

**AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE MEANINGFULNESS  
OF MORAL LANGUAGE**

**BY**

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## INTRODUCTION

Moral language presents an interesting case for analysis if a theorist's concerns are located around issues of meaning. It appears that what makes it interesting are the ways in which moral language is different from the language of some other known discourses. Meaning in the language of science, for instance, is much simpler, though not in content, certainly in terms of what we take scientific assertions to be doing. The simplicity of the meaning of scientific assertions is due to the fact that science exists in a well established paradigm over which there appears mostly to be consensus in terms of scientific language having literal meaning and forwarding objective truth. This consensus sees the linguistic behaviour within scientific discourse placing relatively (to moral language for instance) uncontroversial constraints on linguistic behaviour. Simply, we all expect the same thing from science: objectivity, precise representation of facts, valid deduction and careful induction and that version of truth which most people, who are not deeply involved in a critical discussion around truth, take truth to be: as something based on proof. When we make scientific assertions we simply want our assertions to be taken at face value and we present them as being true in the ways we have just mentioned. So, even though scientific truth is easily defined but hard to achieve, because of the standards set for such truth and the technical content of the language, the meaning of scientific language, by this view, remains relatively unproblematic.

Literary, or metaphorical, language is as easily distinguished from moral language. The types of statements used in literature (poetry, novels, plays and other sorts of narrations) are used with specific intent. Literary language is characterised by its propensity to purposefully convey its content in such a way that it is not always overtly available to the reader or listener. This is not a *fault* of literary (metaphorical) language but is a defining characteristic thereof. However, as

interesting as literary theory is, it is not necessary, for the purpose of this thesis, to look very deeply at the intricacies of this discourse. The present point is merely to show, superficially, how moral language contrasts with that of literary language. The primary distinction between these two discourses, it seems, rests partially in the fact that metaphorical statements employ language not only as a means to convey content but also, formally; to showcase something of the particular structure of the language itself in conveying the content. The language is seen, so to speak, as an end in itself. Literary language is not merely a medium for conveying a message but is explicitly presented as a structure of which the value is determined by some sorts of aesthetic norms. Truth, in literature, then takes on another character altogether. And this fact, of truth taking on another form to, for instance, scientific truth, is not controversial either.

In what way then is it being proposed that moral language is different to either of the preceding examples? And why does this difference present certain problems for theories about meaning in moral language? It is being proposed that there exists a tension between the use of moral assertions and what sort of truth moral language is, in fact, capable of. Unlike scientific language, which presents a case for congruency between use and the establishment of scientific truth, and metaphorical language which also presents a case of harmony between our use of such language and the expectations we have of it, moral language, it is being claimed, says one thing but does quite another. This tension, in a sense, between the means and ends of moral propositions, is what forms the foundation of the problem about meaning for moral language investigated in this thesis. It is the primary claim of this thesis that, in looking at the way in which we use moral language it is apparent that there is only one theory of meaning which can correctly capture our linguistic behaviour within moral discourse: a verificationist theory about meaning. But it is with complete

understanding of the sort of resistance to verificationist theories about meaning (particularly for discourses such as moral discourse) that an attempt is made to counter the usual objections to such a theory about meaning. It is my wish that the reader should assume (if there is a concern here) that there is present, in the nature of this thesis, a sensitivity towards Wittgensteinian notions of the inappropriateness of dealing with all discourses with the standards set by empirical sciences. The argument which constitutes this thesis, however, will be premised on [ironically] another Wittgensteinian notion: use. It will be argued that it is the indicative nature of moral language which has made it vulnerable to being measured by standards which clearly are not appropriate for it. The suggestion is that moral language insists on competing in an inappropriate category and is therefore being measured by the wrong tools.

The intention then, needless to say, is not to offer a motivation for, or a way of, reforming human morality but rather to gain some clarity in what we take ourselves to be doing when making moral assertions and what meaning moral language is, *in fact*, apt for. The claim is that moral language should be regarded as assertoric, as this is the way in which it is used, but that the truth of moral assertions is indeterminate which, if meaning and truth are closely related, must translate into the meaning of moral language not being quite as settled as we should like it to be.

The thesis is structured as follows:

In chapter 1 I aim to dismiss the classical objection to the Verification Principle. This objection to verification theories about meaning reads: that the guiding thesis is not, itself, verifiable which makes verification theories about meaning self contradictory or at least theoretically unstable.

I propose, in chapter 1, to overcome the above problem for the meaning of the principle by discussing how the principle has framed itself by setting in place standards for meaning which require that propositions be verifiable. I shall argue that the principle cannot be known a posteriori because the extensions of the terms which it employs are not knowable via the senses.

In section 2 it is proposed that the principle be regarded as an a priori knowable proposition because its terms are purely theoretical. I shall argue that the Verification Principle must be able to be analytically true (or true by definition). In looking at possible notions of "true by definition" I shall argue against Paul Horwich's rejection of implicit definition yielding a priori knowledge. His argument will be resisted by an appeal to an argument forwarded by Bob Hale and Crispin Wright which states that implicit definition can yield a priori knowledge if 1. implicit definition is properly understood and 2. if the class of propositions which are implicitly defined is correctly constrained. Section 3 will see an argument for the Verification Principle falling within the class of propositions which is implicitly defined if it is rephrased as a conditional statement. This is because speakers understand, a priori, that for a conditional to hold the relation of the concepts (within the antecedent and the consequent) must be a certain way. The verification condition(s) of the principle therefore becomes a positive proof of this relation. It will be argued that the project which sees the further proof of this conditional will be responsible for the explicit definition of the Verification Principle. By implication this means that a speaker who does not possess the necessary knowledge about why and how the conditional holds true cannot possess a real understanding (meaning) of the proposition which states the Verification Principle but that the principle is, indeed, verifiable.

The central problem to which chapter 2 is addressed is that some of the disrepute that verificationist theories about meaning have enjoyed has been situated within the analytical tradition of



philosophy. This phenomenon seems to be a contradiction based on a serious misunderstanding of what verificationist theories propose and maybe even a misconception of the aims of analytical philosophy. Also, if it can be conclusively argued that sense should determine reference, this will provide a very effective basis for a further argument for Verificationism.

In an effort to clarify this misconception about verificationist theories I shall, in section 1 of chapter 2, outline what I see the motivations for the linguistic turn in philosophy are. In doing so it will be illustrated how closely associated verificationist theories about meaning, in particular, are with linguistic (analytical) philosophy. It will be argued that analytical philosophy and verificationist theories about meaning share the same aims: to “clean up” the language which we use to phrase the questions and solutions of our philosophical problems by appealing to the way in which speakers use language.

In outlining, firstly, the difference between sense and reference, in section 2 of this chapter, it becomes clear that there are two salient ingredients to meaning. It will be argued, counter the possible adoption a position which regards meaning as entirely determined by rule following or something like the apt naming of objects in reality, that such a position regards only referencing as important to establishing the meaning of concepts and propositions. The additional claim is that this is the wrong way to think about meaning. The reason for this is; that sense ought to be regarded a salient ingredient of meaning, particularly within assertoric language, because we do not all understand a term in the same way, even while making reference to the same object and even if we share the same linguistic community adhering to the same linguistic rules. Regarding sense as a salient ingredient of meaning, it will be argued, is important for understanding what we are doing when making moral claims and forms part of why meaning should be determined by verification

conditions. The claim is that sense is closer (than referencing) to what we regard as the verification conditions of a proposition.

Chapter 3 primarily addresses the problem which “use” of moral propositions raise for moral truth and meaning. The claim is that when we use language indicatively we are making claims to truth. Contrary to much philosophical deliberation about theories of truth the implied truth of indicative language is generally not regarded, by the individual speaker, as something different to the status of a proposition when it has effectively tracked a real and objective state of affairs. In the case of moral assertions we believe ourselves and others to have tracked moral facts. It is also the case that speakers think it important that the person who is making the claim can show how they know something they have said is true. It is, therefore, problematic that some meaning theories do not take this need for evidence into account.

My continued attempt at building a case for a verificationist theory about meaning sees chapter 3 forcing a concession that speakers expect evidence in support of their and others’ assertoric claims, including moral claims. This will be achieved by using two well developed theories (in sections 1 and 2) around what speakers learn when they learn languages. In doing this it should become clear that our moral claims stand in need of further proof- but not because a philosophical theory about meaning says so but rather because linguistic behaviour requires this.

Section 1 then addresses the manifestation requirement, which states that speakers require that, additional to making an assertion, they and others should be able to manifest how they know their claims have tracked the relevant facts. This forms part of what is the a priori distinction between facts and fallacies. The claim will be that theories about meaning that do not appeal to evidence

(verification conditions) as an aspect of meaning are guilty of overlooking an important aspect of what speakers intuitively regard as part of what they and others mean when they speak. It is my aim to show that moral language is also subject to this requirement and that, because of this requirement, moral language has a certain burden of proof. The overall conclusion of the thesis (not directly concluded within this chapter) is that moral language cannot meet this burden of proof because of the inability of moral agents to access the relevant facts.

The acquisition requirement, as discussed in section 2 of chapter 3, is simply a requirement of proof of competency placed by speakers on linguistic activity. In other words, the central claim of the acquisition theory is that theories of meaning need to give an account of what it is when a speaker is a competent one because this is assumed, by linguistic societies, to be an integral part of learning a language. It is, therefore, necessary for the theories which attempt to describe how we derive meaning to take this requirement into account. I shall show that the acquisition requirement insists that the delineation between competent and incompetent speakers is that competent speakers can use language effectively to state the truth and this entails that achievement of truth is regarded as a practical achievement which must be evident to at least the speaker himself. Because the acquisition requirement is more than just being competent at rule following, the aim will be to illustrate that only verificationist theories about meaning can accommodate this requirement fully.

The challenge borne from the manifestation and acquisition requirements for a verificationist theory about meaning is that Verificationism can still be resisted if truth is accepted to be evidence transcendent. In other words, if truth is not an epistemic notion then speakers are not required to be able to manifest the knowledge they have of the truth value of their propositions. Chapter 4

addresses this problem in the two sections available to it in the following way: a case for an evidentially constrained notion of truth.

The first section then sees a discussion about truth as an epistemic notion. My argument will be that truth must be regarded as evidentially constrained because this is consistent with the way in which speakers use assertoric language and, therefore, also moral propositions. However, it will be my claim that the implication of accepting truth to be evidentially constrained is that the truth of all assertions is not determinable. The obvious reason: if the speaker does not have access to the evidence which shows the assertion to be either true or false then it seems wrong to think of the assertion as "either true or false". This section thus sees the beginning of an argument against the Principle of Bivalence.

In section 2 I shall argue that an evidence transcendent notion of truth is one which makes no appeal to speaker cognition. My aim is to show that evidence transcendent truth gives rise to the Principle of Bivalence (which is a foundational premise of classical logic) because if the truth or falsity of a claim has nothing to do with access to evidence then it does, indeed, seem to be the case that all statements must, theoretically, be either true or false. The claim is that it is wrong to endorse classical logic in cases where we lack evidence because speakers (but maybe not some philosophers) simply do think of truth as something based on proof or evidence. Evidence is what gives rise to the delineation between claims to truths and falsities and, if meaning has anything to do with use, it seems that truth should remain construed as an epistemic notion.

In Chapter 2 it would have been concluded that truth should be an epistemic notion. In chapter 3 it appears that this notion of truth has certain seemingly problematic consequences for meaning: If

truth is evidentially constrained then which discourses are still apt for truth? Surely an evidentially constrained notion of truth will severely limit what propositions are even, in principle, capable of ever being true. The most serious problem for the task at hand, being the defence of a verificationist theory about meaning, is naturally whether or not moral language is capable of truth. This is a particularly sensitive problem because moral agents are generally rather seriously committed to their moral beliefs and the ensuing statements which they then make. And if meaning and truth are in anyway co-dependent then this issue of truth aptness and truth itself will surely have a bearing on what meaning moral language can have.

I propose to overcome these problems in the three sections of chapter 5, wherein I shall argue that moral language is indeed truth apt. This conclusion will be based on the fact that the basis for deciding the truth aptness of propositions should be metaphysically neutral. Additional to this metaphysically neutral basis there are some theoretical requirements. These theoretical requirements are that the discourse is assertoric and that the truth predicate is partially characterised by the Disquotational Schema. A further requirement is that such utterances are governed by norms of warranted assertibility. My intention is to illustrate that moral language does meet with such criteria.

The starting point of section 2 is to show that meaning is generally regarded as determined by what would make a statement true. It will thus be assumed to be relatively uncontroversial that there is a positive relationship between truth and meaning. It will be illustrated how some theories about meaning appeal to truth conditions and others, such as Verificationism, appeal to verification conditions. The argument will be that an epistemic notion of truth requires meaning to be determined by verification conditions because this is exactly what is entailed by an epistemic

notion of truth: that truth/falsity is only conferred when the speaker has knowledge of the evidence which would make the proposition so. It will be shown that a further implication of occupying this theoretical position is that the truth value of some claims are not determinate. Lastly, I shall argue that if the truth value of moral language is indeterminate, and meaning is determined by the conditions which would make a proposition true, then the meaning of moral language must also be indeterminate.

The task of section 3, in addressing the above problems for meaning in moral language, is to propose that semantic anti-realism is the correct semantic theory to endorse for moral language. The reason for this is that it is impossible to be a moral realist and simultaneously subscribe to an epistemic notion of truth. It would have already been concluded in the previous chapter that an epistemic notion of truth is the only notion of truth consistent with our linguistic behaviour when making moral assertions. Since it has not been effectively shown (to my satisfaction) how speakers and moral agents will come by (know) things like objective moral facts, and knowledge of such facts would be necessary for endorsing moral realism within an evidentially constrained truth, moral realism must be resisted. It is my claim that semantic anti-realism seems to present all the right sort of qualities for a semantic theory about moral language.

The last chapter of this thesis looks at some serious objections to some of the central tenets of Verificationism. I take Expressivism to be one of the most effective theories at resisting some of the salient premises of verificationist theory. If Expressivism is right about moral language not being in the business of making true or false statements this does not bode well for our previous claims about the truth aptness of moral language. At least not the sort of aptness for truth that verificationist theories endorse. And if Expressivism is right about moral statements being merely

expressions of our attitudes, dispositions and passions then Verificationism must be wrong about the assertoric nature of moral language. Chapter 6 asks and answers: What then can we take to be the case about moral language?

An argument in support of the correctness of Verificationism (as contrasted with Expressivism) sees me reasoning, in section 1, as follows: In Chapter 5 I have stated a commitment to some criteria for truth aptness. One of these criteria is that theories about what language is apt for truth must start from a metaphysically neutral basis. My claim here is that Expressivism is metaphysically loaded, in other words, it reveals a metaphysical bias at the foundations of the theory. This metaphysical presupposition has the form of assuming that there are no moral facts which our propositions can track. I shall argue that, according to the previously endorsed criteria for theories about meaning, Expressivism is just not doing its work properly and its conclusions about the truth aptness of moral language are simply not to be taken seriously.

Section 2 then continues by claiming, based on the fact that it is wrong to presuppose anything about a metaphysical state of affairs, or to conclude with any certainty anything about the truth of some existential claims (such as ones about the existence of moral facts), without evidence it seems wrong to say that moral claims are not genuine assertions. Surely the criteria for whether or not a claim is an assertion are, firstly, its logical form and, secondly, the intention with which it is used? My reasoning will be that moral agents make moral claims with the full and conscious intent of stating moral truths. My argument will run as follows: Expressivists may be right, on some psychological level, about what *in fact* happens when we make moral claims, but this is not helpful for a theory about meaning because we mean for, and therefore claim to understand, our moral

statements to be doing a certain type of work. And I doubt if any moral agent would be willing to admit that this is the expression of a passion or disposition.



## CHAPTER 1

### A serious challenge to the Verification Principle: Has the Verification Principle rendered itself meaningless by its own standards?

Chapter 1 addresses, what would probably be regarded as the most serious challenge to verificationist theories about meaning: that the Verificationist Principle is itself meaningless because, by its own standards, it must but cannot be verified. It is very important that this chapter is not seen as a defense of *what* the principle proposes: that meaning should be determined by verification conditions. Chapter 1 serves as an attempt to address a very long standing, nearly classical, objection to the Verification Principle itself, and that is that it has fallen on its own sword. Section 1 of this chapter outlines exactly how the Verification Principle has framed itself. In other words, what exactly is it maintaining about meaning when it says that meaning should be derived from verification conditions and not truth conditions? The primary argument forwarded in this chapter is that the Verification Principle is not meaningless. It will thus be the initial task to make explicit exactly how the objection, that the principle itself cannot be verified and must therefore be meaningless, runs. The task of section 1 of this chapter will sketch how the principle has apparently “framed” itself. It then is the work of the sections 2 and 3 respectively to counter this objection. In offering a way of resisting the objection I shall forward different ways in which the principle can have meaning and shall, by critical engagement with a few possibilities, rule out the ones which are not appropriate and endorse one particular way in which the principle could have meaning, which is also consistent with what it itself proposes about meaning. In section 2 I rule out the possibility that the principle be understood as an a posteriori statement. This, it will be argued, is for the obvious reason that it does not make reference to empirical content. Section 2 then does a minor survey of a

few possible ways of understanding the a priori in order to establish whether or not the principle can meet its own criteria for meaningfulness if it were regarded as a priori statement. This is an unapplied section as the survey is done with very little reference to the principle itself, the aim being to establish, firstly, how the a priori should be construed. I shall rule out the legitimacy of the synthetic a priori and also make a case, counter Quine, for the analytic. Both these arguments, against the synthetic a priori and for the analytic, are typical positions occupied by verificationist theories and the relevance of this should become clear throughout the rest of the thesis. In particular, this section will see an investigation of Paul Horwich's argument against definition yielding any sort of knowledge; that we can know anything from definition. This claim will be resisted by appealing to the argument Wright and Hale make for why certain forms of implicit definition can yield knowledge. The reason why I have seen fit to resist Horwich's argument against meaning preceding knowledge is that there do seem to be some very particular cases, be it a small class, which can be construed as implicitly defined and able to yield knowledge and that, furthermore, this would be an appropriate way of understanding the Verification Principle.

It will be concluded, in section 3, that the principle be regarded as meaningful in the same way as any other principle forwarded as some sort of guiding thesis. In other words, it is maintained that the Verification Principle is normative in nature in the same way as any other principle whether scientific or moral. The Verification Principle is normative about how we ought to determine meaning. In using Hale and Wright's argument it will be shown how exactly principles are to be understood and that, in rephrasing the principle as a conditional statement, the Verification Principle can be shown to have verification conditions which can be met and, hence, does have meaning.

The general aim of the first chapter of the thesis is to put to rest the reader's concerns around a thesis which is proposing to endorse a theory about meaning which has been widely discredited based on the incoherence of its own guiding thesis. It will be the work of the rest of the thesis, once this major objection has been laid to rest, to defend what the Verification Principle poses about meaning.

It seems as if it is impossible to forward any complete and serious sort of defense for Verificationism without addressing this classic and enduring criticism against it: The proposition which articulates the Verification Principle cannot have any meaning because it cannot, itself, be verified. When the principle states that meaning is verification conditions it must surely, on pain of contradiction and complete self annihilation, be able to show that it meets its own standards for meaning? It is, after all, a proposition which is making a claim about something, and is assumed to be meaningful and to be stating something true. Any proponent of verificationism, or any other theory of meaning, will require that its central tenet is regarded as meaningful before the work of proving the validity of such a project can be embarked on. So, before we can start looking at how this principle, in fact, does prescribe how meaning should be derived it must be shown how it is itself to be understood. It is only the latter with which this chapter is concerned.

The verification principle, as specified by A. J. Ayer reads something like this: A sentence has literal meaning if, and only if, the proposition it expresses is either analytically or empirically verifiable (1970; 5). Clearly, logical positivism, of which Ayer was a proponent, only endorsed these two types of literal meaning (analytical and empirical). It should be said that other types of meaning, outside the sphere of analytical and empirical meaning, were regarded as possible by the positivists but were not of primary concern to a positivistic theory of meaning. The verification

principle was intended to be a guiding thesis for the sorts of claims which intended to be saying something literally true (factual), which emerges in the shape of assertoric language, but which, for several reasons, according to the logical positivists, was not always in the legitimate shape for some specified discourses, such as moral discourse. It is, therefore, quite simply, a waste of any sort of philosophical effort to accuse the verification principle of rendering, for instance, blatantly metaphorical language meaningless. The principle does not have anything, directly, to say about literature, poetry and other such language. But it does have something to say about moral language because of its assertoric façade.

Even though, in defence of the meaningfulness of the principle, much could be made of the fact that it is not the term “meaningful” which has been employed in the aforementioned articulation of the principle, but rather “literal meaning”, this will not be employed as part of the strategy for showing that the proposition, which states the verification principle, does have meaning. In other words, one of the lines of defence that could be taken would be to show that the principle has metaphorical meaning and, therefore, does not need to be verifiable.

But the particular version of verificationism which will be under investigation here is not that of the Logical Positivists but rather its more contemporary manifestation, the verification theory of philosophers such as Michael Dummett and Crispin Wright. In *Truth and other Enigmas* Dummett speaks of the logical positivists switching from an explanation of meaning in terms of truth conditions (those conditions which, if they obtain, would make a statement true) to verification conditions (the conditions under which the content of a statement would be verified by the speaker) (1978; 421). This switch alludes to the precise difference there is between knowing what conditions *would make* a proposition true or false (truth conditions) and knowing how these conditions *would*

*be obtained* (verification conditions). If this is what is meant by verification conditions then it must be shown what the verification conditions of the principle itself are. Either this, or it must be shown in what other way the principle is meaningful which can still be endorsed by the principle itself. This is, if not entirely impossible, no easy task.

It is not hard to see that there is absolutely no manner in which the principle can be regarded as an empirical proposition. This observation is based on the fact that none of the terms employed by the principle has the kind of literal extension which can be regarded to be of the empirical kind. The extension of “meaning” and “verification conditions” is just not the type we can know via our sensory equipment. This is, of course, because they are theoretical terms. In fact, the extensions of such terms are as contentious, and probably for the same reasons, as the possibility of numbers having any sort of real extension and this, we know, is a polemic as old as the realist/anti-realist debate about abstract entities. (Realism and anti-realism are terms discussed, further on in the thesis, in greater detail but for present purposes it is best to understand them thus: the realism of concern in this project should be construed as a semantic theory stating that meaning by an appeal to truth conditions and anti-realism states that meaning is derived by way of a statement’s verification conditions.) The Verification Principle is in the same position, in terms of meaning, as other principles which employ theoretical terms. In order to save a principle such as the Verification Principle, which is a guiding thesis of anti-realist semantic theory, from being deemed meaningless it will have to be shown that speakers can manifest knowledge of the content of terms employed within the given statement. So, looking at the positivistic proposition, that only analytically true and empirically true claims are capable of literal meaning, leaves us with analyticity as the only option describing the nature of the principle. However, it should be conceded, at this point, that the principle is by no means regarded as self-evidently true as for

instance, “bachelors are unmarried men”. If it were, there would be no need for an argument of the kind in this chapter to be made- unless one is skeptical, maybe in a sort of Quinian sense, about the possibility of analytical truths altogether. But that would require a more general sort of argument against the analytic-synthetic distinction.

Since the analyticity of the principle cannot be taken for granted, and is in need of some sort of careful explanation, this chapter will, in part, direct its attention towards the study of the a priori. It should be easy to understand why an investigation of the a priori is necessary for determining what exactly the analytic is capable of. It is because it is directly related to understanding where the traditional link between the a priori and the analytic still holds, whether implicit definition (a proper explanation follows in the last section of this chapter) can play a role in any form of a priori knowledge and, in the light of the strong link between meaning and truth, as proposed by the verification thesis, whether there is such a thing as a priori knowledge at all. The general purpose of this chapter will be to show what the a priori can legitimately encompass. Seeing as we cannot, a posteriori, know the truth value of this principle the a priori remains the only possibility.

### **Section 1: The framing of the principle**

How then, according to the critics of Verificationism, has the principle shot itself in the foot? If it is true that the world is not a totality of objects, but rather of facts (and facts are not construed as matters of fact but rather as bits of knowledge speakers have), then it must be the case that the world only is what we can know. In a sense this statement proposes that the world can only be to us what we know it to be. This Wittgensteinian principle bears many far reaching implications for those who accept it as true. Or, more correctly, those who have accepted it as true must presuppose

some other truths. Why? Because it seems wrong to accept such a statement, and carry it as some sort of maxim or linguistic rule, without first having drawn some other valid conclusions about the nature of things. In saying that the world only consists of facts it seems only reasonable to deduce that it is wrong to speak of facts in the absence of knowledge or access to matters of fact. Such a construal of "facts" does not mean that we have constructed the world, as in some radical version of idealism, but merely that making reference to a part of the world, an object in it or property of it, which is not also a fact (is manifested to us as knowledge of that object or property) seems like an entirely unsubstantiated reference to make. This does not entail that no objects besides the referents of our language or extensions of our terms and propositions exist. But what it does entail is that the world that we can legitimately make reference to is knowable and exists to us, in other words, as facts.

Bob Hale in his essay, *Realism and its Oppositions*, (1997; pp 271), speaks about the Acquisition Challenge (page 68) to realism. The challenge states that our training in using any language entails us being taught that we can only think of statements as true or false if certain conditions obtain (1997; pp 275). When we use language which we assume to be representational we are faced with disputes about truth because we intend to be making assertions about reality and are aiming to do so correctly. So, if the Acquisition theory is stating a general truth about how we acquire language, and what we assume the role of language is, then it does seem that a situation exists in which the relationship of terms to their referents needs to be qualified by the speaker. Simply, if language is indeed representational the truth of the propositions we make will lie in whether or not we can know the extensions of the terms in question. Hence, a representational view of language is committed to a view that the legitimacy of assertions is derived from the area of direct and accurate overlap of propositions and states of affairs. The Acquisition Challenge to realism (p 68) holds that

we assume that it is this area which determines whether or not we are stating something true or false.

If the Acquisition Challenge is correct about the conditions we place on establishing whether or not we are competent language users, the meaning of the principle cannot, unfortunately, appeal to realist truth conditions. This is because verificationist theory, and therefore also its guiding principle, must appeal to more than truth conditions for determining meaning; and this is verification conditions. The truth conditions of the principle will consist in knowing what would have to obtain for a statement to be true. This is a particularly realist stance on meaning and truth in language. If this was all that was necessary for the Verification Principle to have literal meaning then this project would have come to an end right now, because we certainly can understand the proposition which states the principle and this is because we know what would have to obtain in order for the principle to be true: that meaning is, in fact, determined by verification conditions. We, therefore, in the case of endorsing truth conditions, could safely say that it does have literal meaning. So for the Verification Principle to have literal meaning, in realist terms, we just require an understanding of what it would take for the statement to obtain, and that it itself is verifiable, and an actual understanding and acceptance of the proposition itself (as legitimately part of a particular language community).

But the principle is informed by an evidentially constrained notion of truth. This states that truth should be construed as the status of a proposition when the speaker can show what knowledge they have in support of the content of the claim. This entails that the principle cannot help itself to realist conditions for meaning. In other words, it cannot save itself from meaninglessness by claiming that meaning is determined by truth conditions. It does seem, at this stage, as if the



principle has framed itself in a rather onerous way. If the principle is to have the sort of literal (and evidentially constrained; p 84) truth it prescribes for other specific types of propositions, it must be able to qualify and detect what objects it is making reference to.

It should be noted that there is a fundamental and very important difference between proving the principle false, in the sense that it is a disproved theory, and saying that it does not have literal meaning. Hence, it seems that the objector, whose project it is to show that the principle is false, must at least presuppose that it is meaningful. Because meaningful sentences can also have the value of falsity which means that if we find the principle to be false it is not necessarily meaningless. In fact, if meaning is determined by verification conditions, and it emerges that the principle is false, it must have been put through a process of testing for the conclusion of it being false to have been established. This means that it must have had verification conditions and must therefore have meaning of some kind. However, the objector whose project begins with the meaningfulness itself of the proposition will not need to, if it has been shown to be meaningless or have something like metaphorical meaning only, continue with proving the principle a false one. The damage would have been done in successfully questioning the meaning alone. It is with the aim of dispelling this objection that this chapter concerns itself.

If the principle claims that we establish the meaning of a proposition only by the evidence we have in support of the extensions of the terms employed (which we need to establish via our sense of the terms) then we have come up, squarely, against an epistemological problem: The challenge is to determine what sort of epistemology the principle has in support of its own claim, and whether this epistemology is of the right type to redeem the intention of the literal meaning of the claim itself. The principle clearly is not a claim of the a posteriori kind and it will, therefore, be the task of the

next section to address the a priori and what we can conclusively know about and within this form of knowledge.

It does seem as if the meaning of the principle is not as immediately problematic when the principle is seen as stating an analytical proposition. This is because the terms employed by an analytical claim need not, for the establishment of its truth, be shown to make reference to an object external to the proposition itself. It is for this reason that it has already been stated that the principle has a better chance at survival if regarded as a statement knowable a priori, capable of analytic truth.

## **Section 2: The A Priori**

It seems, in looking at some of the controversies surrounding a priori knowledge, that it would be a mistake to assume anything about it. It would probably be fair to say that it is Quine's questioning of the possibility of purely a priori knowledge by his dissolution of the analytic-synthetic distinction which has done much of the damage to the classical Kantian distinctions. But it should be cautioned, from the onset, that a successful argument against a Quinian notion of the classical epistemological categories will not necessarily align one entirely and completely with a purely Kantian conception of these categories, and neither will a rejection of Kantian epistemology make one, by necessity, a Quinian depending on the reasons for taking a particular position about such matters in every sense or any sense of the word. Conclusions depend on reasons and this means that one could find oneself, depending on the reasons for adopting a particular position about such matters, just about anywhere outside of these two positions.

Some of the challenges which face the a priori, as outlined in the introduction to *New Essays on the A Priori*, are that there are no satisfactory explanations of how propositions can be known without experience, that the growth of scientific knowledge refutes the existence of a priori truths, that no proposition can have the property of non-defeasibility and, of course, Quine's objection to the a priori. Quine's objection runs something like this; that the notion of the a priori would only be valid if truth is something like grasping meaning but seeing as nothing can be true by meaning alone (because he denies the category of analytical truth and truth by meaning would have to be, according to Quine, of the analytical kind) there is, simply, no purely a priori knowledge. Quine's objections are based on one theme and that is that a priori truth is non-empirical and any attempt to determine the meaning of propositions, which is not contingently dependent on the holistic environment in which the proposition occurs, is misguided because such an appeal depends on the truth of analytical necessity (non-defeasibility) and analytical necessity is just not a possibility for any sort of proposition. The reasons Quine gives for rejecting necessary truth is based in his arguments for holistic theories about meaning. These arguments are complex and it is not necessary to look at them in too much detail here. It is, however, important to understand, for our purposes, that what was in non-Quinian terms regarded as a purely logical statement e.g. "All bachelors are unmarried men" is, apparently, according to Quine, revisable. The implication, evidently, of accepting Quine's views is that it remains a possibility to find a bachelor who is a married man or someone who is a man, unmarried and yet not a bachelor. We shall take a brief look, further on, at how seriously we should take Quine's proposal.

## **1. A priori claims as more than logical truths**

Since the aim is to rule out the possibility of the Verification Principle being a synthetic a priori statement it is useful to start by looking at how we are best to understand this category of knowledge. And clarity about categories of knowledge is important for understanding what meaning is when it is being proposed that meaning is evidentially constrained, which is what the principle claims. The synthetic a priori is knowledge about the empirical world which we, it is claimed, can know before (or outside of) experience. So, in terms of truth, the synthetic a priori will yield truth which is not a purely logical truth, but is self-evident in the same way as a logical truth would be. This is a much disputed category of knowledge, rejected outright by philosophers from any empiricist tradition. Very crudely put, Kant, as a rationalist, needed to allow for a category of knowledge which still only depended on reason but could yield knowledge about the world and existence. In other words, it is necessary to permit a category of knowledge which legitimises metaphysical or ethical claims without an appeal to experience if rationalists want to be able to say something about reality. Let us look at an example of the sort of reasoning which is claimed to give us information about the world without an appeal to experience, in other words, synthetic truths yielded by a priori reasoning alone:

P1: All fathers are male

P2: Some fathers have daughters

↓

C1: Therefore, some males have daughters

Admittedly, this argument is a valid argument depending entirely, for its validity, on the a priori rules of inferential reasoning. But is it true that it gives us information about the world because of

its structural validity? Before we answer this question I shall raise another example with which to contrast our father-daughter example:

P1: All higher beings are benevolent

P2: God is a higher being

↓  
C1: Therefore, God is benevolent.

Now, it seems, on closer inspection, that the first argument would be deductively true irrespective of what the extensions of the terms “father”, “daughters” and “males” are. So, it would make no difference if we replaced those terms with terms such as “A”, “B” and “C” because the argument would still be a priori and valid but it would then, quite evidently, not be giving us information about the world. But the very reason why the first argument does say something about the world is because P2 is an empirical claim and can be such because of the nature of the referents. It is, therefore, not the father-daughter argument’s supposed a priori nature which is yielding information about the world, but rather its a posteriori content in P2 and the reasoning that then follows from this a posteriori claim as well as the empirical nature of the other references made.

If it is still claimed that the first argument is maybe stating something true about the world *because* of the validity of its structure alone, it may be useful to look at the second argument and where it is similar or different to the first. The God argument, even though equally valid in structure, cannot yield information about the world. Why not? Some of the terms employed within this argument, such as “God” and “higher being”, cannot ever be fixed (and this stands as a challenge to those who believe they can be), in this world, to a specific and, knowable by experience, referent. In other words the speaker will be unable to yield any knowledge of an empirical nature of the sense (that

aspect of a term which represents what we understand in using that term; p 52) of the term. This argument is purely deductive by nature but has the assertoric structure of a claim stating a synthetic truth. This means that it is attempting to state something true about the existence but does not allow for any way in which we can access evidence about the synthetic content it puts forward. The reason why it does not allow access to evidence is because it makes no determinate (as in determinable by the speaker) a posteriori claims. We simply cannot access any of the evidence needed to establish whether the argument is not merely valid but also sound. But it will be claimed by some that a successful counter-argument to the "god-argument" does not settle the illegitimacy of whole class of the synthetic, a priori truths. What we can conclude thus far is, if truth is construed as an epistemic (knowable by the speaker) notion, then we have here a case of indeterminate truth because we cannot manifest any actual knowledge of what would make the proposition true or false. We merely have here two cases of deductive reasoning yielding valid conclusions. But without the further epistemic support of the existential claims we cannot claim to have said anything about the contingent world.

But why should we reject the whole synthetic a priori class just because the example above is not acceptable? And if it transpires that some species of the synthetic a priori is legitimate then it will need to be shown whether or not the principle can be thus saved from its critics. Let's assume that the first argument (the father-daughter one) is still maintained to be an example of the synthetic a priori, but it is claimed that the second is not valid for whatever reason. I propose that, on insisting that the first argument does conclude a synthetic truth of some kind on purely a priori terms, a commitment is required in accepting that the second does, or can, too. In other words, it is not possible to draw a logical or even relevant distinction between the two arguments above. The distinction would have to be the recognition of the premises of the first argument having truth

values. Added to this recognition is the fact that the conclusion that the first argument draws represents a case of a posteriori knowledge and this is what allows for the first to be stating a synthetic truth.

The aim here is to show that an unrestricted rejection of the synthetic a priori seems like the right way to go. The reason is that accepting that we can *sometimes* know things about the real world in an a priori fashion will make it very difficult for any theorist to place constraints (if they do not wish to allow unconstrained use of the synthetic a priori) on what can legitimately be known in this way. If, however, the claim is that an epistemic notion of truth can solve this dilemma by posing as the constraint on what can be true within the category of synthetic, a priori propositions, we will find that we have merely gone full circle; when truth is evidentially constrained it appears that talk of the synthetic a priori is not valid anymore- propositions (such as the premises of the arguments in question) which state something about the world but depend on evidence to establish their truth values will not be of the a priori kind. Quite simply, and rightly so, we are then merely dealing with synthetic a posteriori claims. It, therefore, seems a more epistemologically “hygienic”, and theoretically superior, option to keep the analytic, a priori and synthetic, a posteriori absolutely separate.

In rejecting the synthetic a priori as a legitimate form of knowledge we have eliminated the possibility of the Verification Principle being verifiable in this way. It is the next project to establish whether or not the principle can be saved as a purely analytical claim. It is my opinion that a serious look at the legitimacy of the analytic is not complete without a look at Quine’s arguments against this class of statements. It will be the conclusion that Quine is wrong in rejecting

the analytic and that there are cases wherein we can know things by meaning alone- but that this class is of a very particular type and generally severely restricted.

## **2. The analyticity of a priori claims**

Which categories of the a priori remain then? The following question to be addressed is whether or not, if the a priori cannot yield synthetic truths, all a priori statements are analytical?

There are not many philosophers who would not first think of Quine when questioning the analytic. Quine reasons, in *Two Dogmas of Empiricism*, that there is no real distinction between the analytic and synthetic and claims that the absence of this distinction must also dissolve the a priori category of knowledge. Quine states that if the a priori were to be valid it would have to be something like grasping meaning. But Quine's skepticism about the possibility of grasping anything by meaning alone commits him to a rejection of the a priori- and this, clearly, is because he rejects purely analytical truths. The question remains whether or not he is right about all of this.

When we say that something is true by meaning alone we are claiming that the proposition attributes no more to the subject of the proposition than is already contained within the concept of the subject itself. Mostly, this definition of the analytic is accepted as the right one and it is also regarded, generally, that some propositions are capable of being analytically true. The argument against the notion of necessary meaning (also referred to by Quine as synonymy) is: A predicate is aptly used if it is true of the extension of the term. (Quine speaks about extensions as the things or properties which words refer to.) Yet, it is possible that two different predicates can be aptly used of the same extension and not have the same meaning as each other. An example would be: "A bachelor is an unmarried man" and "A bachelor is a man who has never had a wife". This example,



according to Quine, shows that, even though both predicates may be true of the subject "bachelor", the predicates are not synonymous in meaning. When we have a case of two predicates sharing the same extension but do not necessarily have the same meaning they cannot be said to be interchangeable because of meaning, but should rather be said to be interchangeable because of matters of fact. In other words, the above example shows the predicates "...is an unmarried man" and "...is a man who has never had a wife" as interchangeable because they both refer to the same **thing** not because they share the same **meaning**. And this, according to Quine (1953; 29) can only be true if language is extensional (refers to objects or properties) and an account of cognitive synonymy (knowledge that two terms do refer to the same object or property) can be given. And according to Quine things are only known to be synonymous when we have empirical access to the referents. Interchangeable meaning is therefore still a matter of synthetic knowledge.

Quine's argument sees a move towards a holism about meaning. It is for this reason that he chooses to use the notion of two "synonymous" propositions to show how meaning can never be interchangeable based purely on the terms employed. Quine states that analytically true sentences are only possible if all propositions are independent of each other because if propositions exist within a conceptually binding network, which they do according to Quine, we cannot be sure from meaning alone what the extensions of the terms are. Presumably the reason is something like knowing that "angel" refers to "divine being" does not tell us anything about the extension of either term. It is for this reason that synthetic knowledge must determine the meaning of terms and propositions.

Another example serving as a reason for Quine's rejection of the a priori is that of arithmetic laws in testing empirical data and the failing of testing usually being attributed to the data testing and not

laws itself. Quine reckons that it is not clear why the laws themselves should not be questioned. It is argued, counter Quine, that when the test fails it is not the law which is questioned, because it must be considered a priori true, but rather the datum itself, which is merely contingently true. The reason why this counter-argument is unsuccessful is that it does not answer Quine's question (Introduction to *New Essays on the A Priori*) regarding a priori rules. It merely states the exact point which he is in doubt of. In other words it begs the question. Quine asks: **Should** it not be, at least partially, the law which is questioned? What are the reasons we have in support of not doubting these laws and merely stipulating that they are indefeasible? And does this assumption of the unrevisability of the "analytic" not result in a false idea of what knowledge is contingent and what not? Defeasibility issues (which sorts of knowledge and reasons are logically certain and which are revisable or falsifiable) are central to objections to and defenses of the a priori. It seems that it is the notion of any knowledge being unrevisable which often underwrites a rejection of the a priori.

Quine has presented us with an argument which rules out the analytic based on skepticism about meaning. This skeptical argument is premised on the fact, according to Quine, that language is only comprehensible because it is extensional. If Quine is right then the principle can only have meaning because of the extensions of the terms employed in its articulation. If Quine is wrong about his rejection of the analytic then this may yet remain a possibility for the meaning of the Verification Principle.

The first thing that needs to be said against Quine is that propositions have, in fact, meaning separate to other propositions. In other words, it seems necessary to question Quine's doctrine of holism. We know this because a sentence such as, "Gypsies have a strange value system", has

meaning which is entirely derived by two means. Here I am referring to Bernhard Weiss's (pages: 77-78) description of two pathways to meaning: The one is the aspect of meaning which is derived via inferential pathways, in other words, the aspects of meaning which we derive from understanding that word within a web of linguistic and reasoning activity. In this sense, it could be argued with Quine, that meaning from rule-following is holistic because the speaker knows how to use the word "atomic" in a new sentence because he/she knows what it means in a sentence which has frequently been used and understood. But the second pathway to meaning is that which captures the activity of knowing what exactly terms refer to (for that speaker) when they use them at a particular time and therefore what the meaning of a specific proposition will be. This requires something like knowledge of the sense (what is understood in using a certain term) of the term. A sentence can, if we take into account sense being a salient aspect of meaning, allow individual sentences to have meaning. It is for this reason that it is linguistically plausible and completely reasonable to look at a statement on its own in order to determine whether it can, for instance, be analytically true. Let us stay with the well worn example of "A bachelor is an unmarried man". The usual demonstration of the analytic is that the meanings of "bachelor" and "unmarried man" are interchangeable because the predicate "unmarried man" does not contain any more information than the subject "bachelor" itself. Carnap describes analytical statements as those which will come out true under every state description. Leibnitz refers to true in all possible worlds. If we do manage to resist Quine's arguments for holism and accept that statements can have independent meaning and can make reference independently, there is no reason why this statement cannot be true in the necessary way it poses to be.

This is how: Analyticity usually refers to a relationship between the predicate and the subject of the same proposition e.g. "A circle (subject) is round (predicate)". But let us grant Quine his insistence

that it still remains a synthetic proposition because words are true of extensions, not each other. In Quine's view we would have to look for circles and roundness, because we cannot take for granted by virtue of meaning things such as circles and properties of roundness and see if they are the same things under all circumstances. This we do in order to establish what he calls "cognitive synonymy"- knowledge of each term having the same extension (1953; 28). Quite clearly, seen like this, it would be impossible to claim any sort of necessary truth because all reasoning must be, according to Quine, inductive. But this is not the right way to see it because one would not look, by empirical method, for a **property** such as roundness without simultaneously looking for a **thing** such as a circle. We know ourselves to be looking for the same thing. And if it transpires that we are mistaken to be assuming this (simultaneously looking for roundness when we look for circles) then it does not bode well for Quine's empiricism either. This is because empirical science is founded on the notion of classification- which is simply the artificial naming and categorizing of objects and properties. This means that according to our classification system for geometric objects and shapes, circles and roundness is the same thing. If we should find this not to be the case it would undoubtedly call for a revision of the names and categories because the object (which used to be a "circle") would still have the property (which used to be "round"). The whole thing is that they are, indefeasibly, extensionally synonymous irrespective of what we call them. But we have called them what we have because of what we have observed regarding their extensions. In other words, it is possibly so that analytical truths are founded on synthetic ones because we need to know, via the senses, what a circle is and round is to know that these mean the same thing. But once the speaker is warranted, because of being able to manifest the knowledge they have about the extensions of these terms, in using a term such as "circle" and round" in a sentence such as "A circle is round" it should be assumed that there will be no conditions under which that speaker

would make such a statement wherein the statement can be shown to be false. This is a necessary truth. If meaning is determined by verification conditions (knowing extension) Quine should have no problem with the analyticity of meaning.

### **3. The a priori as knowledge derived from meaning alone.**

It could be argued that the a priori and analytic are related to each other in many possible ways. Traditionally, it is assumed that we can know the truth of analytical propositions but it would seem wrong, under present circumstances of having to explain the meaning of a principle, not to entertain the possibility of this not being correct. It may, for instance, be argued that it is possible to have analytical meaning but not analytical truths (because we cannot have a priori knowledge) or may be said that it cannot be right that analytical truths, or meaning, precede a priori knowledge but that the relationship is, in fact, the reverse of this.

Paul Horwich argues in "Stipulation, Meaning and Apriority" (Boghossian & Peacocke: 2000; p 150), that some of our justified beliefs are a priori but that a priori knowledge is never derived from our grasp of words or concepts. If this is true then Horwich will have to make some sort of argument explaining what sort of a priori beliefs are justified, but are not derived from grasping meaning. He explains that if knowledge is to be derived from meaning it would mean that it is by stipulation alone which we claim to derive truth about statements. So, Horwich describes implicit meaning as that sort of meaning which is attributed to a term in order to make the proposition to which it belongs true. This, he says (Boghossian & Peacocke: 2000; p 151), is not defensible because: 1. It seems impossible to establish which sentence will determine the use of the term and therefore its definition, 2. When something is merely stipulated to be true can we say that we have gained real knowledge and 3. Does our entitlement to say what we mean by a word really provide

an epistemic reason for commitment to those sentences which permit that meaning of the term? The long and short of this is that Horwich, rightly so, is questioning the claim that we can know anything from definition alone if attributing meaning, before we have knowledge, is such a dubious affair. If there are no criteria in place for guiding our stipulations of meaning then how are we to know that we have attributed the right sort of meaning at all. And if there is such uncertainty at the foundations of the notion of implicit meaning then how can we say that we can infer any sort of knowledge from meaning alone. Based on the preceding reasons Horwich concludes that we, in fact, show commitment to particular sentences not because these allow for certain terms to have the meanings that we want them to but rather because we are already committed to the existentially predicated expressions, and metaphysical claims, that such sentences are making (Hale & Wright: 1997; p 157). So, if sentences have two components to them, a substance component, referring to the empirical content of the proposition, and a meaning component then substance, and therefore knowledge, must precede meaning (definition). This seems fair enough, particularly for verificationist theorist about meaning.

But a problem which, quite evidently, does arise for Horwich, entails his blind spot about what sort of knowledge is in demand here. If he wants to hold that we have metaphysical commitments, based on certain knowledge, before we have meaning, then he must surely be referring to a posteriori knowledge. We know, however, that his intention is to be speaking about the relationship between the a priori and implicit definition. So, if it is a priori knowledge he requires before the attribution of meaning to particular terms, then what is it that he first wants to know? If it is the referents of the terms then this kind of knowledge will be of the a posteriori kind because it will require knowledge of the world. We must grant that Horwich refers intentionally to a priori knowledge preceding meaning but it then remains a mystery what, besides entities of the world and

the meanings of terms, can be known. Of course, it is possible that Horwich does endorse some form of synthetic a priori knowledge and is, therefore, claiming that the prior metaphysical commitments are based on a priori knowledge and to this I respond by referring back to the aforementioned argument against the respectability of synthetic a priori knowledge. In other words, if we cannot, under any conditions, determine meaning before we have knowledge then what are the objects, in Horwich's case, that we can know when we are not expecting to gain empirical knowledge?

Wright and Hale, in "Implicit Definition and the A Priori" (Boghossian & Peacocke: 2000; p 286), also raise some objections to Horwich's argument against implicit definition yielding knowledge. Their argument simply contests that attributing meaning needs to be a dubious affair. Their central claim is that implicit definition says how terms can be legitimately used within a particular context and in doing so determines the meaning of such terms. However, it is central to their argument to determine the conditions under which meanings can be constituted by implicit definition. The further claim is that this sort of definition can have a role to play in some forms of non-inferential a priori knowledge.

Hale and Wright's primary worry with Horwich's argument is that it has misinterpreted what implicit definition is and has, based on this misinterpretation, attached unwarranted problems to the notion of implicit definition (Boghossian & Peacocke: 2000; p 290). If implicit definition is seen as something like fixing a reference or finding the correct preexisting definition of a definiendum (term), then the problems he has outlined seem plausible. However, since implicit definition is nothing like reference fixing and is certainly not some sort of innate definition of a term, understood in realist terms, which is invisible to us until knowledge of something has been

acquired, it cannot be said that we necessarily have the sort of problems with implicit definition that Horwich claims we do (Boghossian & Peacocke; pp 291). Added to this, according to Hale and Wright, if Horwich wants knowledge to precede meaning he would then be referring to explicit definition. (Which is the aspect of meaning that is determined by verification conditions.)

So, what exactly do Hale and Wright refer to when **they** defend the possibility of implicit definition yielding a priori knowledge? Because this seems a very odd sequence- definition preceding knowledge- for theorists who tend to endorse Verificationism. They, firstly, specify (Boghossian & Peacocke: 2000; pp 296) that a priori knowledge must meet two conditions: 1. the meaning of the sentence must be determined by implicit definition and 2. the meaning of the sentence must be determined by that alone and must require no further epistemic support (such as empirical proof). Clearly, this sort of limiting of the a priori implies that there is a positive link between meaning and the a priori, to the extent that meaning is a necessary and sufficient condition for the a priori. In tying things up this tightly it becomes apparent that only a certain type of sentence will meet these conditions and that the scope of this sort of truth by definition is very limited- but certainly not impossible. These conditions basically ask that the sentence can be true without any other epistemic support. This is, of course, not an un-contentious demand as there is much dispute about what can be true with or without additional epistemic support (reminiscent of Quine's arguments). Furthermore, sentences must also be consistent with other linguistic "objects" within an established discourse, in order to determine a coherent use for the terms in question and to yield non-inferential a priori knowledge. In other words, it must be explicitly and observably adhering to the rules of a particular language. So, a good implicit definition will allow comprehension of any sentence wherein the definiendum is used. Also, the inference rules, applied within the sentence itself must be in harmony. This means that the logical connectives such as "therefore", "hence", "and", "or"



and so on must allow the sentence, employing the particular definition for a term, to make logical sense. In short, the sentence must be logically valid and epistemologically satisfied, and this without the need for further epistemological justification of any kind. If we look carefully at the picture being painted here we have sentences which can be true by definition alone- which seems very much like what we take analytical truth to be. The point is then, for our purposes, whether or not the sentence which articulates the Verification Principle could be a sentence which Hale and Wright regard as legitimately capable of implicit definition.

The real worry then is not only with whether the criteria, posed by Hale and Wright, are the right ones, but whether there are any sentences which can actually meet these criteria. Wright and Hale do not make specific reference to examples of such sentences but do mention that implicit meaning is good for mathematics and logic. One of the most important qualities of such sentences is that they will be extremely conservative in regards to forwarding information. This we know is true of, for instance, deductive arguments as opposed to inductive ones, so it seems entirely plausible that the class of sentences which will permit knowledge based purely on definition and rule following will not be saying anything very much about the world, hence Hale and Wright's insistence that this type of a priori knowledge must be non-inferential. In other words, we should not be tempted to draw conclusions of the broadly informative kind from implicitly defined sentences. And it seems entirely right that the sort of knowledge that only such a sentence will produce will be of the a priori kind.

One of the primary reasons why Hale and Wright want to endorse an approach to implicit meaning, is to allow scientific theories a role in determining the meaning of their own vocabularies, without the compromise of their empirical information (Boghossian & Peacocke: 2000; pp 306-307). The

immediate worry that should come to mind is that it seems impossible for scientific theories to meet the condition of conservativeness because it is captured, by the very nature of science, to postulate empirical truths, which are just too broad to be conservative in the way implicitly defined sentences are. Added to this a scientific theory cannot assume the very things it wants to prove. So how is it to stipulate the meaning of its terms before it has been tested for its truth or before it has appealed to knowledge or verification? Also, we know that scientific theories must be testable and falsifiable, and are therefore in need of additional epistemic support, but implicit meaning is certainly not the type of meaning which is experientially defeasible. We seem, at first glance, to have a situation of stale mate. Scientific theories need what implicit definition can do for them, yet have all the qualities of propositions which could never be implicitly defined and, hence, be true by virtue of their meaning alone. But if Hale and Wright's suggestion is going to work for scientific principles then what is to say that it will work for a principle of meaning? In other words, what makes the Verification Principle similar to scientific theories or principles? The Verification Principle also makes a suggestion, based on the intrinsic normative nature that principles have, which is not self-evidently true and therefore needs further epistemic support in order to determine its truth. But, like scientific theories, it must be possible for the sentence which articulates the theory or principle to have meaning and yield some sort of understanding before it is tested (verified) in the way necessary for settling its truth.

The solution, according to Bob Hale and Crispin Wright, is that theories such as these should be expressed in a conditional form in order to have implicit meaning and to be knowable a priori (Boghossian & Peacocke: 2000; p 308). The way to do this is to understand the theoretical proposition in two ways and to cater for the two needs entirely separately. Firstly, the theory needs to be expressed in such a way as to allow it to assert particular and recognisable empirical content

without the deployment of an unusual theoretical vocabulary. It can achieve this aim by using the form of an existential generalization. However, clearly, if the theory were left as this type of assertion it would be in need of additional epistemic support and could not be true by virtue of its meaning alone. It seems to be necessary to, somehow, fix the theoretical terms which are used with the intention of being introduced and this is achieved, secondly, by expressing the theory as a conditional sentence.

Before we continue; it could be argued, against this solution for showing how empirical terms can have implicit meaning, that introducing a conditional structure is just side-stepping the fundamental need of empirical terms to have epistemological support. This is an objection which should be addressed. It must be remembered that introducing the conditional is not the same as claiming the truth of the theory itself. It is not pretending to substitute the proper testing which theories need to undergo in order to be shown to be true. If the meaning of empirical theories are to be subject to their falsifiability then we would never, in the light of the revisability of contingent knowledge, be able to attribute any sort of certain meaning to such theories. But a fear of this possibility, that empirical theories can have no settled meanings, should not deter us from accepting the truth of this state of affairs. However, it does seem to be possible to confer a use-orientated model for the understanding of theoretical terms, as long as the proposition, in order to have meaning, is not making any sort of claims that are in need of additional epistemic assistance. In using conditional sentences it is being proposed that terms can only have a use under particular conditions. So, conditional sentences make explicit the context in which the terms must have that use.

What we can take from this last section is that it is possible to have a priori knowledge but only if it is founded in implicit definition. And this is only legitimate under very specific conditions, which

makes the group of sentences which can yield a priori knowledge a rather small and very specific group. The question with which to continue then is whether or not implicit definition can save the principle from itself- in other words can implicit definition, while constrained in the way Hale and Wright propose, serve as some sort of verification conditions?

### **Section 3: How best to understand the Verification Principle**

Being in any manner convinced by Hale and Wright's, as opposed to Paul Horwich's, arguments in section 2 does not necessarily translate into the meaning of the principle being able to be rescued in this manner. It still needs to be argued that the criteria for meaning imposed by a principle stating that meaning is determined by verification conditions have been met by the principle itself. And, if it is the suggestion that Hale and Wright's implicit definition argument is right, it must still be shown to be right in a very particular way. We shall, therefore, in this third section of the first chapter, determine whether the principle is capable of implicit definition and is, therefore, able to be meaningful in this way. This possibility will be assessed in terms of the previous discussion on the a priori and what has and has not been endorsed within this argument already. Thus, no investigation of the Verification Principle, as having, for instance, synthetic a priori meaning, will be entertained, as the synthetic a priori has already been disqualified as a legitimate category of knowledge and therefore a foundation for meaning.

#### **The Verification Principle as implicitly defined**

Of course, the preferred choice for the meaning of the Verification Principle ought to be that it should have either of the two types of meanings which it explicitly regards as literal. If this can be

shown to be the case it would not just be capable of some sort of meaning, such as in the case of metaphorical meaning or normative a priori meaning, but the only type of meaning that can save it from itself. Literal empirical meaning has been ruled out based on the fact that the referents of the terms employed by this proposition cannot be known a posteriori and we are therefore not dealing with an empirical claim. The remaining possibility is the analytic. If the principle is ever to be verified the nature of the conditions for verification would be of the analytic kind. The question here is what, exactly, are the conditions which the principle must meet which will permit its meaning being derived by definition alone?

We have looked at an argument made by Crispin Wright and Bob Hale for the possibility of implicit definition attributing meaning and yielding a priori knowledge. The importance of this claim, for the present purposes, is not that we can derive knowledge from implicit definition, but rather that implicit definition can result in the attribution of meaning for certain propositions. Hale and Wright state what the conditions are under which implicit definition can do this, and it is now our task to see whether the articulation of Verification Principle can adhere to these conditions. Before we continue with our investigation of the proposed implicit meaning of the principle it should be reiterated that the conditions for sentences permitting a priori knowledge is that they are implicitly defined and that they are only defined in this way and are not in need of any other sort of epistemic support. So, if it is found that the principle can be defined in this way it may be that this has gone some way towards showing that it can yield knowledge in the area it proposes to. And this is the task of the rest of this thesis.

Now, Hale and Wright state that implicit meaning should not be confused with some sort of reference fixing. It is herein exactly that their objection to Horwich lies, as he proposes that we

need knowledge of the objects in question before we can establish the definitions of the referring terms. But, say Hale and Wright, this sequence would not be giving us implicit definition but explicit definition. They then identify the problem that arises for theories, and in particular scientific theories. The dilemma has already been outlined so a repeat is unnecessary. Let it suffice to say that theories, and principles, need some way of being meaningful without begging the question by employing the very terms which need testing and other types of epistemic support. The Verification Principle, it seems to me, is in the same sort of predicament. Hale and Wright's solution of articulating the theory as a related proposition, using an existential generalisation within a conditional sentence, will allow the theory to be implicitly defined without compromising its empirical content. The verification conditions which are so needed in order to determine the meaning of the principle will be whether or not the conditional relation holds. This is so because it is whether or not the conditional relation holds which will render the statement (in this case the Verification Principle) either true or false.

By using conditional sentences we enable the fixing of the theoretical terms we wish to use but only in a particular context. So, we are not proposing to fix references in any sort of absolute way.

Verification Principle: "Meaning is determined by verification conditions."

Existential generalisation: Language is assertoric.

Conditional: If language is assertoric then meaning is determined by verification conditions.

The Verification Principle serves the verification thesis as a scientific theory serves a scientific investigation. Principles, in this sense, are subject to the same dilemma as scientific theories. They are in need of legitimately being able to determine the meanings of the terms which they employ without assuming their content which must remain revisable. It is for this reason that the "vehicle

of implicit definition” (Boghossian & Peacocke: 2000; pp 308) is regarded to not to be the theory itself, but “some other sentence so related to the theory that its stipulation or acceptance as true on the one hand suffices to confer meaning on the other....” (Boghossian & Peacocke: 2000; pp 308).

Conditional sentences obtain meaning from the specific relation in which terms, used in such sentences, stand to each other. It is my suggestion that the Verification Principle be rephrased: When language is assertoric meaning is determined by verification conditions.

So phrased, the Verification Principle, becomes implicitly defined. It proposes that *if* language is to be regarded as “representational” (when articulated as an assertion) *then* the terms “meaning” and “verification conditions” stand in a specific relation to each other. Meaning is seen as determined by verification conditions. The meaning which has been conferred on the latter proposition has been enabled by the specification of the context which is articulated by the antecedent (assertoric nature of language- “if”) in which these terms are to have this particular kind of use by standing in this relation to each other. In other words, a reference fixing has been made possible but not in the problematic sense to which Horwich objects (that is in a way in which the fixing is forwarded as necessary but the use of the language requires it to be revisable). A random stipulation based on what would make the proposition true is not what has happened by articulating the principle as a conditional sentence. The terms have been given literal meaning but only in as much as the conditional claim is proven to hold. So, in a sense, it has provisional meaning.

And thus we end this chapter’s attempt to resist the classical objection to the Verification Principle. It has been argued that, firstly, the principle is in no different a position to any other scientific, linguistic or any other sort of principle. Principles have implicit normativity as they propose how matters *should* be understood or tested or predicted. But most theorists regard principles as

revisable as the truth of these principles is dependent on whether or not the understanding, testing and predicting which they propose is correct. In this sense it is going to be the proof of the principle which will absolutely settle the meaning of it. Testing the conditional is verifying the principle. And this is not a simple matter to settle and will be the task of the rest of this thesis. But this proof will yield explicit meaning, as Hale and Wright say. In the meantime we must settle for a sort of implicit definition of the terms employed- this implicit definition being the result of an a priori understanding of what it means when concepts stand in a conditional relation to each other.

It is entirely conceded that the truth of the Verification Principle, even stated as a conditional sentence, is not as self-evident as “all bachelors are unmarried men” or “ $12 - 7 = 5$ ”. And these are after all the only sort of sentences, according to Hale and Wright, which are apt for implicit definition. But not all, for instance, mathematical sentences are self-evidently true either. Some are so complex in their expressions that they need proofs to support their truth. However, if it transpires that they are, indeed, true, there are not many theorists who would deny that they are analytically true. The thesis to follow will serve as such a proof for a sentence which I hope will be seen, in the end, to be analytically true.



## CHAPTER 2

### Some foundational principles: What principles need to be presupposed by a verificationist theory of meaning?

At times it is necessary to offer some sort of justification for adopting a particular system or strategy for doing a philosophical investigation. The reason seems apparent; often the outcomes of a philosophical analysis will be criticized for its method and this, in itself, will be regarded as the reason for why certain controversial or even just plain seemingly incorrect conclusions have been drawn. Since the aim usually is to convince the reader of a particular conclusion (that this conclusion does follow logically and necessarily from the premises given), and seeing as this task alone poses enough challenges, it seems that the rejection of an overall method is an unnecessary variable which is best eliminated at the outset of the argument. Chapter 2 has two tasks: the one is to explain the close association between analytical philosophy and verificationist theory. The reason why this is useful is that it seems to be a first line of defense for the Verification principle which has often stood under fire within the analytical tradition. It is my contention that this is due to some misunderstandings about what the principle states. It will be argued that when we start an investigation about the meaning of something like moral language it seems most natural to look, firstly, at how we use moral language, and then, based on this understanding of "use" to demonstrate why a verificationist theory of meaning is the correct theory to adopt in the analysis of moral language. This chapter sees in part a historical look at the connection between verificationism and analytical philosophy and then also a detailed defense of why sense should be regarded a salient aspect of meaning. The claim about sense being important for meaning is relevant for the development of the rest of the argument in the following chapters because sense is

seen as closer to verification conditions than for instance referencing alone. Simply, the reason for this is that sense has to do with speaker knowledge and intention of the terms and propositions employed.

Analytical philosophy can be safely characterised as a general change in philosophical method. This change is possibly best described as a move away from a philosophy which is characterised by unqualified profundity and semantic vagueness. Analytic philosophy, in one sense, can be described as an attempt to theorise and argue from a position which is free from unqualified metaphysical and meta-ethical commitments and aims to conclude only what can be done with complete rationality and unquestionable proof. The outcome is something which only allows for the most conservative of steps to be taken making the first prize that of achieving clarity in expression and the logical deduction of inferences which can also, conclusively, be proven to be true. It is easy to see, therefore, that skepticism of the method which analytical philosophy advocates will result in skepticism towards the conclusions drawn about the myriad of arguments (such as metaphysical and meta-ethical arguments) located **within** this tradition. I, of course, am well aware that analytic philosophy is hardly in need of a defense anymore, but it does seem that when an attempt is made to defend a verificationist theory about meaning, and in anticipation of the usual objections to such an argument, it becomes particularly necessary to revisit the reasons for a linguistic turn in philosophy.

It is because verificationism and linguistic philosophy share a common base that this section consists of an attempt to explain why it is right to say that semantic theories (realism or anti-realism about meaning) must provide, and therefore precede, a basis for metaphysical (or ethical) disputes in philosophy. This is relevant because much of what is central to an investigation into the

meaningfulness of moral language hinges on conclusions drawn about the realism/ anti-realism dispute. It would entail an assumption of grave proportions to just set forth with an argument about realism and anti-realism in language, and which describes moral language best, before a justification has been offered for the overall method being employed.

What follows has, to quite a large degree, been based on some readings of Michael Dummett's work and some very good, and exceptionally helpful secondary writings by philosophers who have looked extensively at his work. Having said this it would be wrong to give the impression that the next section is posing to be another analysis of Dummett's work. I have not, by any means, done an extensive investigation of his work and it should not be assumed, unless it is directly stated to be the case, that the content reflects, attempts to reflect or endorses specific views of his. It is, however, impossible to propose a verificationist theory about meaning without paying credence to Dummett's work.

It is also impossible, and unnecessary, for this thesis to address all the challenges which face verificationism (or its associate: anti-realism) about things like the past and mathematics and so on. I shall keep my attention directed at the challenges which pose problems for verificationist theories about the meaning of moral language. It is my wish that the reader is aware of the fact that I have not worked under the illusion that this thesis makes bold claims about having solved some of the intricate and technical problems which have been borne from this particular discourse. It has, however, made every attempt, as is its task, to observe the most obvious and damaging problems for a verificationist theory about meaning.

Bold claims have been made about verificationist theories about meaning and linguistic philosophy sharing a common foundation- now let us see if this is the case and why this is significant for an argument about moral language.

### **Section 1: The motivation for philosophy of language**

Anyone who has made a study of the history of western philosophy will most likely agree that it is characterised by a tradition of trying to solve problems of existence, causality, matter, properties (such as moral properties) and so on by way of presenting rational proofs. Rational proofs are arguments which are based on laws of inference, in other words logical laws, and a good proof is generally regarded as one which manifests legitimate entailment from plausible premises. We have all learnt about deductive and inductive reasoning and contingent and necessary truths. We have learnt about a priori and a posteriori knowledge. And all these components of reasoning, it is said, are factored into deciding which proofs offer the *best explanations* for things like certain phenomena or moral attitudes. In short, it is probably fair to say that these components of reasoning have been the tools of philosophical deliberation and the argument or proof which displays the best use of these gets to be the best explanation for the issue under dispute.

And, predominantly, it is thought that these are indeed the only sorts of tools available to philosophers. Philosophy is not a discipline characterised by field work or empirical research. It does its work conceptually and analytically. But philosophy does aim to, and certainly claims to, forward some truths about reality. The fact that this is its primary activity and it does so with full awareness of what tools it has at its disposal must mean that its labourers, the philosophers, believe this task to be possible using only the aforementioned conceptual tools. Hence all the arguments

ranging from Plato's argument for how we can have knowledge for things such as Forms (those mysterious things which are the stable essences of the volatile and unreliable material world) to Thomas Aquinas's proofs for the existence of God, to error theorists' proofs for the absence of things such as moral properties. But each new theory can and has been outplayed by a new and better theory. The concerns which motivated the verificationist theories of the logical positivists was this apparent inability of philosophy to settle any of the most pervasive and fundamental disputes therein, as well as the tendency of philosophical language to become progressively more obscure and unwarranted in making its various claims to truth. The positivists were intent on cleaning up philosophy and proposed that if the traditional problems were approached, not from within meta-ethical, political or metaphysical deliberation, as has been the tradition, but rather with a focus on the language which we employ to describe and then solve the problems, a real clarity can be achieved. This linguistic turn saw the birth of analytical philosophy.

Dummett's verificationist theory about meaning, and his endorsement of this order of philosophical deliberation, is motivated by exactly the same concerns. But save the brief sketch offered above, no more needs to be said about the historical background to the Dummettian notion of solving metaphysical disputes via theories about meaning. The purpose, however, of including a brief historical sketch of the linguistic turn in philosophy is to prepare the reader for the fact that analytical philosophy's project to solve various disputes within philosophy by looking at language may be part of one of the most important premises for endorsing a verificationist linguistic theory. In other words, the assumption is that any analytic philosopher should already be committed to this order of theorising (as it is this order which defines analytical philosophy) and the intent is to show that once this commitment has been made it should not be hard to see why our language [use]

predisposes us, as theorists, to verificationist theories about meaning. It is for this reason that the motivations for analytical philosophy are part of a defence for verificationism.

The effort being made to show the historical connections between analytic philosophy and the Verification Principle is aimed at sensitizing the critic of Verificationism- particularly those critics who see themselves working within the analytical tradition. But, naturally, the success of this effort to create awareness cannot alone stand as a defense for the principle. It can at most raise a “guard” for Verificationism. But it certainly is not the claim that this alone is a foolproof guard or impenetrable argument.

The first point in need of clarification regarding the application of the principle is the one about “meaninglessness” in the positivist sense. Even though much of the talk about meaning emerges from the positivists and, in particular, their verification principle, not all theories about meaning which are based in verificationist notions will deem most of what philosophy does and what language users do as meaningless or dismiss the traditional questions as pseudo ones. As Dummett says (1991; 10) of the positivists: “The doctrine was meant to be liberating; but it failed to exorcise the psychological allure exerted by the metaphysical pictures.” We just cannot seem to stop speaking about reality, or what we hope or think is reality, despite the fact that we cannot always do this in a rational and appropriately conservative manner. Our propositions about the world (and morality) have *meaning* to us regardless of how certain we can be of their truth. Contemporary verificationist theories about meaning acknowledge this fact about how we communicate, but place constraints on the legitimacy of our propositions (in terms of their factualist nature).

It would be a mistake, at any future point of reading this thesis, to think that the claim is that our moral language, for instance, is meaningless. I have hoped, in briefly speaking in this manner about “meaninglessness”, to have eliminated such a worry. The Verification Principle is merely concerned with the legitimacy of factual language because factual language masquerades as more than just subjective expressions of a kind- it claims to be denoting objective states of affairs which seems, to me, to be begging for greater criteria for legitimacy. And it is this legitimacy with which our work ahead concerns itself.

## **Section 2: Sense determines reference**

This section presents an argument for why reference and sense should be regarded ingredients of meaning. The rest of this thesis relies quite heavily on a clear understanding of these two terms (sense and reference) and in what way I see them serving a meaning theory. It is of particular importance to understand the sense of a term or proposition as being closer (than the reference) to the verification conditions of that term or proposition.

In order to really get to grips with what the differences between various meaning theories are it is necessary to understand the dispute around sense (what we understand in using a term) and reference (denoting of an object or property). The reason for this is that a theory about how we derive meaning is going to have to settle some important issues around the exact relationship between sense and reference. In other words, if a meaning theory proposes that we (and with this “we” I mean language users) obtain meaning by making the correct reference to objects there will be no need to include knowledge of sense in such a definition of meaning. Let me caution, from the outset, that it is tempting to say about theories about meaning, that terms and propositions must be

implicitly defined in some way in order for us to even make reference at all. In other words, it is said, that meaning must precede reference. To some extent this is true, of course. For instance, in order to establish what a proposition's verification or truth conditions are we must first have access to its meaning. But this claim is missing the point to quite a large degree. When theorists speculate about meaning they are attempting to address the questions around legitimate language use. So philosophers are not so much concerned with the fact that speakers all may have some understanding of a word, sometimes even words speakers think they recognise in other languages, as with what meaning can legitimately be attributed to a term and proposition based on the understanding of a whole lot of issues which impact on the meaning making process. Unlike using correct referencing (denoting of an object or property) alone as a way by which speakers derive meaning, a theory of meaning which is more inclined to include a full blooded understanding of the content of a term will want to say that the sense of that term needs to be an aspect of determining its meaning. In other words, a sense based theory will hold that we cannot make proper reference without substantive knowledge of the content of our understanding (the sense) of a term or statement.

What exactly is sense then to give it such importance for a verificationist theory about meaning?

The sense of a term is, according to Dummett, "to know everything relevant to determining its semantic value that needs to be known about it by anyone who knows the language." (1991; 123) (I have underlined for greater emphasis.) This, *at the very least*, means that the sense of a term is related to knowledge about that term. Admittedly, the quoted definition above is more specific than my stipulation of it, in that it suggests exactly what type of, or how much, knowledge is required to know the sense of a term. But, for present purposes let us remain with my stipulation because Dummett's definition could, at this stage of an argument about whether sense determines reference



be accused of question begging. We first need to demonstrate why [knowledge of] sense should be an aspect of meaning. The reason for Dummett's definition is based on his insistence that sense **does**, in fact, determine reference. But this is something which still asks for an independent argument here. To the extent of which I am aware it is impossible to mention one theorist or a particular philosophical position which overtly advocates that reference alone determines meaning. The point is merely that if sense is taken as seriously as it ought to be, regarding its role in meaning, those theorists would all be verificationists. If theorists about meaning are not verificationists, they cannot be giving proper credence to sense. In what follows I hope to test any theorist's seeming commitment to sense as an aspect of meaning.

So let us take the sense of a term to be **knowledge** of the understanding of the object or property (in other words the content) which the word denotes. This knowledge is more than just the sort of knowledge which is needed to point to an object and successfully say that (object X) is a heffalump but having no intimate sort of knowledge, the sort of knowledge which is characterised by direct access to the state of affairs being understood and denoted, of what a heffalump is. Presumably we learn to point to objects and name them by being taught the names of things (which we can recognise) and this ability to point to an object and correctly employ a term to denote it is making "reference". Imagine teaching a chimpanzee to point to the numeral (3) when it is either verbally or in writing confronted with the word "three". This behaviour of the chimpanzee indicates the ability to reference and does not indicate that the chimpanzee has any real understanding of what "three" consists in. Compare this, for instance, to the chimpanzee being able to correctly point out an (**orange**) when confronted with the word "orange" if oranges are his favourite food and he knows what they taste like, smell like and that he can peel them and eat them. This intimate knowledge of the content of the word "orange" is what is meant by the sense of a word (or a whole statement).

And it is not possible to explain away the difference between the example of the chimp pointing to the **(orange)** and the numeral **(3)** as a simple misunderstanding that can be clarified on testing the chimps knowledge of the two objects to which it is making reference. It is precisely this testing, which may be proposed as explaining the appearance of a difference in the chimpanzee making reference to two objects (one which it knows well and the other not) which an appeal to verification conditions attempt to address. The argument is that the chimp has no sense of the numeral **(3)** and therefore has no understanding of what the word “three” means. It merely knows how to correctly make reference to **(3)**.

Verification conditions are closely related to sense because both sense and verification conditions appeal to knowledge of extension beyond just simple recognition of the objects or state of affairs in the world.

My aim also, in making an appeal to something such as chimpanzee knowledge, is to draw to the reader’s attention the fact that an intimate understanding of the content of language may be different for each individual agent. This is why a term can have only one correct reference but many senses. I can point to an object **(3)** and a chimpanzee can do the same and, even if we both do so correctly, we can probably still have very different ideas about that object. This must mean that when I make reference to **(3)** I shall have a different understanding of what **(3)** is compared to a chimpanzee which is pointing at it. These different understandings of terms are what is called the senses of a term and it is for this reason that one object in reality can have different senses even though it may only have one proper reference. But the acknowledgement of the fact that there are different senses to a term can pose a serious worry for arguments which do not have the capacity to

allow fully for how we determine the meanings of our terms. Arguments which start with metaphysical presuppositions, such as an argument for a moral fact being it is wrong to torture babies, need to assume we are all on the same page as to what is being made reference to (the existence of things such as moral facts) in order to enable the proofs to be successful. But the fact of the matter is that we, quite evidently, would be wrong to assume that we all mean the same thing, even when we do agree on the referencing, and that such assumptions are precisely the reason why an approach in philosophy starting with metaphysical claims (as opposed to starting with theories about meaning) has never been able to yield any real solutions to our philosophical problems. It could be objected that we may still all mean the same thing even though we have different ideas about that thing. My contention is that we cannot all be meaning the same thing if we have different ideas about it- even if we can all point to the same object. Meaning is more than identification. Meaning must be derived from an intimate knowledge of the thing being represented because if it is not the deductions we make in our reasoning about reality will be confounded, and either thought to be true when they're not or false when they're not (or one of these when it is neither). This is very apparent in a statement like: "God is a merciful God". This statement can only be true in some senses of the word "God" even if everyone understands what is being referred to when using the word "God". But more importantly, it can only be true if certain conditions obtain and we can only claim this to be true if we have access to those conditions. And none of the above conditions can be satisfied by referencing and rational proofs alone.

The intention is to show that when sense is seriously taken to be an ingredient of meaning, that this entails a natural commitment to the notion that rational proofs cannot, alone and unsupported by further epistemic conditions, solve metaphysical problems. This is because the sense of a term

requires knowledge of the states of affairs which are being understood in using such a term. The relevance for moral language is that, if sense is a salient ingredient of meaning, we need to be able to give an account of what exactly it is we understand when we say things like "It is wrong to break promises".

The debate between whether the solutions to philosophical problems should proceed starting from metaphysical theorising or from theorising about meaning is tied in with whether or not sense does, or ought to, determine reference. (Of course, I am aligned with Dummett on this in that theories about meaning should make explicit that sense should determine reference but the intention is to force an acknowledgement that this is not always taken into account in meaning theories, e.g. proofs for the existence of moral facts.) The connection runs like this: in the preceding explanation it was forwarded that philosophy, prior to the onset of analytical philosophy, attempted to solve philosophical disputes, such as whether or not moral properties are mind independent or not, by rational proofs. What this asks for is that the rules of inferential reasoning are obeyed and that the conclusions, therefore, follow validly from the premises. In order to achieve a reasonable amount of success employing such a strategy, all that we need from our use of language (our terms and propositions) is that we reference properly. This can be done without an intimate knowledge of the understanding of the terms and statements. It is merely necessary to know, in principle, that "God" refers to the (object **God**) and in knowing this the argument can proceed happily, making possible the a priori knowledge so highly prized in philosophy. So, holding the position that either sense does not determine reference, or that there is no distinction between sense and reference, means that, provided inferential rules are followed, we are entitled to deduce truths about the real world by employing the means of proper referencing and valid reasoning. It may be denied that any self-respecting philosopher would ever think themselves capable of deducing truths about the real world

while merely remaining faithful to correct referencing and inferential rule following. My claim is that this is exactly what theorists do when they make arguments for the existence of things like moral facts. Facts which have the property of containing some sort of moral value need to be proven by further means. And there just are no such other means available- at present. Propositions which make claims to the existence of moral facts or depend on the truth of such claims for their own truth are, after all, existential propositions. And it should be quite evident, after so many years of doing analytical philosophy, that these sorts of claims remain largely unsubstantiated when the only proof provided is that of a rational kind. This way of doing philosophy enables an approach characterised by metaphysical theories infirming meaning theories. This is because the primary concern is not with what we **know about** the object (or property) being referred to but rather with what conclusions we can validly draw while making reference. I propose that if, however, meaning theories were informing metaphysical ones the very difficulty with the meaning of moral propositions would disallow further speculations of the metaphysical kind. The objection to metaphysical theories informing meaning theories must be that it is highly questionable whether valid proofs, secured by proper but, what amounts to, vacuous referencing is, in fact, enough to legitimise statements about the real world and existence. Surely, this is in breach of the agreement about the fundamental distinction between validity and soundness. And if soundness (factual truth) is what we're after we need to be able to give support for the plausibility of our premises and this, it seems to me, just cannot be done by referencing alone. All we can derive from rule following and referencing (if **undetermined** by sense) is validity- never truth of the substantive kind. And this will have consequences for meaning.

Taking then that there is a distinction between sense and reference let us look at how this distinction (referencing being the ability to identify the state of affairs and sense being the understanding a particular speaker has of a particular term- this being derived from experience with that state of affairs) impacts on philosophy which works via theories about meaning to theories about metaphysics and other things. According to the linguistic philosophical method (meaning theories to metaphysical theories) we start our investigations by looking at how we use our language. In other words, we start with describing our linguistic practice and setting norms in place to ensure that our practice can meet our criteria for legitimate language use. The reason why this approach is thought to be more fruitful is that it is thought that much of our disputes are due to a lack of clarity and agreement about the meanings of the terms we use. So our tendency to make reference to, for instance, the objective, mind-independent existence of moral value needs explaining and justification.

What we have thus far is an argument for sense being regarded an important aspect of meaning for any valid theory about meaning. The reason being offered is related to the way in which speakers use language. The notion of sense, understood as a specific type of speaker knowledge, must form part of determining whether or not the speaker has used a particular term or proposition correctly (legitimately).

But what does our tendency towards using language in a realist (objective, mind independent) way mean for the preceding discussion about sense and reference? With realist language I specifically mean statements and terms that are structured or used in a way that their syntactical composition or contribution lends them the force of an indicative statement. Bernhard Weiss, in *Michael Dummett*

(2002; 17), speaks of assertions as sentences which are used in an indicative way, in other words, as sentences posing to state some sort of truth. Let it be said, before the conversation is biased in any way that will prevent it from being useful for our ends, that, unfortunately, for the realist philosopher the pervasive use of realist language cannot be taken as any sort of vindication of realist theory because the question here is precisely about **clarification** of language use. In other words, the idea is to determine when our language use is **legitimate**. But, it is certainly true that our tendency to use language indicatively **does** give an indication to our psychological commitments to our propositions and the facts which we believe them to be tracking. We shall need to, and therefore will, give a significant amount of attention to language competency in the text that follows, but for now it is merely important to look at how the relationship between sense and reference stands for philosophy which works from the bottom up.

If our realist language does show something about what we expect from our language it would seem a mistake to overlook this expectation as an ingredient in the way in which we derive meaning. Since realist language makes reference to objects in and properties of the world as if they exist independently of our minds, and that the tracking of these facts depends on the ability of the speaker, it must be assumed, if it is being claimed that this is true, that the speaker has successfully done so in order to speak in the way that they are. The question then is what requirements has the speaker, employing such factualist language, met in order to justify the bandying about of such claims to truth? The use of assertion shows that we expect evidence in support of our claims. We expect that there exists evidence somewhere whether we have access to it or not. But the astute reader should note that there is quite a leap from saying that we expect to have evidence in support of claims and that we expect that there is evidence in support of our claims- despite the fact that we may not know what this evidence is or where to find it.

If the sense of a term is a more intimate knowledge of what is understood about the content of that term or state of affairs that a proposition denotes then, sense forms part of what we mean when we use such terms and propositions. The sense should surely be regarded as part of the reality which the speaker is claiming to track in using language indicatively. In this way it seems quite natural to think of sense as an element of meaning. The controversy, however, is seated in the fact that some theorists maintain that if we cannot show that we have knowledge of the sense of a term we ought not to be making any sort of reference. Dummett puts it like this: "But meaning, of which sense is the salient ingredient, is entirely correlative to understanding: to ask after the meaning of an expression is to ask what has to be grasped in order to understand it." (1991) If this claim is true it will be true by virtue of how we do, in fact, use language. So Dummett is not posing an ideal here, he is merely describing what it is we understand ourselves to be doing when we make assertions. He is not posing an ideal because he is not being prescriptive about language use, he is merely stating (describing) that when we use language indicatively we, in fact, do expect evidence. It seems, in doing so, he is also drawing a distinction between rule following, referencing and understanding. The reason is as follows: Our particular type of use of language (such as metaphorical, factual, making commands and asking questions) must be apparent to us because it is with a particular intention that we use language in a particular way. If meaning is determined by this intentional use of language then meaning, unlike maybe grammatical rules, must be largely operative on a consciously cognitive level of our thinking and communicating. It seems quite natural to look at use as a surface aspect of linguistic practice and it therefore seems right to say that meaning (of some sorts of discourse) is derived from what we take ourselves to be doing, consciously and intentionally, when we make assertions (use language assertorically). When we make moral claims we are using language indicatively- we are claiming to be asserting facts.



The claim is that sense captures our intuitions about the cognitive aspect of meaning. Therefore, meaning theories which are concerned with remaining faithful to meaning not being a mysterious and inexplicable property of terms, which precedes referencing and sense, but sees meaning rather as a result of a speaker's interaction with his/her language and the world it claims to denote, must remain hostage to the notion of sense being a salient ingredient of meaning. The eventual conclusions about the relationship between sense and reference will constitute a part of the foundation of the argument for which model of meaning we ought to adopt.

### CHAPTER 3

#### Two semantic requirements: What requirements does our use of assertoric language place on semantic theory?

When we say something like: "It is wrong to break a promise", the right question to ask is in what way are we using the assertion? And then, to really benefit from the full impact that such a question could make, in other words to really give it due attention, it is important to suspend, for the time being, any formal theories of the meta-ethical kind that we may have about, for instance, constructivist truth, mind independent moral properties or post modern subjectivism. To really get to grips with an investigation into how we use our moral language it is necessary to think of ourselves as moral agents and not as philosophers. So it seems that when someone makes an assertion such as the one above it is reasonably safe to assume that they believe themselves to be saying something true, that they may have, at least, one or two reasons to give as to why the assertion is true and that they probably even believe themselves to stating some sort of ultimate truth. Since all this is most likely a fact of the matter about the use of moral propositions it is reasonable to assume that the moral agent would think it morally wrong for someone to act in a way which seems to contradict the norms which seem, to the agent in question, implicit to the moral proposition. (This tendency to hold others to our own moral standards is also true for moral agents who think of moral deliberation as context or situation dependent for the reason that the

moral agent would most likely be of the opinion that we are all consistently bound by the same moral norms informed by a specific context. In such cases it is said that the moral facts do obtain but they are based in a particular set of circumstances. It would, however, be misleading to give the impression that this discussion is about whether or not moral reason is “principled” in some sense or whether it is “particularist”. Rather, the discussion is about the fact that we tend to be realists in our use of moral statements and we do so because we believe ourselves to be tracking facts of a moral kind- whether these are overriding principles or situation dependent facts. In short, we are not, presently, interested in the metaphysics of moral facts but rather in whether or not speakers can show that they have access to the sorts of facts they need to have in order to legitimately use language in the way that they do.)

What this means is that moral agents talk as if there exists some sort of objective moral fact of the matter. It is for this reason that philosophers such as Simon Blackburn and Crispin Wright, who both associate themselves with the anti-realist project, have acknowledged the importance of giving some account of our realism in moral language. Blackburn’s notion of quasi-realism (a thesis that holds that we can speak as if we are realists about moral truth even though there are no moral facts) and Wright’s insistence on arguing for the minimal truth aptness (this is a notion that assertions, when they have met some minimal syntactic constraints, which will be explained in more detail later, can be apt for a certain “type” of truth- not of the objective kind) of moral language are two examples of how we could be sensitive to this human tendency despite the fact that we may think of moral language as intrinsically flawed, unjustified, or some such thing.

The suggestion is that there exists some tension between what we say as moral agents and what we are entitled to say. It is being supposed that, if all moral agents (speakers) were interested in the

meta-discourse around moral language, it would be found that realist intuitions do not correctly represent what speakers see themselves doing when making moral assertions. The question here is whether or not it seems right that we, as moral agents, think of our moral statements as true in the way a theorist who endorses realist notions of truth as determined by truth conditions (that state of affairs, which if it obtains, would make a statement true). The answer seems to be that we simply do not think of our moral statements as true in this way. This is because we simply do not think of our use of the truth predicate as sufficiently characterised by the Correspondence Principle (that a proposition is true iff it corresponds to the facts). In other words, in colloquial terms, when we are making assertions to truth we do not think in an idealised way about the truth of our statements. If you asked someone if they really believed their statement: "It is wrong not to be a Christian" to be true they would, almost certainly, not answer: "It is true if it happens to be the case." I do not think that my statement about it being wrong to break promises would be true if it were the case that it is wrong to break promises. What we do think, as moral agents, is that **it is** (not **if it is**) a fact that it is wrong to break promises (or that it is a fact that it is wrong not to be a Christian). We assume, in making the assertion, that we have **already** tracked the facts about the matter which is why we feel vindicated in asserting such facts. We do not think of ourselves as stating a conditional truth- which is what the Correspondence Principle implies.

Thus, we do not think in "platitudes" (borrowing from Wright) and we do not use our language in such a way as to rest content with a conditional claim on truth. Now, if it transpires that our assumptions at having tracked these "moral facts" are inconsistent with our intuitions about what it means to use a language competently then we may be involved in a little bit of self deception. Our natural and enduring commitment to "evidence" may, if we are right about having such commitments, require a revision of our notions of when our language can be true and then our

tendency, as language users, to regard some of our assertions as true or false in the absence of the evidence which we so value. Either this or we must give up our commitments to evidence. What this throws into question is the usefulness of theoretical truth conditions as an aspect of language use. It seems as if we regard ourselves as competent language users not because we are able to **imagine** the facts that **would make** our assertions true but rather because we presume **there are** actual existing states of affairs which do so. And an assumption like the latter surely needs further epistemic support?

Before we continue by looking at two of the semantic requirements of our linguistic practice (in order for our language to have the meaning we intend for it to have) let it be said that semantic requirements are taken to inform meaning theories (how we derive meaning) and what sort of semantic value (realist or anti-realist) our language is entitled to have. So if it emerges that language use is indeed not underpinned by something like the Correspondence Principle and theoretical truth conditions then this will call for a meaning theory which can, indeed, accommodate the following semantic requirements.

It will be argued that an appeal to truth conditions, to establish the correct notions of use within a theory of meaning, cannot be accommodated by the requirements outlined below. And it seems as if the manifestation and acquisition requirements are, indeed, legitimate.

### **Section 1: The Manifestation Requirement**

In her article, *Semantic Challenges to Realism*, Drew Khlentzos (2004) outlines the manifestation challenge to realism. It seems, Khlentzos sees the manifestation challenge as a semantic **challenge** and it runs, in short, something like this: "The challenge simply is this: what aspect of our linguistic

use could provide the necessary evidence for the realist's correlation between sentences and states of affairs? Which aspects of our semantic behaviour manifest our grasp of these correlations, assuming they hold?" (Khlentzos; 2004)

I propose that we modify, slightly, the way Khlentzos has put it. Manifestation should be regarded a requirement for any semantic theory, realist or anti-realist. It should form part of the reason why we favour either of these semantic theories. Calling it the Manifestation Challenge for realism is, in effect, begging the question. Any semantic theory should be able to give an account of how language users manifest the link between their sentences and the world they wish to, and assume to, denote. But since, Khlentoz' argument runs, this will prove to be problematic for the realist, it **then only** becomes a specific challenge for the realist. (Of course, Khlentzos is not by any means the only theorist who challenges the realist project on the grounds of semantic requirements; this strategy is favoured by Dummett throughout much of his work, and another example of an author basing an argument, counter realism, on semantic challenges is Bob Hale in his article: Realism and its Oppositions; 1997.)

It is of some importance, if the reader should want to refer directly to "Semantic Challenges to Realism" that some mention is made of the fact that this article sees yet another misconstrual of the anti-realist project. This misconstrual has a bearing on some of the conclusions reached about whether or not realism succeeds in evading the semantic "challenges" posed to it. Khlentzos insists that manifestation, according to the anti-realist, is only a problem for the realist because of the difficulty with mind independent objects. This way of putting it misses what is essentially, according to the type of anti-realist in question in this thesis, going to be problematic for the realist. It also suggests that all anti-realists are somehow committed to some sort of metaphysical

constructivism or idealism about some or all objects. This is simply not the case at all. There are many anti-realists who are very happy to accept the possibility and the actual fact about the existence of mind independent properties and objects. The point is, according to the anti-realist that the realist is going to have a problem with how to manifest the knowledge of the link between the world, moral facts, and the assertions which we make about these moral facts. So, it is less about existence of these facts than it is about knowledge of how our language tracks such facts.

The question with which to continue is thus: What warrants our assertions if these happen to be of the fact stating kind? Surely this warrant will require some sort of manifestation of knowledge about how our fact stating assertions latch on to the world of which they speak? If it is not possible to manifest the knowledge of such a link (tracking) then it emerges that our language is not warranted- despite the fact that there may very well be such things as mind independent moral facts.

It seems that the manifestation requirement does pose a problem for the realist about things such as moral facts. This is because [our] realist language is factalist by nature. I should like to emphasise the following once again: it is not being stated that realist language cannot and does not track moral facts, it is being claimed that the realist cannot always show that it does- certainly not in the case of moral facts. Khlentzos describes realist sentences as sentences which, in some discourses or theory, are to be construed as literally fact stating ones (2004). Factual language has, in effect, set itself up in such a way that it must accept, in order to comply with a basic semantic requirement for such language, a burden of proof- in this case the burden is to give an account of the speaker's manifestation of the knowledge of the link between their language and the world. The reason why it is not an effective evasion of the challenge, for the professors of the Correspondence Principle of

truth, to wield to such a definition of truth is because speakers in ordinary, everyday speak quite simply are not committed to hypothetical or conditional assertions when they are making moral claims. In other words, when I say "It is wrong to covet my neighbour's husband" I do not mean "If the moral facts, to which I have no access, are such that it is wrong to covet my neighbour's husband then I say, and it must be true, that it is wrong to covet my neighbour's husband." Meta-ethicists may speak like this but moral agents do not.

So, the truth conditions, implied by the Correspondence Principle, of a statement like the one above can be of no use to the realist in satisfying the manifestation requirement and thereby blocking the challenge. This is because, naturally, this raises a question about, if and when it seems to be the case that we cannot, as speakers, manifest in what the connection between our language and reality consists, then how are we really to come to grips with the content of our propositions? And it seems that forwarding imaginary and ideal conditions which would make the proposition true does not seem to fit with what we see ourselves doing in our linguistic practice. Does the manifestation requirement then ask for a revision of our linguistic practice, if this practice is so inherently realist?

## **Section 2: The Acquisition Requirement**

Once again I think it preferable, for the same question begging reasons, not to immediately think of Language Acquisition as a challenge to realism. It should be thought of as a requirement in the formulation of any respectable semantic theory (realism or anti-realism) and both the would-be realist and anti-realist should be shouldered with the task of giving an account of how we acquire language or become competent language users.

Taking the Acquisition Requirement to be saying something like: A competent language user is a speaker who has acquired the ability to correctly use language to denote facts. The claim will be



that the realist, as opposed to the anti-realist, has difficulty distinguishing between a competent and non-competent language user. However, the reason forwarded is **not** an impossible claim that those who believe there are real moral properties in the world should find it more difficult, compared with those who believe that there are no moral properties, to explain how we acquire language. This cannot be the reason because, firstly, anti-realists do not claim that there are no moral properties, they merely claim that there exists no satisfactory account of what such moral properties could be which means that speakers are not warranted in speaking of such things. And, secondly, in realist doctrine, where warrant is not a criterion for truth or meaning, it seems hard to see where the delineation between the competent and incompetent acquisition of language lies. In other words, whether or not the speaker is warranted in making a claim seems not to be a criterion for truth when the Correspondence Principle is seen as adequately accounting for truth. But it seems that if the Correspondence Principle is doing all the work in giving an account of truth, with no further constraints or criteria to support it, then anyone is surely permitted to make any sort of claim to truth- because as long as they can imagine what the truth conditions would be their statement is legitimate. It seems that the realist is implying that it is permissible for a moral agent to merely have a hunch about why they have some sort of moral commitment, something like saying it is permissible to be confident that someone is lying, if there is an accompanying feeling that can count as a reason for being confident in this way, without really being able to say whether such a feeling has any grounds in reality. If having hunches about things can act as reasons for commitments then anyone and everyone must be right about their commitments. And everyone and anyone must be competent language users. By looking at competency in language in such a way it seems quite evident that there exist no meaningful criteria for competent language acquisition.

It is my claim that realism, as described above, cannot give an account of competent language acquisition and that language acquisition therefore becomes a requirement (and challenge) of linguistic behaviour which realism, in particular, cannot meet.

If the purpose of identifying semantic requirements for linguistic behaviour is to inform which semantic theories we should endorse for a specific discourse, then it seems as if manifestation and language acquisition favour some sort of theory which will emphasise the importance of **sense** as an aspect of referencing. The claim being forwarded is that the sense of a term is contained by exactly the sort of knowledge which needs to be manifested according to the manifestation challenge. In other words when we have manifested in what **our individual [speaker]** knowledge of the link between our language and the world consists we have given an account of what it is that we understand ourselves saying in using a certain term, and this is the sense of the term or proposition. We have, simply put, given an account of the contents of the term as we see it. Similarly, we can only regard ourselves as competent users of language when we can give an account of how we have tracked the facts of which we speak. This tracking does not merely refer to knowing of which object we speak, but entails that we know the content of the predicative statements which we make about such as object. In other words, we only consider someone a competent speaker when they can show how they know "Stealing is wrong" and this requires more than knowing that stealing is wrong.

Are there any accounts of linguistic competence available to the realist? A realist may be of the type who agrees that competency is a real factor in language acquisition and stipulates that a competent speaker is merely one whose propositions corresponds to the facts. This is all fine and well for theorists of the verificationist type but this option is not available to the semantic realist:

Linguistic behaviour (in other words, speaker behaviour) does not subscribe to meta-linguistic theorising. Speakers either do or do not acquire a language and become competent users of it. There must be some substantive account of when this is the case because competence is not a hypothetical event, but an actual one. Our language is either legitimate or not and if we agree to this delineation (between legitimate and non-legitimate), then we have the burden of showing where exactly this delineation occurs and how we would recognise it when we see it.

What then should an account of language acquisition and degrees of competence be premised on? If competent use of language is regarded as something like saying it right and this, again, is regarded as being the case when assertions have correctly represented the facts, we must surely be dealing with a case wherein factualist language is somehow constrained by "proof". There cannot be anything odd about this notion because it seems as if any person, or then theorist (not that these are mutually exclusive), of a realist or anti-realist type will concede that the concept of a "fact" must be a priori associated to the notion of "justification". It simply is the case that some statements are accepted as facts and some not, which means that agents within a particular discourse believe it an a priori fact that there are certain delineating criteria which can distinguish fact from those statements which pose to be facts. We can take a broad definition of such criteria to be the "justification" of certain statements. Apt and appropriate justification (this term is loosely used at present) is then what will distinguish a fact from a fallacy. And what will distinguish moral agents (or users of moral language) and realist and anti-realist philosophers from each other is what is regarded as being able to legitimately serve as justification for a factual assertion. At present, I shall withhold an argument and conclusion about whether a realist or anti-realist theorist is correct about what should serve as "justifications" because I believe, with Dummett, that this decision should be based on linguistic behaviour (use). This means, at pain of begging the question, our semantic

conclusions should be informed by our theories about use. And how we use our language is what has been the focus of discussion so far- but this investigation is not entirely complete.

Both the manifestation requirement and the language acquisition requirement are based on an appeal to some kind of constraint put on language and to, therein, determine its legitimacy. This is because factualist language, which is the type under discussion, is necessarily (by definition) in need of a real and workable distinction between when we as speakers are stating facts and when not. And this need for establishing the exact place of delineation between a factual assertion and a fallacious one will premise theories about legitimate use (semantic theories). This is a self imposed distinction, imposed by our linguistic behaviour and epistemological commitments, which is seated at the foundations of any sort of theory about how we derive meaning.

Before looking at how linguistic practice (use) will influence theories about meaning it is necessary to look at how semantic requirements relate to the distinction between sense and reference. Taking us to have concluded, conservatively, that speakers (if not theorists) expect evidence in support of their factual statements it seems that it may also be correct to want to add that not only is there a distinction between sense and reference but that sense does in fact determine reference.

If the manifestation and acquisition requirements are related to speaker knowledge and speaker competence, then these requirements must surely be tied up with the sense of a term or proposition. But, if sense is additionally characterised by these requirements, what argument can be forwarded in support of why sense must determine reference? In other words, why should this sort of speaker knowledge be part of legitimising referencing? In forwarding an argument for why sense is related

to cognition (knowledge) and why sense should determine reference I refer to Dummett's distinction between the identity argument and the cognitive argument.

Dummett says of Frege's notions of sense and reference:

"Where the identity argument can be expressed by saying that to know the reference of a word is to know more than is involved in knowing its sense the cognitive argument may be stated, conversely, by saying that more is involved in knowing the sense than just knowing the reference: more exactly, that there cannot be such a thing as the bare knowledge of the reference of an expression." (1991: 126).

What Dummett means by identity argument, which is the argument that proposes that reference is a necessary and sufficient ingredient of the meaning of a term, is that all that is necessary for knowing the meaning of a term is to be able to **identify** the object to which it refers. This, according to the identity argument can be done without an intimate knowledge of the object (or an understanding of what is meant when using a term). The thing to see now is how this fits with what we now know about moral language.

When I say that "It is good to give money to the poor", I expect to be stating a fact. So when I use this proposition in a purely referential manner, in other words, when my knowledge of the proposition consists in my knowing to what I am making reference, my statement is capable of expressing, what Dummett calls, propositional knowledge (1991; 127). However, the claim is this does not give a complete description of what I am doing when I make such a statement. When I make a moral statement such as the one above I am not merely displaying a knowledge that "good" refers to (good) and "poor" to (poor). I am making a substantive claim of a factual kind. This means that I am employing predicative language. I am ascribing the actual property of moral goodness to an actual action of giving to the poor. When I am doing this, what Dummett calls ascriptions of

predicative knowledge-**what**, as in contrast to propositional knowledge-**that**, I am making claims to knowing something about the substantive content of my sentence. When doing this, as opposed to just correct referencing, it seems that the cognitive argument holds some theoretical advantage over the identity argument in its ability to describe how we employ language. In order to manifest knowledge of what it means when I say that an action X has a property Y, I shall need to manifest knowledge of its sense because knowing whether certain actions have certain properties requires an intimate knowledge of that action- an understanding of what is meant. It will not be enough to forward a platitude of “good” refers to (good) like “orange” refers to (orange). In order to make an ascription of predicative knowledge it is going to be necessary to display [manifest] a knowledge of the link between the term “good” and the property (good) and what this property could be.

So manifestation and competent language use (for exactly the same reasons) will require the knowledge of the sense of a term for the reason that we expect more from our factual language than correct labelling. We expect evidence (intimate knowledge) of the referents.

What follows in the last part of this chapter is a bridging between the concepts of manifestation, acquisition and truth (which is discussed in the following chapter). It is of great importance that the reader sees how the term “evidence” is to be taken and how it is borne from the notion of sense. If the argument about sense being integral to meaning is successful (and sense can be seen as very closely linked to the type of evidence required for truth and meaning by the Verification Principle) then a further argument in support of Verificationism will be so much easier to make.

For theories of meaning the notion of truth is pivotal because most theorists and, in fact speakers, regard the meaning of their claims to be determined by what will make that claim true. But

meaning theories must, unlike theories about logic (thinking of classical logic) which assume a certain position about things like truth and is merely concerned with preserving truth values across inferential pathways, first establish a firm conception of truth. The reason for this is that a particular understanding of the notion of truth, in other words an understanding of what it would take for any sentence to be true, will be part of the justification of a proposition. And this justification forms part of how the speaker is entitled to determine the meaning of that particular proposition. So when it is said that "It is good to give money to the poor", it is going to be the moral fact of the matter which, if it obtains, will make my statement true. This is simple enough and is certainly uncontroversial.

If such "facts" are to be construed as evidence then the question could be phrased like this: "Why can't there be evidence in support of the meaning of moral claims?" But it would be a mistake to see an argument forwarding the notion that we expect evidence in support of our assertoric language to be simultaneously claiming that there is or is not such evidence available. The latter is a separate argument altogether. The first step in establishing a verificationist theory about meaning is going to be to convince the reader that meaning should be derived in a particular way, e.g. by way of verification conditions (evidence). This, in itself does not presuppose that there are no such conditions. It is then a further argument which will state that there are no such conditions, such as the arguments which error theorists and expressivist theorists make. This is a further step which I assume most verificationist theorists would be loathe to take, for the very reason that such claims, about the absence of moral facts, are just not verifiable. These claims are not verifiable for the same reasons that moral claims, which depend on the existence of moral facts, are not verifiable- we simply cannot say what exactly we are looking for in attempting to detect moral properties- which surely is what will comprise a moral fact?

Even though I do not see it as part of the ambitions of this thesis to establish the metaphysics of moral facts, in fact, the very essence of this thesis is sided against such an investigation, I do concede that it is going to be difficult to avoid at least a stipulation regarding the metaphysics of moral facts. The purpose of offering a stipulation would be that any reader who is convinced of the existence of such moral facts is going to come up repeatedly against some of the central tenets of this thesis. So, let it suffice to be said that I take moral facts to denote, what some would qualify as, moral properties of the real world. But this thesis is premised on something like the Humean and earlier Wittgensteinian notion of a distinction between fact and value. It is my contention that it simply is not obvious in any way that the natural and real world is partially constituted by things such as moral properties available to the keen and astute observer or moral judge. There seems to be no meaningful way to distinguish between what we think we are observing when we see, at times, the natural world as normative and other more widely accepted illusions, such as gods and angels. But this stipulation may seem to commit this project to something like error theories or expressivist theories- and this would be a very big mistake. It is my claim that the moral realist, whether of the naturalist or rationalist stripe, has a burden of proof which, to my knowledge, has not been addressed adequately. It is, therefore, not my claim that there are no moral facts (or moral properties) - even though I **doubt** that there is for the same reasons as Hume and Wittgenstein - but rather that there is no way available to the moral realist of showing to the skeptic how one would be able to recognise such properties, and what the criteria are for distinguishing them from value neutral properties, and where to find them. Even though this case is far from adequate I rest it anyway.



What we have thus far is a claim that meaning is determined by what would make a proposition true, and that what would make a proposition true could be construed as its verification conditions, not its truth conditions. Which one we should regard as the correct criterion for truth is the work of the rest of the thesis.

Part of an argument for the aptness of the manifestation and acquisition requirements is premised on the understanding of the content of the sentence. Bernhard Weiss, in his book *Michael Dummett*, defines the manifestation of this understanding thus: "...an exercise of an appropriate recognitional capacity (a capacity to recognise the sentence as true or as assertible or, perhaps, a sensitivity to whether or not presented evidence justifies the assertion of the sentence)..." (2002; 71).

Weiss describes the pathway to meaning as follows (2002; 114): linguistic practice has two elements which are fundamental to it and the achievement of meaning. The first is the logical nature of language which is informed, implicitly and unconsciously, by inferential rules. This aspect of our practice enables us to speak coherently, ensuring that (hopefully) our sentences are syntactically sound and our arguments are validly deduced. The second element of linguistic practice is fully conscious and rational and is what enables us to gain referential knowledge via our knowledge of sense. It should not be difficult, by now, to understand why this aspect of our linguistic practice must be fully conscious and rational. The reason for this is because the identification of evidence for a statement, which is based on a knowledge of the content being referred to, must be done using perceptual faculties capable of influencing a decision about the truth value of the sentence. Recognition of evidence is not a reflex and conferring truth is not a necessity. So, for instance, if it transpires to be a temptation to argue that moral truths are necessary truths this would need some explaining because this fact, in itself, is not self evident. An argument

for moral truth being necessary truth will have to be supported, and preceded, by an argument for moral statements being analytical statements. Until this has been successfully achieved, which to my knowledge it has not, we must assume moral claims to be of the contingent type. And contingent truths can only be derived from a posteriori knowledge. Hence, the claim that we would require perceptual faculties in order to recognise moral facts (the conditions which would make moral claims true/false). And it seems to me quite evident that it has been impossible to show what we shall "perceive" in finding such truth conditions. And even if it can be shown what we shall perceive, additional evidence will be required to show that such truth conditions are not aspects of our imaginations (something like a projection) but are, in fact, aspects of an objective reality.

Truth conditions, such as those implied by the Correspondence Principle, cannot serve as the sort of evidence we expect from factual language. So, if Weiss is correct in his description of how we acquire meaning, and we have largely already argued for a position like his (by arguing: 1. that partially we achieve meaning by grammatical correctness and 2. that we require an intimate knowledge of the sense of a term or proposition) and if the semantic requirements place the right sorts of self imposed constraints on our language use, then it is just a short step to showing that meaning is verification conditions. What we have now is that the matters of fact which will make a proposition true or false cannot be hypothetical truth conditions, but must be actual evidence we have in support of our propositions and that we must be able to manifest knowledge of such evidence. This is partly due to the fact that sense must determine reference if we, in making for instance moral claims, are not satisfied merely with the vacuous labelling of referents. If evidence is the condition for conferring a truth value on a proposition then we, quite simply, have an evidentially constrained notion of truth at the basis of our theory of meaning. I have already indicated that a discussion on the intricate relationship between meaning and truth is left for the

next chapter. We shall see that meaning theories will determine what the conditions for warrant (legitimate use) are for our assertions. In other words, it seems as if there is tension between what we expect to be doing when employing a certain linguistic practice and what we can, in fact, accomplish with our full and conscious understanding. It may transpire that in our attempt to meet with our own semantic requirements our actual linguistic practice, in certain discourses, stands in need of revision.

It seems, then, as if it is right to say that speakers expect evidence in support of their assertoric claims. The Manifestation and Acquisition semantic challenges presuppose this about our linguistic behaviour and it is for this reason that they are very effectively forwarded as a challenge against realism. However, the reason why these are successfully posed as challenges to realism is also because these two semantic challenges assume truth (of assertoric language) to be evidentially constrained. If, however, it emerges that truth is better conceived as evidence transcendent then realism still has a way of resisting these semantic challenges.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **Two conceptions of truth: What are the reasons for and the implications of accepting either conception of truth?**

If achieving truth is regarded as possible without any knowledge of the relevant facts, then it may transpire that truth conditions can still serve to resist the semantic challenges of Manifestation and Acquisition. This chapter looks at which conception of truth, evidence transcendent or evidentially constrained, is correct. The conclusion will run in favour of evidentially constrained truth based on, as with most of the preceding argumentation within this thesis, use. The implication of proposing that truth be evidentially constrained is that verification conditions, as opposed to truth conditions, should be regarded as that which would make a proposition true.

Most theorists acknowledge that we may sometimes say things that are true without realising this to be the case. This characteristic of truth has become such a seductive option for how truth could be construed formally that it has informed much of what is claimed about truth, language and even metaphysics. What such a construal of truth permits, but does not entail, conceptually and theoretically, is that we can assume that all our propositions are either true or false, whether we have some way of knowing this determinate truth value or not. In other words, we can rest content that, provided our assertions have met some very basic justificatory constraints, such as elementary plausibility, consistency with existing facts, coherence within a larger argument and syntactical

correctness, it is going to be a fact that such assertions **will** either be true or false even within the absence of knowledge of which this is. It is from the notion that reasonable propositions must either register the facts or not and therefore be either true or not that we conclude that any reasonable (as above) proposition must have a determinate truth value.

However, is it necessarily the case that all reasonable propositions must have a determinate truth value? In other words, may there not be instances that (or certain ways in which to construe truth which) insist that not all propositions must be either true or false? My suggestion is that there are propositions which, because of the way in which they are phrased and the terminology which they employ, may be apt for truth but cannot be shown, determinately, to have achieved an actual truth value. This claim will be premised on truth being construed as evidentially constrained. Hence, if the notion of truth which permits the inference that all statements are determinately either true or false proves to be wrong this may enable a move towards the conclusion that some propositions are indeterminate.

In order to successfully counter an argument for why all propositions must have a determinate truth value we need to pay credence to the notion of falsification. It is quite apparent that the absence of evidence for the existence or presence of X does not necessarily constitute a proof for the absence or non-existence of X. In other words, in order to prove that X does not exist we need proof of that fact, not merely a lack of proof for its existence. So, when I walk into an empty room and cannot see a chair therein I can legitimately assert that there is no chair in that room. However, if I walk into a room and the room is empty save for a big box in the middle, of which I am not permitted access to the content, then I only have proof of the existence of a box in the room but I certainly do not have proof of the absence of a chair. In order to have this sort of proof I would need to be able

to access the contents of the box to see whether it is empty, contains a chair or some other object or is, in fact, a solid cube. Only then can I safely say, having scrutinized all the possible extensions of the room that I have proof of there not being a chair in the room.

Statements which do not allow for conclusive falsification or verification (even in principle) must be of a particular type. They are of the type which cannot be shown to be either true or false. If however, truth is defined: "X" is true iff X is the case, then it is argued that all statements, by definition, will be either true or false, even if we cannot determine which. By this definition of truth all statements are, a priori, true or false. And this is exactly what the Law of the Excluded Middle maintains. It transpires then that an example such as the one above does not get us to a rejection of this law because it will, and should if this law is correct, be maintained that an assertion like "There is a chair in that room" will be shown to be true or false when I do have access to the contents of that box. In other words, if I were to open that box it can only make my statement either true or false because there either is or is not a chair in that box. Which means that, in principle, I may safely assert that the statement "There is a chair in that room", will be either true or false, whether I look in the box for it or not. But this is because it is, in principle, possible to falsify and verify the statement. It is my claim that this is unproblematic because I know what I should be looking for when I open that box in order to know whether there is or is not a chair inside. However, assume the proposition said: "There is a maximonis in that box". On opening the box I see that it is filled with many different objects, some of which I recognise and some which I have never seen before. I can remove all the objects which I know **not** to be a maximonis (because I know that they are, for instance pens, pencils and paints) from the box and put them to one side. I may say, referring to the removed objects, and knowing this to be true; "None of these objects is a maximonis" but I cannot say; "There is no maximonis in this box" is either true or false. The reason for this is that I do not

know what I am looking for. I have no real criteria by which to identify a maximonis. I could extend my search throughout the whole of the universe and will never know whether or not I have found a maximonis because there will be objects which I do not know the names of and I have no substantive criteria by which to recognise a maximonis when I see it. For instance, I may look under a microscope and see many strange and (to me) nameless organisms and it will be impossible to say whether or not they are what I am looking for. Nor will I be able to say whether not one of those nameless objects is, indeed, not a maximonis.

But this example has still not done the necessary work of showing that even a statement making reference to an unknown object will not be determinately true or false. This is because even if I cannot say what a maximonis is, it will still be either true or not (in principle) that there is one in the box. If it happens to be the case that there is no such thing as a maximonis then, the statement simply cannot be true for the very reason that a maximonis does not exist. And if there is such a thing as a maximonis then it simply will be the case that there is or is not one in the box- which means the statement must be either true or false irrespective of whether or not such an object exists and whether or not I know this to be the case.

*But all of the above hinges on a particular conception of truth.* And this particular conception is one of truth being regarded as evidence transcendent. The reason is this: if truth is evidence transcendent then my lack of knowledge of what a maximonis is will have no bearing on whether or not a proposition about its existence will be true or not. It simply can be assumed that either such an object does exist or it does not- this is tautologically true. And this must mean that my statement must be either true or false, even if I do not know which one. The only way to resist such an argument for determinate truth based on truth being evidence transcendent is to argue that truth

should be evidentially constrained. Before forwarding a defence for truth being evidentially constrained I would like to pose a question: If it emerges that the right way to construe truth is truth as evidentially constrained and that this, somehow, entails that truth is something which can only be settled by the language user then an a priori principle that all propositions must, logically, either be true or false surely becomes indefensible? This is because truth then has a different meaning which means that different inferences will be valid.

I would like to consider two possible ways in which to think of truth:

### **Section 1: Evidentially constrained truth**

An evidentially constrained notion of truth has two clauses characterising it and an evidence transcendent notion of truth has only one clause. The first clause which characterises evidentially constrained truth (also called an epistemic notion of truth) specifies that truth is, in a manner of speaking, a status which some of our propositions may obtain when certain conditions have been fulfilled. So this sense of truth characterises truth as a status of a proposition when it has satisfied certain conditions. What exactly are these conditions of which the first clause speaks? Quite simply and relatively uncontroversially, they are a proposition's truth conditions. Truth conditions refer to the content of an assertion which, if the assertion is able to denote accurately, would make the assertion true. Truth conditions are, therefore, thought of as states of affairs in the world which language attempts to represent, and either does or does not successfully do.

An evidentially constrained notion of truth has, in addition to the first clause of this notion of truth, the further specification, or clause, that in order to make a claim to truth, in other words, a claim that the proposition has met such truth conditions, it must be possible for the speaker (user) of the



proposition to manifest how they know that the proposition has satisfied such conditions. We see here a construal of truth which has two interdependent clauses working together to stipulate what truth is. It is only the second clause, regarding the manifestation of knowledge of the proposition having met the requirements forwarded by the first clause, which is essential to an evidentially constrained notion of truth because the first clause it shares with an evidence transcendent notion of truth. (We shall discuss this shortly, though.)

From the above it should be evident that truth, as an epistemic notion, has everything to do with the capacity of the speaker. It cannot be the case, by an epistemic notion of truth, that achieving truth has anything to do with the linguistic community because when a speaker says something they are only warranted in saying this if they have access to the knowledge of what would make such a statement true. When a lay person says "Light can bend under certain conditions" but has no knowledge of the facts that would make this true they are, by an epistemic notion of truth, not warranted in making this claim even if it happens to be absolutely true. It is only the experimenter or scientist (or even informed lay person) who knows the facts that would make such a statement true, who is warranted in making such a claim. An epistemic notion of truth asks for a cognitive component in the definition of truth itself. Truth, in this sense, is not just a status of a linguistic item but is, rather, the status of the speaker's knowledge of the linguistic item and its relationship with certain states of affairs. It is when truth is construed as an epistemic concept of sorts that we think of it as a result of having established when the speaker is warranted in making certain propositions and when not. In other words, truth is the status of a linguistic construct only when the speaker is able to explain the relationship between the construct and world it refers to and is therefore warranted in doing so. Truth, therefore, becomes something like warranted assertibility.

Truth being something like warranted assertibility entails that, according to such an epistemic notion of truth, many proposition will remain indeterminate in truth value. This is because an epistemic notion of truth holds that wielding the truth predicate (that aspect of a sentence which either implies or overtly states that the sentence is making a claim to truth) there exists no appropriate speaker knowledge is illegitimate. And we are not warranted unless we can say how we know the truth predicate bearing sentence to have tracked the intended matters of fact. Note that it is not being claimed that some propositions are indeterminate in truth value for the reason that there are no states of affairs which they can denote- this would be a metaphysical presupposition. The claim, simply, is that if we do not have the right sort of access to the facts and cannot say in what way we do when we think we have access to the facts, there is simply no manner in which we can determine the truth value of certain propositions. Hence, some propositions being indeterminate in truth. And, it seems, this conclusion hinges entirely on a particular construal of truth- that it is evidentially constrained and, therefore, epistemically defined. Revisiting, briefly, our example from above: The reason why a claim such as "There is a maximonis in that box" is indeterminate in truth value is not because we assume there is no such a thing as a maximonis, but rather because we have no way of telling (knowing/determining) when our propositions will be true.

According to Weiss (2002; 107), Dummett lists four criteria for when we can take a sentence to be correctly asserted (true), in other words, when there is warrant for its assertion. The first is that it should be asserted on the basis of inductive evidence. Secondly, it must be capable of being used as a basis for inference, thirdly, that it can be correctly denied in certain circumstances and fourthly, that one should withhold judgement about its truth or falsity in certain circumstances. In short, Dummett will have it that moral claims cannot merely (only) form part of a deductively valid inference, but should be based on inductive (empirical) evidence. We should also be able to falsify

it. Referring back to our discussion about the importance of falsification we can see how much more conclusive evidence has to be in order to provide reasons for falsification. Thinking, then, of what a moral fact would be in order to determine, by Dummett's standards, whether moral language is warranted: Are moral claims ever asserted on the basis of inductive evidence? And, in the light of much uncertainty about what exactly a moral fact looks like, are ever going to be able to deny moral claims?

### **Section 2: Evidence transcendent truth**

On the other hand truth is construed, only, as the status of a proposition if it has met certain conditions, namely its truth conditions. Without the further clause, as proposed by an evidentially constrained notion of truth, namely that of the speaker's knowledge of whether or not the truth conditions have (or can) in fact be met, it transpires that truth remains an ideal. But this claim seems hasty at this stage so let's look more carefully at what is being proposed.

It seems that it is a logical truth, a tautology in fact, that truth conditions either will or will not be met. To demonstrate: Take a moral claim such as: "It is good to give money to the poor". A claim such as this one will be true if there is a moral fact, it actually being good to give money to the poor, which obtains. However, if there is no such fact at all or the morally relevant fact is characterised differently, such as that it is bad to give money to the poor, then the claim, "It is good to give money to the poor" will be false. It is easy to see that truth conditions are a way of theoretically setting the bar for truth. Furthermore, it seems nothing short of a logical necessity to state that it must be the case that statements will or will not meet such truth conditions. And since it must be the case that statements do or do not meet their truth conditions it is wrong to speak of a situation in which statements will not do either. This is just not a logical possibility. It seems

therefore that from the premise of truth being directly related to the notion of truth conditions we must deduce that the middle, that possibility of some statements not either meeting or not meeting their truth conditions, is excluded. In effect, what has just been described is the Law of Bivalence; which states that “there are exactly two truth values, true and false, and that, within a certain area of discourse, every statement has exactly one of them” (*Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy*; 78).

But it seems that, when truth is regarded an epistemic notion, and we cannot rest content with a conditional way (meeting hypothetical truth conditions) of defining truth, we must allow for the indeterminate truth value of some statements not being obtainable. The reason for this is simple: if the speaker does not have the necessary knowledge to establish whether or not a statement does or can meet its truth conditions then this statement remains indeterminate (because determinacy is something which depends on some cognitive relationship between the speaker and the conditions which would make the statement true). This means that according to an evidentially constrained notion of truth indeterminacy is a real possibility.

The linguistic turn in philosophy saw, among other things, an adoption by some of an epistemic notion of truth. The reason for this is that analytical philosophy, as we have said in chapter one, is premised on empirical (scientific) foundations, which occurred as an attempt to counter the obscure and highly speculative philosophy which had, up until that point, been the order of the day. We know science, in part, for one defining quality it has; that all legitimate and respectable scientific theories must, at least, be testable (by the proponents of and oppositions to the theory). It is exactly this principle, the testability of scientific theories, which gives rise to an evidentially constrained notion of truth. This is because a truth conditional understanding of truth does not, in itself, require the speaker (scientist) to demonstrate or explain how the truth of his/her claim (theory), can be

verified (tested). I suggest, regarding the matter of truth, that if we claim to be saying something true, and we are averse to the slippery slope of a speculative philosophy, we must by necessity commit to an evidentially constrained notion of truth.

What we have so far then is a commitment to truth as evidentially constrained. Adopting this conception of truth must have certain implications for some foundational principles of philosophy.

The rest of this chapter consists of an investigation of whether or not it is possible to continue endorsing Classical Logic when one of the foundational principles, the Principle of Bivalence, cannot be sustained under an epistemic notion of truth. The conclusion is that it may stand to reason to reject Classical Logic in situations where no evidence is available for the determining of the truth or falsity of a proposition.

Classical logic is based on the rule of the excluded middle, and truth as evidence transcendent is regarded, therefore, by some (such as Dummett) as the cornerstone of Classical Logic.

Classification of the conclusions of arguments as determinately true or false, and even just basic assertions as always being either true or false, or assuming that they will be either true or false under ideal epistemic conditions, means that we have excluded the possibility that some assertions and some conclusions of arguments may not be either of these values for the reason that not all epistemic conditions are ideal. Classical logic regards the fact that we sometimes just do not have access to the facts or non-existence of facts as irrelevant to the definition of truth.

The problem with the type of reasoning that maintains all assertions are either true or false is that it is guilty of begging the question. (Begging the question being when an argument assumes at the level of its premises what it is central to its conclusion.) By excluding the logical possibility of some propositions being neither true nor false, the Principle of Bivalence assumes that the nature of

knowledge is such that propositions about the world can be treated in the same way as mathematical and logical propositions. When it is maintained that our propositions will always be either true or false, whether we are capable of showing this or not, we must be appealing to an evidence transcendent notion of truth. Evidence transcendent truth may be appropriate for situations wherein the truths of propositions will be, when settled, necessary truths. The reason is most likely related to the fact that rational proofs are not based on contingent knowledge. And it is for the reason that the real world is not one of necessity that evidence of **contingent facts** must settle truths about reality. And tautologies, such as the Principle of Bivalence, even though useful in mathematics and formal logic, are unhelpful when it comes to knowledge about contingent existence and therefore Classical logic begs the very question at heart (what is true about reality) when it assumes that such truths can be settled in the same way as analytical truths.

We have concluded that not all propositions are determinate in truth value. Additionally it is proposed that moral propositions are of the "indeterminate in truth value" kind because they are not analytically true and so must be synthetically so. But if truth is evidentially constrained, is the claim, it is hard to see what sort of contingent knowledge will settle the truth of moral propositions. My contention is therefore that no respectable category of knowledge, the synthetic a posteriori and the analytic a priori, has successfully accounted for moral properties and therefore moral facts.

It now remains to be seen what such a conclusion entails for the meaning of moral propositions.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **Truth and meaning: If truth is evidentially constrained then what is meaning?**

#### **Section 1: Truth aptitude**

This chapter aims to establish what meaning moral language is capable of if truth is taken to be evidentially constrained and truth and meaning are related. It has already been forwarded that meaning is determined by the conditions we think would make our propositions true. In other words, when using language assertorically we mean to accurately denote states of affairs in the real world. But if establishing this truth can only be legitimate by way of verification conditions then this must enable the inference that somehow meaning is also derived from verification conditions. Is this the case for moral language?

I shall begin by looking whether or not moral language is even apt for truth by drawing from Dummett and Wright's theories on truth aptness. The conclusion will be that moral language is, indeed, apt for truth. The eventual aim will be to show that, even though moral language is in principle apt for truth, because the actual truth value of its propositions is indeterminate, its meaning must also remain indeterminate.

Dummett maintains that it is fundamental to the nature of assertoric language that it be capable of being correct or incorrect (1977; 371). It is hard to imagine how anyone could disagree with this

statement. We only need to imagine how the character of communication would change if we all spoke in such a way so as to say things which we knew full well could never be established as either true or false. And it is irrelevant to object to the previous statement stating that propositions may still be capable of being true or false because we are working within a conception of truth being regarded as evidentially constrained. It seems quite simply to be part of assertoric linguistic behaviour that propositions being capable of being false or true must be detectably so.

It is claimed by Dummett (1977; 374) that some statements' truth conditions cannot be stated without circularity and among these there may be some whose truth conditions do hold but we may have no way of knowing when this is the case. Moral language must be a case in point. A claim such as "Murder is wrong if murder is wrong" seems very much like circular reasoning. But even if it is probable that moral statements *can* be substantively true or false, and not just tautologically so, we simply cannot know in what way this is to be so and how we would recognise a substantively true or false moral claim when we see one (see Chapter 3; 75).

What we have is that moral statements cannot be true or false (or that their truth value is indeterminate) but a vague suggestion that moral claims may yet be apt for truth (because moral language is assertoric and must therefore be assumed to be capable of being either correct or incorrect; see pg 91). In *Truth and Objectivity* Wright says (1992; 27) that when we accept neutral [metaphysical] grounds any discourse can count as truth apt provided it meets with certain conditions. Amongst these are that it counts as assertoric discourse. And it being counted as assertoric is determined by whether or not it can be embedded as an antecedent and a consequent of a conditional statement. Wright continues; that the truth predicate of such statements are partially characterised by the Disquotational Schema (which is that no substantive fact is imported to a



statement by stipulating that “it is true”) and that such utterances are governed by norms of warranted assertibility. However, outlining these conditions for assertions does not conclude, by any means, whether or not moral discourse meets with Wright’s conditions or whether these are even the right conditions by which to identify assertoric discourse.

It seems quite evident that moral statements are factual by nature. This we can easily see by the use we make of them. We have already argued, in the previous chapter, that when we use language in a factual manner we expect the truth predicate of such statements to be constrained in some way or another. This is an a priori fact about “facts”. Implied by the definition of a fact is that it is different to another sort of statement which has not managed to achieve this factual status. In other words, it is a priori necessary to think of factual type of statements as being capable of being either correct or not. A statement like “It is wrong not to return my friend’s dictionary to her.” is intended to be saying something true. It is said in the hope of correctly corresponding to certain moral facts. But being “correct” would only make sense if it were possible for the statement to be “incorrect”, and in order to set up a discourse so that this distinction is a reality (and can be recognised as this), and not just a vacuous act of referencing, there must be substantive norms for when our assertions are warranted. The fact that we think of our moral language as capable of being incorrect, or not, means that we expect it to be subject to certain norms.

Can a statement such as “It is wrong not to return my friend’s dictionary to her” be embedded as either an antecedent or consequent of a conditional statement? It seems it can. As an antecedent: “If it is wrong to not return my friend’s dictionary to her then I should return it as soon as possible.” And as a consequent: “I should return my friend’s dictionary to her if it is wrong not to return my friend’s dictionary to her.” This is easily done but is this characteristic a necessary condition for

identifying the primary statement as assertoric? It seems to be the case that all statements which want to be regarded as assertoric should, at least, be able to function in such ways, because aspects of conditional statements serve as truth predicates. This is because an antecedent or consequent, being shown to be either true or false, does have a bearing on determining the truth value of the whole conditional statement. In fact, the antecedent and consequent bear on the truth of the whole statement regardless of whether they have been shown to be true or false themselves. Such an embedded assertion is, if we want to determine the truth value of the conditional, subject to the same norms as a statement which is not embedded in a conditional. Conditional statements state that there exists a very particular relationship between the truths of two separate statements (the antecedent and consequent). This relation is what is at stake when we speak about the truth predicates of conditional statements being subject to norms. But is Wright right about it being a necessary criterion of assertions to be able to be embedded in conditionals? If it were not possible for statements to be embedded in conditionals it would have to be because of their logical form. So any statement which is truth apt (will be partly due to their logical form) should be able to be part of a conditional statement. Indicative statements can and are therefore to be regarded as assertoric.

To conclude this section on truth aptitude: "On my view, truth aptitude is relatively easily earned: and once a discourse is recognised as truth apt, the default view should be that claims to truth within it are justified by satisfaction of its proper standards of warrant." (1998; p 192) The aforementioned conditions forwarded by Wright in order for a discourse to be deemed truth apt are really just grammatical. He has placed no substantive criteria on what would then actually make a sentence true, in other words, warrant its assertion. Truth aptitude is easily earned because it seems right to start from a metaphysically neutral basis. And this is because, by this grammatical definition of what assertions can be truth apt, it is not necessary to have settled metaphysical

disputes, such as those around the existence of moral properties **prior** to establishing whether or not certain claims about such things can be apt for truth. Once we are free of metaphysical presuppositions which would confound our arguments with circular reasoning it seems that any discourse which is assertoric in its grammatical structure should be apt for truth. Problematic content (as in mysterious objects or properties) will, therefore, not affect, what Wright calls, minimal truth aptitude. When a discourse is minimally truth apt it is only up for truth determined by norms within that discourse itself. In other words, such a discourse will not necessarily be up for the type of objective truth asked for discourses within empirical sciences etc. Wright seems to regard moral language as minimally truth apt because the norms for warrant are norms which are awarded by the nature of moral language itself (1992; 61). This position of Wright's is not necessarily endorsed here but we shall return to this option a little later on (pg 105, 108). But discourse which is only minimally truth apt can only yield truth of a minimal kind because such assertions would then still be subject to proper standards of warrant in order to legitimately make claims on truth (of the objective, mind-independent type) itself. Discourses, which cannot meet the further conditions for warrant, presumably only ever remain minimally true because they comply, only, with certain minimal grammatical and internal norms.

### **Section 2: Truth and Meaning**

I have already made explicit my commitments to why moral truths cannot be analytical truths and then continued, by way of showing that moral truths could therefore only be synthetic truths, knowledge of such truths would be impossible because a posteriori knowledge of moral properties is impossible. It is, however, still necessary to revisit these claims in order to present a more

thorough argument for why we shall be concluding that the meaning of moral language is indeterminate.

“All bachelors are unmarried men” is necessarily true because it is true by definition, which means there is no possible world in which a bachelor could not be an unmarried man. If we were to find an unmarried man he simply would not be called a bachelor. (Thoughts about the analytic has a tendency to raise Quinian theory but we are not going to, at this stage, entertain Quine’s objections to the analytic-synthetic distinction.) Synthetic truth, on the other hand, is the sort of truth a statement would have if it were made true or false by circumstances or matters of fact. “It is raining outside” is only true if it is actually the case that it is raining outside. Scientific truths are synthetic truths because it is part of the very nature of science that it is contingent and therefore revisable and that we come by these truths by way of sensory experience. If this were not the case it would be merely stating tautological truths which are not very useful for getting to know anything about the real world.

I would like to rule out the possibility of arguing that moral claims, if correct, are analytically true or yield a priori knowledge. In order for the statement, “Killing human beings is wrong”, to be analytically true it must be shown that “killing human beings” is identical in meaning to “wrong”. It will have to be shown that this is a logical necessity. It does not seem hard to see that this simply is not the case. Logical truths, by their very nature, are self-evident. Admittedly, there may be some theorists who will argue that a proof can be provided for the fact that one can get “wrong” from “killing a human being”. It is my claim that it would be impossible to present such a proof without making an appeal, at some stage of the proof, to an a posteriori claim which will be only contingently true. This would, needless to say, immediately invalidate the hoped for necessary

nature of the conclusion. It is easy to demonstrate the difference between the analyticity of a statement like "All bachelors are unmarried men" and the supposed analyticity of a statement like "Murder is wrong". Bachelors are unmarried men in all possible worlds but murder, even in this one world, is not always deemed wrong. Even murder is context dependent- which makes such a statement only contingently true if true at all.

Whether we are particularists (theorists who state that reasons for action are determined by specific and context determined matters of fact) or theorists who propose that moral deliberation and action are principle driven it will be equally hard to argue, if this were desired, that moral claims are necessarily true. The particularist would have to show that what seems like contingent facts can serve as moral facts **and** that these are not revisable, in a given context, in any way and are therefore to be regarded as necessary. And principle theorists would have to show how principles are necessary truths which, despite the sincere efforts of some of the most important philosophers (starting with Plato right through to Kant) over the last few centuries, has still not been achieved.

A successful argument for moral claims being analytically true will see a very interesting and hugely important shift in meta-ethical discourse. Until then, we must rest content with moral claims, if ever true at all, only being contingently so. Admittedly this is not a conclusion which has been argued for extensively but it the sort of claim which poses itself as a challenge: Can any theorist really show that moral truths are analytical (or, for that matter, a species of necessary truths)? And if they are not this then surely they must, by necessity, be contingent- if we take these to be the only valid categories of truths.

But let us see if moral statements can even be contingently true.

In the previous chapter we argued that sense should be considered a central ingredient of referencing. The reason for this, it was said, is that meaning is not just a matter of denoting the right object. Meaning is to quite a large extent derived from the way in which the speaker uses the term, or understands by the term. And the speaker's understanding of a term (sense of the term) must be informed by the knowledge they have of the contents of the term. Dummett (1978; 118) puts it like this in his discussion about Frege's distinction between sense and reference: "Force is thus one aspect of meaning, to be distinguished from that ingredient of the meanings of the words which goes to determine the condition under which the sentence is true. This latter ingredient Frege calls *sense*..." Knowledge of sense must be predicate knowledge, according to Dummett. The conditions which we must know in order to establish the truth of a sentence is not just going to be propositional knowledge. This is because knowledge of the soundness of a proposition must be the sort of knowledge which is about the properties of reality. It must be the type of knowledge we have when we know the predicative claims within a proposition. And this sort of knowledge has to do, not with what we know about the proposition within an inferential network but with knowledge of content and therefore knowledge of warranted assertibility. So unless we think of sense as determining reference it will be impossible to manifest what our predicative knowledge of a term or statement consists in because this is exactly the sort of knowledge which knowledge of sense consists in. Manifesting an intimate knowledge of the content of a term or statement is a requirement to establishing its meaning. (Recall that it is not being denied that some sort of communication can take place by referencing alone. This is the sort of communication that allows us to deliver or take meaning of a more superficial kind- in that we all understand and agree that we are referring to the same thing and that the truth of a particular statement, using referencing alone will depend, hypothetically and unsubstantively, on whether or not it corresponds to the facts.)

If the use of our language (linguistic practice) is such that it merely requires us to make tautological statements we need look no further than referencing as a way to establish meaning. This is because it is merely necessary that we all understand which term denotes which object and whether or not such terms can, in a rule following sense, stand in a valid inferential relation to each other. In other words, if it is possible that "god" can stand in a positive, predicative relation to "loving" then we can legitimately conclude that the sentence "God is loving" is a valid sentence. Undoubtedly, this is a logically valid sentence and quite possibly its use within a network of inferential relations (such as an argument for God being loving) could be valid too. What is under dispute, however, is that if we want to use this sentence in a more than logical manner- in other words, if we are asserting something about an actual property of the actual entity, God- then we need to make an appeal to sense. It is this aspect of meaning which Dummett refers to as having an inductive basis. It is only in this way that we are able to manifest a more intimate knowledge of the terms we have employed. It is now no longer only a question of correct referencing and valid reasoning. When we want to say something about an object existing in a contingent and empirical world the truth (not validity) of the proposition is going to depend on more than just rule following considerations and truth transference across truth tables. Of course, it could be argued here, regarding moral properties, that it is not the claim that these properties are of the objective or empirical kind and that insisting on an inductive basis is inappropriate for the truth of moral claims. In hoping to side step the requirement of an inductive basis by denying that inductivity is appropriate for accessing moral facts the challenge just becomes an epistemological and metaphysical one: what then exactly are moral facts (when they seem more and more like moral Virtue in the Greek sense) and how will we know them in an a priori, for surely this is the manner in which we are to access such knowledge, fashion?

It should be more evident now that at the foundation of this whole argument for moral language is the nature of moral facts. It is the nature of such facts and the definition of truth that will settle the issue of indeterminacy. And it seems that, until it has been settled in a satisfactory way (in a way that, for instance, there is agreement about what moral facts are) we should accept that we have in moral language, according to classical logic, a case of the excluded middle which should not be excluded. The reason why the Principle of Bivalence and, therefore, the law of the excluded middle has been so pervasively successful is that the primary aim of philosophy has always been to say things about the world by way of valid reasoning. For this reason it has always been assumed that statements must either be true or false because truth or falsity have been somehow equated to validity or invalidity. It is assumed that, like mathematical statements, which can only be either true or false (although, even this is contentious), other statements must be the same. But it may transpire that we can only understand mathematical statements because of their content. That is, we only understand what the sentence "7 + 13" is because we are capable of grasping the sense of 7 and 13 and (+). Philosophy has attempted to do mathematics with words, concepts and ideas- forgetting that these things actually make reference (or not) to objects in and properties of the world. It may be easy to squeeze concepts into perfectly logical sentences but it seems wrong, in a very serious way, to assume that a logically valid sentence (or the conclusion of a valid argument) must be saying something true about the world because it is logically true (valid).

It seems, therefore, that factualist language (our assertoric linguistic practice) gives rise to another type of logic because the quantifiers used in assertions cannot always be settled with an ascription of a determinately true or false status. Barwise and Etchemendy in *The Language of First-Order Logic* claim that existential quantifiers, which are those symbols used to express existential claims (1993; 116), are used when we want to say something about a limited or finite group of objects or



properties. Dummett claims that finite sentences, such as those quantified existentially, make reference to a surveyable domain of facts which would provide the knowledge of what it would take for that statement to be true (1977; 6).

When we are faced with a sentence which is quantified universally (those which would be making reference to “everything”, “each thing”, “all things” and “anything” – 1993; 116) we have no capacity to survey every instance of the instantiation of that sentence (1977; 6). In such a case it too is inappropriate to assume that this sentence necessarily must have a determinate truth value because the speaker is incapable of settling a determinate value for “all” and “everything”. Using the example of mathematical sentences as universally quantified, Dummett puts forward the possibility that mathematical sentences (or sentences notated in the language of first-order logic) may, in fact, have content (1977; 3). In other words, it could be the case that mathematical sentences too possess content or truth conditions to which they must correspond in order to be true. This entails that they cannot just be true by way of logical/mathematical proof alone. (Of course it is assumed, by mathematical Platonists, that mathematical statements do have content of a very real and mind independent kind, but this assumption seems wrong in cases where we lack evidence. Hence, the importance of adopting a metaphysically neutral position where we lack substantive evidence.) In the light of our previous discussion and argument in favour of an evidentially constrained notion of truth we simply have not determined whether or not mathematical entities exist and so it leaves our mathematical or logical language in a position of indeterminacy. But this is only the case if mathematical assertions are seen to be denoting real objects. If it is the case that mathematical sentences have content then such sentences would stand in need of further proof- and cannot be used or conclusively resolved within a closed referential system. If mathematical statements are not seen as denoting real objects but are just formal notations of constructs which

stand in mathematical inferential relationships to each other then the meaning of such statements need not be indeterminate. And this is because they are not making claims to the sorts of truths which cannot be settled.

Unfortunately, it is not possible to save the meaning of moral propositions by claiming that moral propositions only make reference to constructs which stand in some sort of referential relationship to each other. Why not? Because this simply is not what speakers do when they make moral claims.

It seems that the problem which arises for indeterminate [universal] quantifiers must arise, similarly, for logical constants. The grasping of logical constants, or connectives, like disjunction (“or”) and conjunction (“and”), cannot solely consist of a grasp of its role in inference because the aim is that these constants obtain meaning by being used in actual sentences with content. In order to know whether a sentence has a determinate truth value we need to be able to have an intimate knowledge of the sense of that sentence and this includes knowledge of whether these connectives hold true under the proposed conditions. Dummett claims that the meanings of these constants are determined by the contribution which they make in determining the correctness of an assertion and not directly to the validity of inference (1977; 363). So, if I take a sentence such as: “Either I must commit to the immoral cause of communism or I must accept that I have been a traitor to my country”, it becomes quite evident that the truth of such a sentence can only be established once further proof (beyond establishing the logical validity of such a sentence and its role in other inferential networks) has been obtained. This proof will have the onerous task of showing that communism is immoral and that one would be a traitor to their country if they did not take up the causes of that country despite the fact that the particular individual may think the cause immoral. Added to this burden of proof it would also have to be shown, in a substantive manner, that this

disjunction implies a real dilemma. And this will depend on the actual truth of the two simple sentences within this complex sentence. The question must arise then: If the rules of inference cannot alone serve to determine the meanings of logical constants and that truth is, thereby, not just a matter of validity, then what exactly is the nature of truth in order to contribute to meaning in a significant way?

What kind of "proof" is being referred to when we are speaking about "proof" beyond that of logic? If (1) sense is a salient ingredient of meaning and (2) the sense of a term is derived from an intimate grasp of what is understood in using the term and (3) an intimate grasp is not one which can be captured a priori because there is nothing necessary (it is being assumed, in a Humean sense, that the only things which can be grasped a priori are necessary truths) about it then the sort of knowledge which we refer to when we ask for an intimate grasp of the content (sense) of a sentence must be a posteriori. We have established that the logical validity of a sentence would, quite evidently, be derived from an a priori knowledge of the rules of inference and what these determine about a particular claim and its role within an argument. However, if we want to know whether that sentence is really denoting something true about the world (corresponding to the facts) we must surely be operating on the level of the contingent. When we want to know whether or not it is actually the case that communism is immoral, or whether we are a traitor to our countries when we do not align ourselves with the causes of that country, we need to see what the facts are. And these facts have been shown not to be of the analytic kind. They simply must be (if there are any such facts at all) of the contingent kind. However, knowing that the facts which contain the sense of a sentence are not necessary facts does not entail, a priori, that there, conclusively, are or are not such facts available.

What happens when some of our claims need further epistemic support in order to be true? And is the case for moral language? If it is the case that we derive meaning from what we know would make our claims true (and this, in itself, does not seem to be controversial) then the above problem for truth will directly bear on meaning. This problem of further “epistemic support” and also how we are to think of truth itself will also bear directly on what we take meaning to be.

How, exactly, then are truth and meaning related? According to Dummett the grounds for an assertion must be available and these grounds must be able to legitimate conclusions and consequences. This entails that, if we want to make a posteriori claims, we must be able to warrant such claims from a posteriori grounds. The consequences must be in harmony with the conclusions, and this does not refer to logical entailment. What it means is that an a posteriori epistemic position only warrants an a posteriori conclusion. Dummett, according to Weiss, refers to this as “harmony” between grounds and conclusions (2002; 107). I, once again, take it to be a fair conclusion in the light of the manifestation requirement, that a limited legitimate appeal to the Principle of Bivalence, sense determining reference and that meaning cannot be derived from hypothetical truth conditions in the absence of evidence, that truth should be epistemically constrained. In other words, to speak of truth as evidence transcendent counters every intuition we have about our use of assertoric language, and the commitment to content which this implies, as well as results in theoretical inconsistencies (such as concluding necessary truths from contingent relations of ideas and concepts and states of affairs).

One serious problem arises for the Dummettian notion of an evidentially constrained truth. If it is so that sentences acquire meaning by that which makes them true (which most theorists agree on), and if indeterminate content cannot yield truth because truth is evidentially constrained, then it

cannot also be the case that indeterminate sentences can have meaning. So, a sentence like:

“Communism is immoral”, because, as far as I know, there are no facts available to determine the truth or falsity of this sentence, this sentence then is, formally, meaningless. But Crispin Wright’s notion of minimal truth and superassertibility may [or may not] successfully give us a way to legitimately retain meaning for discourses such as those mediated by, for instance, moral language.

In *Truth and Objectivity* Wright asks how we can hold that a discourse is truth apt but at the same time acknowledge that the contents are not knowable (1992; 11). This is easily done for those who take truth to be evidence transcendent. But the claim is that an evidence transcendent notion of truth is problematic for factual language because, firstly, we expect evidence in support of our and others factual claims and, secondly, because we assume, a priori, that there is a distinction between facts and non-facts and evidence seems to be the natural place of delineation. In other words, understanding legitimate factual propositions as warranted assertions, we are a priori committed to some features which will deem a discourse as truth apt. Wright makes a case for minimal truth aptness. He suggests that any discourse can count as truth apt in which it is possible to define predicates with the features highlighted by minimalism (1992; 27). Now, it is unnecessary to delve into too much detail here as we have, to quite a large degree, already discussed Wright’s notions of minimal truth aptness (based on metaphysical neutrality) at the beginning of this chapter.

All that is needed here, then, is a reminder of how adopting a metaphysically neutral position and an evidentially constrained notion of truth, in an attempt to grapple with how we acquire meaning, may allow us to overcome the problem for meaning which arises from indeterminacy.

Let's see exactly how Wright goes about defending an epistemic notion of truth and what this means for the meaning of indeterminate discourse: Wright rejects the notion that truth is coextensive with warrant if warrant is construed as an ideal information state (1992; 38-40). What he means is that truth is not the analytical equivalent of warrant (is not synonymous) if warrant is seen as an information state which remains a hypothetical ideal (something like what is proposed by the Correspondence Principle). Wright's reason for this is that there may be ideal information states which still cannot yield truth about certain sentences: Putnam assumes (1992; pp 40- 41) that under ideal epistemic conditions one should always be able to either prove a statement or its negation. Wright denies this for reasons of indeterminacy, which we have already discussed extensively; it may be the case that not all our sentences make reference to content which we can know. So even if our knowledge is ideal it is being claimed that the metaphysics in question may not cooperate. (It should be noted by the astute reader that *content* has been eliminated as a reason for indeterminacy. We have previously denied that an absence of certain states of affairs can render a claim indeterminate. An absence of things in reality, if proven to be absent, always makes the corresponding claim false. But there are cases, and this is the point, in which it has not been possible to prove either the absence or presence of facts.)

So what does this mean for discourses such as moral discourse? An appeal to ideal epistemic conditions will not be very useful because truth, being a substantive quality of a sentence, must not be hostage to idealised conditions for determining it. Wright speaks about, and stands in agreement with, Dummett's notion of an epistemically constrained notion of truth based on the semantic requirements of manifestation and acquisition (1992; 60). He equates this to superassertibility as a model for truth since superassertibility is to be construed as:  $P$  is knowable  $\rightarrow$   $P$  is superassertible

(1992; 58). In other words, in order for something to be superassertable (true) it must be possible “to alight on the indefeasible state of information that makes it so, and then the accumulative inductive grounds for identifying it as such” (1992; 61). This, however, does not resolve the issue we seem to have with the indeterminacy of moral statements and what this implies for the meaning of moral language. And this is because there do not seem, at this stage, to be any inductive grounds for moral truths. In fact, if we are right about truth being an epistemic notion this does not bode well for indeterminate discourse. But, and this is what we’re looking for, Wright says of superassertibility that it also serves as an internal property of a sentence, or as a projection of the standards which inform the assertions of that discourse (1992; 61). And this, supposedly, is how we may continue to regard our moral language as meaningful- because it is superassertible by its own internal standards for warrant. In other words, the knowledge which will entail the superassertibility of moral claims is derived from a knowledge which is informed by the discourse itself. This means that we may make claims to truth provided our sentences are coherent, consistent, grammatically correct and asserted within an established discourse, adhering to the norms of that discourse, for which it has been acknowledged that we more often than not do track the facts.

Wright believes that these are minimalist conditions, and that such conditions are consistent with the notion of superassertibility, which he has set in place to allow discourses, such as moral discourse, to be fit for the project of stating truths without needing “metaphysical underpinning” (1992; 204). This is, not surprisingly, consistent with what Wittgenstein, according to Paul Johnston, would have said about the fact that there simply is no independent judgement available for moral claims (1989; 143). Johnston explains that talk about moral discourse in a way which subjects it to the same standards as empirical discourse results in creating an “unduly mysterious”

subject matter out of moral propositions (1989; 152). The problem that this leaves us with, and that cannot be ignored, precisely because of manifestation and acquisition, is that we use our moral language in an objective sense. We use it in such a way as to assume it can meet the “inappropriate” standards which should, according to Wittgensteinian theorists, be limited to certain other discourses only. The problem then emerges: Wright’s internal (not to the subject but to the standards of the discourse itself) superassertibility cannot give an account of our “objective” use of moral language and this is a particularly devastating flaw for a theorist who premises arguments about meaning on the notion of use. It just seems right that we must either commit to moral language not being able (being at present in an epistemically indeterminate position) to achieve the sort of objective truth and meaning it claims to or we must change our standards for what warrants assertion of facts. I am, therefore, not convinced that minimalism about truth solves the problem that indeterminacy raises for meaning. If minimalist truth (which emerges to be merely a sort of grammatically based platitude for those who want certain discourses to have determinate truth value despite the fact these cannot do so within an epistemic notion of truth) saves moral discourse- because moral propositions can be grammatically correct- then we surely can only save moral discourse in a minimal way? Minimalist truth merely results in a minimalism about meaning (1992; 231) and this just sidesteps the important fact about use (which in the case of moral language is hardly minimalistic). I propose that the argument for an epistemic notion of truth seems to be beyond reproach if we accept that sense does determine reference and that manifestation is a genuine semantic requirement. This entails that meaning is determined by the conditions under which a sentence is verified (because the truth which determines the meaning is epistemically constrained). It should be very apparent that the thesis of meaning being determined by verification conditions is in no way inconsistent with the thesis that meaning is determined by use. This is



because we have only been able to conclude that meaning is determined by verification conditions because of what we know about our use of factualist language. If we are going to remain loyal to an evidence constrained notion of truth we simply have to question Wright's internal superassertibility. The problem that indeterminacy and epistemic notions of truth raise for moral language must simply be addressed some other way. Minimalism cannot address these without compromising what we know about our use.

The choice seems to be that we adopt a revisionist stance about our actual use of moral language or our notions about truth and whether truth should maybe be construed as minimalistic or even as evidence transcendent. But this, of course, would merely raise other problems- some of which we have already addressed.

### **Section 3: Semantic anti-realism**

For those who are convinced by the fact that truth should be epistemically constrained (at least for assertoric language) and that, therefore, if the meaning of a sentence is determined by what would make it true, meaning should be determined by verification conditions- anti-realism may be the preferred semantic theory. What follows demonstrates the distinctions between, not only realism and anti-realism, but also what exactly is meant by semantic anti-realism. This thesis is only concerned with defending semantic anti-realism as it is pivotal to the whole argument that any metaphysical assumptions, even those resembling some form of constructivism or idealism, are categorically denied and this is partially what qualifies semantic anti-realism.

Dummett maintains that it is important that the sequence of theorising about meaning should start with theories about meaning itself. Then depending on what has been established about how we derive meaning this will inform which semantic theory, realism or anti-realism, we should endorse. This chapter, following from the first, has been concerned with showing that our use of assertoric language, when making moral claims, requires that we adopt a verificationist theory about meaning. The idea has also been to argue for all factual language being subject to the same theory about meaning. The conclusion about truth in assertoric linguistic practice is that it should be evidentially constrained as we expect to have evidence in support of our assertions and also because it makes theoretical sense that, considering the practical nature of our linguistic behaviour, we do not characterise truth by a hypothetical principle such as the Correspondence Principle.

There are theorists who maintain that there exist mind independent properties, such as moral properties or colour, or mind independent objects, ranging from common sense objects such as chairs and tables to more problematic objects such as Forms (in the Greek sense), souls, mathematical entities and a God or many gods. Many, but not all such theorists maintain that we can say true things about such properties and objects without having knowledge of them. In other words, for those who do maintain that we can say true things without having knowledge about the facts will hold that truth is evidence transcendent. Now a description like the one I am offering here, needless to say, loses all the complexities and sophisticated combinations of ideas which do exist among philosophers today. But the important thing, for now, is to observe that this position is characterised by two separate aspects. The one aspect is its metaphysical commitment and the other is its particular views on knowledge and truth. Crispin Wright describes one of these positions by noting that its metaphysical commitment is of the modest kind as it acknowledges that we, as subjects, are not responsible for the existence of what we understand as the natural world (1992; 1).

The other view, which has it that we can say true things about this mind independent world without an appeal to evidence, he claims is presumptuous (1992; 2). This position, broadly and crudely described, is what we know as realism.

There are also theorists who take it that much of what we take to exist independently of us is, in fact only projections of our mind. In other words, such theorists will qualify their metaphysical commitments as denying the mind-independent existence of properties and objects. Now there currently are very few theorists who endorse a global denial of the mind-independence of objects and properties. Usually theorists limit such views to specific areas of investigation, such as the projectivist theorists about moral properties. Such theorists may identify themselves with the anti-realist project or not. An alignment with the anti-realist camp may depend on whether the theorist is also committed to some of the other theses which are associated with anti-realism. (These we shall discuss shortly.) This position is generally known as idealism or constructivism.

Then you get theorists who have no (initial) metaphysical commitments of any sort. In other words, such theorists will hold that we simply must not begin our philosophical investigation presupposing anything metaphysical. We may conclude some things about a metaphysical state of affairs, but only after we have subjected our reasoning and language in general to some very stringent set of criteria and conditions for truth. In other words, we are simply not warranted in drawing certain conclusions about the world, even if there is a chance that it may be correct, if we have not met these conditions for truth. These conditions are usually characterised by a very strong focus on epistemic norms for warrant. These norms, more often than not will inform how we determine meaning and how we are to make sense of our language. It is this position which will promote epistemic notions of truth, and verification as a criterion for meaning. It should be observed that

this position is predominantly posed against the epistemology and particular definition of truth which realists endorse. It is for this reason that such theorists are called anti-realists, and it is this position exactly which is often referred to as semantic anti-realism. Not because they have any necessary metaphysical commitments but rather because they are opposed to realist notions of truth and justification.

If we are right about meaning being determined by verification conditions then it seems that the correct semantic theory to endorse is that of anti-realism. It has always seemed a bit ironic that realism has used a term such as Correspondence Principle to define truth. The Correspondence Principle states that a sentence is true if and only if it corresponds with the facts. Now, it seems right that any theory which is premised on such a principle would be particularly concerned with the necessity for forwarding additional clauses about how we may know when our sentences do correspond to facts. But, instead of doing this realism forwards the notion of truth conditions, which are those conditions, if they obtain, that would make our sentence or proposition true. Yet, again it seems as if a further clause is necessary and particularly so for a position which expresses such confidence about the reality, and its mind independent existence, which our language can represent. Our assertions remain, by this view, hovering in the realm of the speculative and hypothetical. And this, as I have said, is particularly surprising for a theory which should be able to gain some sort of theoretical advantage from the fact that the entities and properties about which it speaks are not mere figments of our imagination and should therefore be accessible for the type of objective deliberation which is so prized by the professors of realist doctrine.

It has always been my contention that realists would be better realists for being semantic anti-realists. And this should be relatively easy if they are right about their particular metaphysical commitments.

Endorsing a verificationist theory about meaning simply must commit one to the form of anti-realism described above. Dummett calls this position semantic anti-realism and this term seems to be able to successfully distinguish this position not as a metaphysical theory but rather a theory which concerns itself with meaning. Acceptance of metaphysical indeterminacy and the implications of this for epistemological theories, a rejection of the Principle of Bivalence and the law of the excluded middle, an endorsement of verification conditions as opposed to truth conditions as well as proposing that truth be epistemically constrained are all positions which will qualify a philosophical position as anti-realist. For these reasons, if we are right that meaning is determined by verification conditions, anti-realism must also be right.

## CHAPTER 6

### Another challenge for Verificationism: Is Expressivism right about moral language?

The following chapter will address the second significant challenge to verificationist theories about meaning relevant to this project. (The first having been addressed in Chapter 1: Has the Verification Principle rendered itself meaningless by its own standards?) Chapter 6 will address the possibility of moral language not being genuinely assertoric. This chapter will use, as an opponent to a verificationist thesis about meaning, one of the most convincing and well established theories forwarding an anti-thesis; Expressivism. Section 1, while outlining what exactly Expressivism maintains, will argue that expressivist theories must concede that they are metaphysically loaded which makes them guilty of circular reasoning in the way, and for the same reasons, outlined in the previous chapter. The reason why it is claimed that expressivist theories are metaphysically loaded is based on a central premise of expressivist theories; that the moral predicate cannot import any additional factual content to a proposition because there simply are no such moral facts (no truth conditions). Section 2, will look then at whether or not moral propositions can be regarded as being assertoric. It will be argued that, if we do not assume anything about a metaphysical state of affairs, which we should not assume in the event of a complete lack of evidence for or against the existence of moral facts, it seems wrong to think of moral propositions as not genuinely assertoric with some potential for truth (even if, at present, indeterminate). The claim will be that it seems right to take moral propositions at face value; which is that of being assertoric. But it must be cautioned that the implication of accepting this position is not that moral language can and does represent moral facts

just because it is assertoric by nature. It seems, it will be argued, that if moral truth is indeterminate because evidence for or against moral facts is unavailable, the meaning of moral language must also be indeterminate.

### **Section 1: Expressivism as metaphysically loaded**

The question to lead us then is whether or not Expressivism is or is not guilty of an unjustified metaphysical presupposition in saying that there simply are no such things as moral facts and for this reason to claim that moral language is not genuinely assertoric. Wright says of Blackburn that, and there seems to be no good reason to think that he may be misrepresenting Blackburn: "And it is his unspoken assumption that it is only in so far as a discourse serves to depict what is within the Cup that its propositional surface may be regarded as unproblematic." (1998; 192). In using "his" Wright is referring to Blackburn and in using "the Cup" he means the cup of reality, in other words, the real world which a proposition aims to denote. This expressivist stance on legitimate, unproblematic propositional language makes apparent the positivistic roots which expressivist theories draw from. And here Blackburn gains my sympathy and undoubtedly would have the allegiance of almost any verificationist theorist as well. So why does Wright, being a verificationist, object to this claim? My suspicion is that Blackburn does not gain approval from Wright about this matter because his, Blackburn's, metaphysical claim that there are no moral facts, even though most probably true, cannot be shown (verified) to be so. It is my aim to argue that this means that moral truth is indeterminate but moral language truth apt. Simply put, there seems to be no evidence available to show that moral facts are absent from the "Cup of Reality" (1998; 192) and this means that we are simply obliged to assume that moral language may be apt for truth even though we may never establish the actual truth value of moral propositions.

Wright takes on Blackburn on many scores, some of which will be discussed further on, but my point will be the above: The truth value of statements within moral discourse is indeterminate. The reason for this is that there is no clear and convincing way in which we can manifest our knowledge of the existence or non-existence of the conditions which would make our moral claims (if they exist) true or false. We, quite evidently, cannot show, and this in some sense serves as a challenge for those who believe it possible, what these facts are that will either confirm or negate (verify or falsify) our moral propositions. And, any sort of proof which is forwarded will only be useful if it is congruent with our aim in making moral claims- in other words moral facts would have to be of the objective, traceable kind. A word of caution to the reader: It should be clear that the presence of moral facts would serve to make moral propositions either true or false (depending on how the propositions correspond to the facts). Proof of the absence of moral facts would render all moral claims false (those **only** stating simple moral propositions pertaining only to some moral state of affairs). But the inability to prove the existence and the non-existence of moral facts would make moral claims indeterminate.

More to the point, however, our inability to manifest our knowledge of what the facts would be like that would make our moral propositions true or false and also, counter the expressivist, not being able to provide evidence for the non-existence of such moral facts it would seem wrong to say that moral language is not truth apt despite the fact that it has every syntactic characteristic it requires to be used indicatively.

But a further argument is needed to show that moral language is genuinely assertoric. But more important than showing moral language to be assertoric is to make explicit the implications of this



fact; that moral language is subject to the same constraint as any other indicative language because of being used in this particular way.

If we take it that moral discourse is indeterminate in truth value and yet truth apt it seems to leave our morality awkwardly suspended. There are many theorists who find this inconclusive and open-ended view of moral language largely unsatisfactory. And, in the light of how important ethical behaviour and moral value are to people, it can be easily understood why such an open-ended view seems not to capture correctly what morality is to us as moral agents. And this, rightly so, should make theorists suspicious of accepting such an unsatisfactory view of moral truth. In theoretical terms it is often assumed that this sort of stance on moral truth is giving the debate away to Quietism (a view that there is not much to dispute or to resolve between metaphysical realism and anti-realism). Quietism assumes that an attempt to resolve the debate between whether or not we can establish conclusively that there are such things as mind-independent, moral facts (in the case of meta-ethics) is a misguided effort by metaphysicians and other types of philosophers. To some extent this view gains my sympathy, simply for the reason that it is hard to imagine what the ontology of such a thing as a mind-independent moral fact will be. And in the light that it seems hard to describe what we must be looking for it seems highly unlikely that we shall find the thing itself or be able to confirm its absence. (Refer back to the example of a "maximons" in Chapter 4)

However, some attempts, such as Wright's suggestion that we regard moral propositions as minimally truth apt and, therefore, capable of minimal truth, have been made as a possible way in which we can maintain some of our ideas about moral truth. However, it is not obvious that "minimal truth" does not just result in another sort of counter-intuitive position because moral agents certainly do not think of their moral assertions as true because they are grammatically valid

and true by general norms internal to moral discourse. Moral language is used in a more objective sense and moral statements are assumed to be true in an absolute sense by the speaker. Hence, the existence of ethical dilemmas, disagreements about what is right and wrong between moral agents and antagonism between cultures about their varying value systems.

Moral language poses to be doing more than what is permitted by minimalism, and this requires some metaphysical presuppositions. It seems that Dummett is right when he says that we are unwittingly and wittingly seduced by the metaphysical picture. Maybe it is for this reason that theorists, such as Ayer and Blackburn, say more than what is minimally permitted about moral language. Ayer and Blackburn, as we have seen, maintain that moral language has no truth conditions. Blackburn quotes and expresses assent to Ayer's view that the moral predicate (e.g. "It is wrong..." or "It is right...") does not add anything substantive to the factual content of the sentence in which it appears:

"The presence of an ethical symbol in a proposition adds nothing to its factual content. Thus if I say to someone, "You acted wrongly in stealing that money", I am not stating anything more than if I had simply said "You stole that money" in a certain tone of voice." (1984; 167)

When a theorist claims that nothing substantive is added by the moral predicate the reason most probably is that this theorist takes it that the moral predicate cannot track anything real or does not make reference to anything real. In the particular case of Ayer and Blackburn we know them to be proponents of Expressivist theories about meaning (in moral language). This means that the moral predicate is taken to be making reference to nothing more than a desire or passion or disposition of some kind. In more "expressivist" terms: The moral predicate is nothing more than an expression of

a feeling or attitude. Such a moral predicate is not asserting truly or falsely that something is the case. If there is not factual content for the moral predicate to import to the value of a moral proposition then it must mean, if truth conditions are states of affair in reality, moral propositions have no truth conditions. This undoubtedly is a metaphysical claim and serves as the reason why expressivists cannot regard moral language as apt for truth. The fact that expressivists may regard moral language apt for truth, not because it **states** but because it **expresses**, is, once again, missing the point about use. It simply is not the case that moral agents think of themselves as expressing sentiments and predispositions when they make moral claims. If this were the case there would be no contention around what is right and wrong. Moral agents think of themselves as saying something which is true enough that the morally relevant situation should be judged the same by any other moral agent confronted by the same set of circumstances. And this is not the same as a sentiment.

When Expressivists claim that there are no moral properties, and therefore no moral facts, they must be saying something about the way the world is. Stating that reality is devoid of anything such as mind-independent moral properties is a statement in the same class as those saying that the world has no colour, or texture or temperature. So having secured the position that Expressivism does presuppose a metaphysical state of affairs, and that it therefore does not assume a metaphysically neutral position on which to base its semantic theory, we can look at exactly what the two theories have to say about the assertoric nature of moral language.

## **Section 2: The assertibility of moral claims**

Wright says in *Comrades Against Quietism* (1998; p 184): "It's a familiar phenomenon in activist politics that disagreements among closely related factions are often more intensely felt than disagreement with more radically opposed ideas, and are often pursued under the accusation of insufficiency of distance from the latter." His position about the relationship of verificationist theories and expressivist theories is that they are in many ways similarly characterised, not least, I expect, their affiliation to anti-realism about truth. But their positions on matters such as the possibility of truth in moral language nevertheless do differ in ways which make it "... worth trying to get these matters right." (1998; p 184)

Blackburn objects to the notion that there should be "norms of acceptance and rejection of utterances of indicative sentences which exist for other reasons than that those sentences have truth conditions" (1998, p 159). Expressivist theories maintain that moral language is not genuinely assertoric because there is one necessary criterion for determining whether sentences are assertoric and that is that they have truth conditions. (We are assuming here that these are not quite the same sort of truth conditions forwarded by the realist camp: theoretical conditions would ensure the truth or falsity of statements.) Assertoric language is, quite simply claimed, by expressivist theories, as language which intends to be stating some sort of facts or to be representing reality. In the light of the above discussion about the expressivist position on the absence of truth conditions of moral propositions it can be assumed that Expressivism holds moral language not to be assertoric because there is no justification for seeing it as fact stating for the reason that there are no such facts (no things which can serve as truth conditions). This expressivist position suggests that there are reasons, beyond those of a syntactical nature, which delineate assertoric language from other sorts

of language and that this has something to do with the nature of the content of assertoric language which justifies it as being regarded as assertoric. But the notion of "content" allows, in itself, necessary a priori inferences to any such specifics about what contents are justifiably appropriate for assertoric language. In other words, specifying that only certain contents are appropriate for assertoric discourse, while unsupported by further norms, is not very useful. When, then, can an utterance justifiably be regarded as assertoric? In other words, what sort of "content" are the expressivists looking for? And, also, for our purposes, are moral claims ever justified in presenting its assertoric façade?

Supposing that this contents-based view of assertion is accepted by expressivist and verificationist theorists let us look, first, at why expressivist theorists deny that moral claims are genuine assertions. One of the conditions which have to be satisfied in order for an utterance to be justified is that it is capable of truth. If moral language is judged not to be capable of truth this could be due to particular views on the metaphysics of moral reality but also could be due to views on truth itself. Most likely it will be regarded as a bit of both.

Expressivism maintains that moral claims or judgements are not capable of truth because such claims and judgements have no truth conditions. Simon Blackburn makes it very clear (1984; 170) that expressivist theories do not maintain that **because** our moral utterances are expressions they have no truth conditions. This position would be guilty of circular reasoning because it is the very question about why utterances should be regarded as merely expressions (and not claims to truth or beliefs) which needs to be answered. This answer will inform the argument as to why such utterances ought not to be regarded as genuinely assertoric.

Truth conditions are those conditions in the world, matters of fact or other abstract states of affairs, which would make a certain utterance, if it corresponds to that state of affairs, true. Now when expressivism makes the claim that moral claims and judgements (referred to in the collective as moral language) have no truth conditions it is, undeniably, making a metaphysical claim. It is stating that the state of affairs which would make the utterances true, if they correspond correctly, does not exist. But what knowledge of the world, or our minds, informs expressivist theories in this way? The answer has much to do with projectivist theories about moral truth. Hume (1886; paragraph 24) spoke about "the mind's propensity to spread itself upon the world located outside of it". A.J. Ayer and Blackburn both propose that the moral predicate e.g. "...is wrong" or "...is good", of a sentence does not import any more information regarding the properties of the referents (1984; 167). The moral predicate is proof of the mind's ability and tendency to overlay a value neutral, a world of cold fact, with its own projections of value.

It is, in times like these, helpful to compare the human mind, nervous system and visual equipment to that of a camera. Pretending to be a security camera, visualise the recording of a certain crime say, for instance, a theft. The camera will pick up all the features of the activity, say the insertion of a hand into a jewellery box and the extraction of a string of pearls there from. The camera may capture some photographic material of the person who is extracting the string of pearls. But nowhere will it be able to record the mind independent features which justify the assertion of the moral predicate "...is wrong". Nowhere will it have proof of having access to the referents of the term "wrong". The properties of the external world, the world independent of the human mind, are the events, colours, textures, movements and sounds (particular tones, pitches and rhythms) which have been picked up by the camera. However, when a person observes the recording which the camera has made, in other words the person is seeing exactly the same events as the camera- no

more and no less- they can and do make an *interpretation* of the events on many different levels. It may be tempting, at this point, to argue that the moral properties which we note are merely the resultant properties of the physical, observable properties. The problem with arguing in this manner is that it seems to be in breach of the Humean rule that we cannot derive an "ought" from an "is". I would prefer not to spend much time defending this rule here save to say that, to me, it seems like a fundamental rule of inferential reasoning and that the disregard of this rule can only place one in a precarious position of having to justify how one *infers* norms from value neutral facts.

It seems that one of the levels on which the interpretation will happen is the level of value. So when a person, in other words the human subject, makes a statement like "It is wrong to steal a string of pearls" or "That was the wrong thing to do" this is a statement which, according to expressivist theory, is loaded with some sort of pre-sentiment. It is not reflecting, literally, what the features are.

So when humans perceive the natural world it is always, by physiological necessity, going to seem like more than the matters of fact. The challenge for the scientist and philosopher (at least of the empiricist type) alike is to establish the exact place where these two things, fact and fancy, come apart. An expressivist, such as Blackburn, claims that moral language has no truth conditions because there is nothing, but a projection, for our language to represent. And, presumably, the argument goes that if there is no validating or supporting metaphysics (no objective truth conditions) then there is no justification for regarding moral utterances as assertions. A reminder may be needed here: it is not being claimed that false sentences cannot be assertions or that all assertions must be true. It is merely being said, by the expressivists, that without the metaphysical possibility of moral facts, moral language cannot be seen as genuinely assertoric.

Verificationism, by contrast, claims that moral language is genuinely assertoric. It would, for the same reasons that have been extensively discussed thus far, be a mistake to assume that verification theories, in maintaining that moral language is genuinely assertoric, also maintain that all or any moral claims are true. What verificationists, such as Crispin Wright, say is that language which meets certain criteria is assertoric by nature. Wright maintains that assertoric discourse should not be defined by the deep features of its content (in other words that it is about moral value), because this requires a metaphysical presupposition which may not be verifiable, but rather by certain syntactic features. And it does, indeed, seem as if identification by standards such as deep features of its content is going to call for explanations beyond what is offered by a linguistic analysis. To reject or accept a discourse based on the deep features of its content means that some contents are acceptable for assertoric language and others not. But then the problem is just batted elsewhere- and maybe in a direction from whence it cannot return because to imply that any discourse is unjustified, based on its topic, seems like the wrong way to go about it. (Because this requires a metaphysical presupposition **before** the settling of which semantic theory- realist or anti-realist- is appropriate for this discourse.) So what are these syntactic features: 1. A claim is assertoric when it can be denied while making grammatical sense, 2. It is also assertoric if it can serve sensibly within a conditional, 3. It is assertoric when it can form part of a more complex statement which is subscribing to the correct use of connectives such as “and” and “or” and, of course, 4. When the language is an object of propositional attitude (1992; 75).

What this means is that a statement should be able to retain its grammatical validity while being capable of being part of a more complex statement and simultaneously not jeopardising the grammatical validity of the complex statement of which it is a part. In other words, it should be able to be part of valid inferential reasoning. It also, on a more semantic level, needs to be making a



proposition which is being offered as an articulation of a personal attitude. This is a condition which expressivist theorists will also endorse. What all this entails is that assertions form part of a truth making activity- irrespective of what the outcome is bound or suspected to be. When we make assertions it is our intention to be stating something true. I am not, however, immediately concerned with the underlying metaphysics of the facts which the speaker is intending to assert. So we shall not commit the notion of truth to any particular metaphysics or content. What is important here is that assertions intend to represent, accurately (truly), some state of affairs- whether it be an internal state of affairs, such as sentiments and predispositions, or an external state of affairs, such as a game of cricket.

What we have thus far, from the verificationist camp, is that assertions can be recognised by various characteristics, one of them being that the surface syntax and use in particular context set them up for being regarded as representational language. However, it is not enough to assume that because language intends to represent it, in fact, does. The question then arises: Under what conditions does language actually represent? It is for the reason that language sometimes does manage to represent and sometimes does not that we say that truth predicates are subject to norms. And when truth predicates are subject to norms then assertion, by implication, must also be. If assertions intend to, but do not always, represent some state of affairs there must consist a distinction between proper and improper use. Hale (1997; pp 271-308), in *Realism and its Oppositions*, claims that this supposition is central to the Acquisition theory about language which implies that if there were an independent or necessary link between reality and language (in other words between referents and references) there would be no such notion as linguistic competence. And not answering the Acquisition Challenge is in effect implying that language competence must be related to something other than "saying it right". This is because when the link, between our

language and the world it attempts to describe, has nothing to do with our cognisance of the world and our ability to use language, then competence (because “competence” surely refers to agent competence) is a redundant notion. Part of what we expect when learning a language is that there is evidence in support of our claims. If it isn’t right that evidence must form part of the delineation between competence and incompetence then we would be justified in assuming that this distinction must be based on something else but the accurate reflection of the facts and how to recognise when this has been achieved. The fact that it is the case that speakers value evidence as an aspect of distinguishing competence from incompetence is the reason why truth predicates are subject to norms. Verificationism contends that “illicit kissing is wrong” is an assertion, and not just a predispositionally informed commitment, because there is an assumption, by the speaker, that there are conditions which would make this moral proposition true. In other words, the truth conditions would be the existence of some moral fact which the moral agent (the speaker) would recognise as a property of illicit kissing. Verificationist theory then continues by saying that, in order to establish whether or not the claim is determinately true, the truth predicate is subject to norms. These norms, e.g. manifestation of knowledge of when language actually does represent the facts and how this link is to be recognised, and the attempts we make to adhere to them in our linguistic practice, will aid the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate assertoric practice.

Wright maintains that Blackburn is wrong in assuming that “literal descriptiveness is a matter of possession of propositional surface” (1998; p 194). He says that it is indeed a very important task for any anti-realist to show how “propositional surface may be disengaged from realist commitment” (1998; p 194) but cautions against it being done by assuming that the metaphysics cannot support the propositional surface. In a sense, if I have read Wright correctly, he is saying that propositional surface must be seen to remain unproblematic in the event of the metaphysical

issues being unresolved. This seems to echo very clearly the notions of moral language being truth apt despite the case about the metaphysics of so called moral properties and facts. He says this very clearly when he says that the work which we have regarding propositions, and what sorts of content we may be trading in when making moral assertions “could only start *after* we have made a distinction between cases where realism is acceptable, and the propositional surface consequently unproblematic, and cases where neither is so.” (1998; p 194). “These are issues which are evidently at the heart of the metaphysical question, not things to take a stance on before starting work.” (1998; p 195) Wright’s criteria, which are basically syntactic by nature, for minimal truth aptitude seems to say that our moral deliberation can be part of correct inferential reasoning but that it would be very hard to argue for moral propositions being able to track facts of the kind which are claimed to have moral qualities. This sort of moral claim will not be settled either in terms of its truth value and its exact and legitimate meaning until the metaphysical work which must precede it is concluded- and this is so whether our inclinations are to deny or assume the existence of moral facts.

Expressivism maintains that moral claims such as “illicit kissing is wrong” is not genuinely assertoric because there are no conditions under which such a statement could be true. (And minimalism does not aid us here either because minimalism does not reflect how we use oral propositions.) Expressivism, as we have established, presupposes a metaphysical fact about the world. Looked at like this, assertions are defined, by the expressivist, not by the use of the language, but rather by the inherent nature of the agent (his/her tendency to project value) and, also, the state of reality (which, according to expressivists, is characterised by an absence of moral facts). Verificationism, on the other hand, maintains that moral language is assertoric **because** it is **used** to make reference. But it is also because of this particular use that it is subject to norms. So, any

theory taking language at face value (in terms of its syntactical features and the manner in which it is in actual fact being used) and then also observes the truth predicate and the qualities thereof, as previously outlined by Wright, will be enabled to recognise assertoric statements and will see moral propositions as intending to state truths. Added to this, if no metaphysical presuppositions are being made, this language should be seen as apt for truth. The additional default clause must be that the truth predicate of truth apt discourse is subject to norms, if it attempts to represent the world. Theories which are interested in the relationship between language and the world it attempts to denote, will be hostage to the presupposition that we sometimes get it right and other times not. Such theories then have some sort of obligation to put in place rules for use.

This, of course, does not logically exclude the possibility that we may, in fact, never or seldom get it right and that we are, as moral subjects, doing something else altogether when we use moral language. Both verificationism and expressivism acknowledge that the surface qualities of moral propositions are that of being assertoric. Verificationist theories, because not assuming anything about the nature of the world which moral language makes reference to, choose to regard such propositions as genuinely assertoric- as an articulation of actual beliefs that we have about (moral) reality. Expressivism is, however, concerned with why we speak in such a way and whether or not we are right when thinking ourselves capable of cognisance of moral facts even though there are no such facts. The reason for our realist type of language, according to expressivist theory, is that we are naturally convinced by our projection of moral value as facts.

An important point to be taken here is that there is nothing to say, at this stage, that expressivist theories will never be shown to be right. This is because we have not been able to determine, conclusively, anything about the existence of moral facts and nor is it in any way impossible that

our observation of moral facts is due to us being faced by our own projections. But if it is true that we project moral value and there are no such things as moral facts then it must be correct that our moral language is not genuinely assertoric because it will just never be apt for truth. This is because it then has no valid truth conditions. But when language is taken at face value- as determined by its use and syntactic structure- it seems that the moral agent intends to be stating some sort of truth when making moral claims (deluded or not).

As promised, I should like to end by briefly looking again at the implications for use, and meaning derived from use, set up by these respective theories. If verificationist theories are right about our moral language being assertoric based on the fact that it clearly is of an indicative nature (its syntactic structure) and the fact that we intend to use it to represent facts about the world (moral reality) then we have a situation wherein our use of it in this way is clearly not ever going to yield any conclusively true propositions. This is because the semantic value (whether the proposition is true or false) is not verifiable. We have therefore a situation of legitimate use of language (because it is syntactically sound and metaphysically open-ended) but within this legitimate discourse we see that we make mostly only indeterminate claims (because of moral claims being unverifiable and non-falsifiable). We see, therefore, how an evidentially constrained notion of truth (See Chapter 4 section 1) results in a counter-intuitive position about moral agents never being able to say anything true, in the objective absolute sort of way in which they aim to, while making moral assertions. Minimalist truth cannot save moral discourse in this regard, save for the philosopher, because it is highly unlikely that we want to be stating minimal truths when making moral claims. In this sense it does seem, if meaning is derived from verification conditions for representational language (which is a requirement imposed by the natural use of moral propositions), that the meaning of moral propositions is indeterminate. Indeterminate meaning does not imply that moral language has

no meaning at all. It is merely the claim that moral agents cannot achieve what they have set out to do, stating moral facts, when using moral language. This inability to achieve our ends as speakers results in a situation wherein it is not clear what the answer to a question such as "What do you mean when you state it is wrong to vote for the Communist Party?" cannot have a conclusive answer. It is of course possible to answer that "I mean that it is wrong to vote for the Communist Party". And, it would be unnecessarily confrontational to deny that any listener, in command of English, cannot grasp the "meaning" of this answer. But, the point is that speakers are making claims greater than such a grasp. It is most likely that a speaker will have some sort of argument in support of this claim which has reasons based in assumptions about the moral properties of the real world. If such assumptions are part of the intended meaning then it seems problematic, to me, what state of affairs, which the speaker in question has supposed knowledge of, will settle the truth, and therefore the meaning, of a statement such as the one above.

But Expressivism fares no better in capturing our intuitions about our moral claims and what we do while making them. It simply is not the case that we regard ourselves as expressing attitudes and dispositions, even though the philosophers may be right, when we make moral claims. And if we would be willing to concede to something like this it would most probably still be found that we somehow believe that our personal and subjective attitudes and dispositions are the right ones, which means we are back at square one regarding the possibility of conclusive moral truth. It just seems that our intention to represent facts, and therefore our insistence on using moral language in an indicative manner, stands in some contradiction to what we are able to determinately and legitimately mean within moral discourse.

## CONCLUSION

The structure of this conclusion may either be the demise of the argument forwarded by this thesis or may, in the end, serve to strengthen its basic premises and conclusions. This is because it is the nature of deductive arguments that poor reasoning cannot be obscured by difficult technical language and complicated, dense justifications of philosophical notions and commitments. It has been my decision to lay bare the skeleton of my argument trusting that the reader will find it convincing even in this vulnerable form. In presenting it thus (as a series of deductive proofs) my aim, obviously, is not to convince the reader of the truth of the premises, and therefore the soundness of the arguments, but rather to allow the reader to decide whether, *assuming the premises given are true*, the various conclusions made can be logically inferred from these premises. In other words, the conclusion of this thesis sees a general claim to the validity of the argument presented. The assumption is that the truth of the premises forwarded by the following deductive proofs has been settled within the chapters of this project.

(Please note that the conclusion of each proof has been numbered according to the numbering of the argument in which it occurs. I have included references to the parts of the preceding chapters where I have hoped to settle the actual truth of the premises to follow.)

### **Argument 1**

P1: Speakers do not unconditionally accept each others' assertions as true (pp 59, 60, 64)

P2: The conditions for truth is taken to be the evidence a speaker has in support of his/her assertion (pp 64, 67, 68, 72)

P3: Evidence is a state of affairs which must be manifestable by that speaker (pp 77, 78)

C1: The manifestation of evidence is a condition for accepting an assertion as true.

### **Argument 2**

P1: The manifestation of evidence is a condition for the truth of an assertion (from C1)

P2: Conditions are constraints (pp 85, 86, 128)

C2: The truth of assertions is evidentially constrained

### **Argument 3**

P1: Statements which fulfil certain syntactic criteria (X) are assertions (p 124)

P2: Moral statements fulfil certain syntactic criteria (X) (pp 127, 128)

C3: Moral statements are assertions

### **Argument 4**

P1: The truth of assertions is evidentially constrained (from C2)

P2: The unavailability of evidence renders the truth of assertions evidentially unconstrained

P3: Evidential constraint is a necessary condition for the determinacy of the truth of assertions (pp 81, 82, 83, 88, 89)

C4: The unavailability of evidence renders the truth of assertions indeterminate

### **Argument 5**

P1: The unavailability of evidence renders the truth of assertions indeterminate (from C4)

P2: There is no evidence available in support of the truth of moral statements (pp 75, 76)



P3: Moral statements are assertions (from C3)

C5: The truth of moral assertions is indeterminate

### **Argument 6**

P1: The meaning of a statement is determined by [what is being represented and understood in using a statement] (pp 52-57)

P2: [What is being represented and understood in using a statement] are the conditions which would make a statement true (pp 52-57)

C6: The meaning of a statement is determined by the conditions which would make a statement true

### **Argument 7**

P1: The meaning of a statement is determined by the conditions which would make that statement true (from C6)

P2: The truth of assertions is evidentially constrained (from C2)

P3: Moral statements are assertions (from C3)

C7: The meaning of moral assertions is evidentially constrained

### **Argument 8**

P1: The meaning of a statement is determined by the conditions which would make that statement true (from C6)

P2: The truth of moral assertions is indeterminate (from C5)

P3: Moral statements are assertions (from C3)

### **C8: The meaning of moral assertions is indeterminate**

The conclusion forwarded in the eighth argument above represents the overall conclusion of the thesis: **The meaning of moral assertions is indeterminate**. It is conceded that such a conclusion is, in most ways, entirely counter-intuitive because it certainly seems to be the case that our moral language has "meaning" of a very definite kind to us. But if our intuitions were never permitted to be up for investigation there would be no need to think critically about anything. The point, and the central thesis of this project, is that our intuitions about truth (what we believe about "moral truth") and our intuitions about what we take ourselves to be doing when employing moral language and what moral language is, in fact, capable of stand at odds with each other. However, it is important that the conclusion is not misrepresented in any way and I therefore caution against the possible assumption that this thesis has proposed a general sceptical position about meaning, like something in the vein of Quine's doctrine about meaning (Wright: 1997; p 397). This project, as suggested by the title, has been an isolated study of moral language and the intention has been to forward an argument for why moral language, in particular, presents certain problems for meaning. The claim is: The fact that we expect evidence (of the objective, truth conferring kind) in support of our and others' moral claims, but can manifest none, is the reason why the meaning of moral claims should be regarded as indeterminate.

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