have to begin by attempting to verify s . Our failure to decide the pro tempora undecided s should lead us to conclude that the negation of s holds. Once the negation of s is established, the road to an establishment of the independence of the truth of s is closed. It isn’t possible to show that s is absolutely neither provable nor refutable: intuitionistic negation forbids this.⁵ In other words, there is no way of manifesting a mastery or knowledge of the truth-conditions of instances of the modal claim that could satisfy Dummett’s antirealist

⁵ See *Dummett 1977*: 17.

constraints on truth given the intuitionistic reading of negation is presupposed (as opposed to justified).

Another important point must be stressed concerning the neo-Kantian construal of (2) in relation to the logical constant for negation. What is claimed here is that the only bona fide notion of “the truth of *s*” we may grasp, for any *s*, is one according to which these conditions are constrained by knowledge. There are no “things in themselves” embedded in such conditions. We might perhaps be able to think of them somehow as things in themselves, but we cannot *cognize them* as things in themselves (see *Kant [1781, 1787] 1997*: A35/B51, B69, B36, A360 and *Allison 2004*). Just as we credit ourselves with a grasp of the meaning of a classical constant we, as a matter of fact, can’t achieve when making inferences using classical negation, e.g., when eliminating double negation, we credit ourselves with a knowledge we do not possess when we credit ourselves with a grasp of the possibly verification transcendent truth conditions of our statements, whether atomic or complex (i.e., built up from atomic statements by a finite application of rules governing the logical constants). We might be able to think or to represent such meaning and conditions as cut off from the way we fix the meaning and grasp the conditions, but the thought or representation thereby obtained is *without* any genuine cognitive content.

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