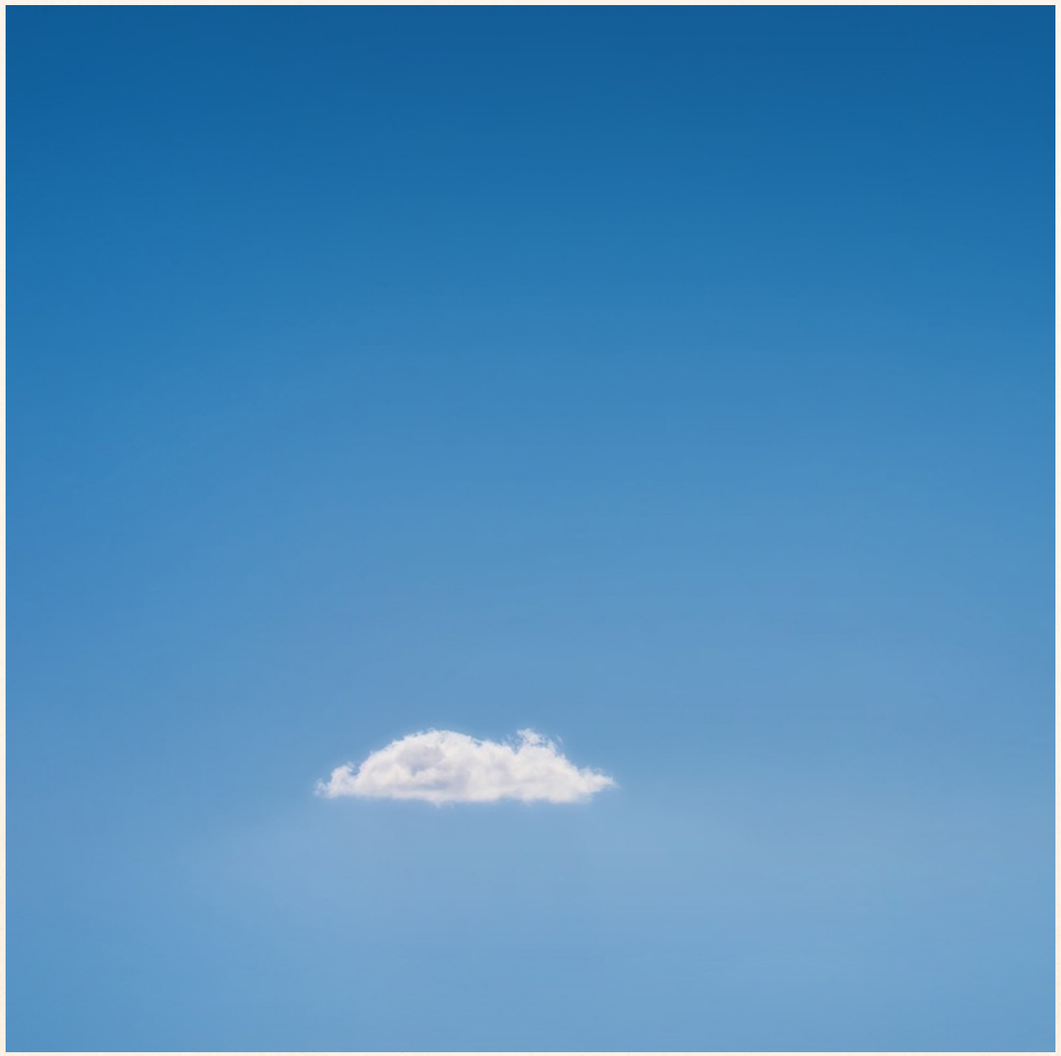
REALISMS

On What is There Anyway

A CLOUD IN THE SKY



HOW MANY?

- Think of a cloud—just one cloud, and around it a clear blue sky. Seen from the ground, the cloud may seem to have a sharp boundary. Not so. The cloud is a swarm of water droplets. At the outskirts of the cloud, the density of the droplets falls off. Eventually they are so few and far between that we may hesitate to say that the outlying droplets are still part of the cloud at all; perhaps we might better say only that they are near the cloud. But the transition is gradual. Many surfaces are equally good candidates to be the boundary of the cloud. Therefore many aggregates of droplets, some more inclusive and some less inclusive (and some inclusive in different ways than others), are equally good candidates to be the cloud. Since they have equal claim, how can we say that the cloud is one of these aggregates rather than another? But if all of them count as clouds, then we have many clouds rather than one. And if none of them count, each one being ruled out because of the competition from the others, then we have no cloud. How is it, then, that we have just one cloud? And yet we do. —Lewis (1993, 164)

HOW MANY CLOUDS?

1. Suppose that there is a cloud in the sky. Suppose, in fact, there is exactly one cloud in the sky.
2. A cloud is composed of water droplets.
3. For each set of water droplets, there is an object such that the water droplets in that set compose that object.
4. If the water droplets in set_1 compose $object_1$, and the droplets in set_2 compose $object_2$ and the sets set_1 and set_2 are not identical, then $object_1$ and $object_2$ are not identical.
5. If $object_1$ is a cloud in the sky, and $object_2$ is a cloud in the sky, and $object_1$ is not identical with $object_2$, then there are two clouds in the sky.
6. If any of these sets is such that its members compose a cloud, then for any other set_n, if its members compose an $object_n$, then $object_n$ is a cloud.
7. There is more than one set of water droplets in the sky.
8. So, there is more than one cloud in the sky.
9. So, either there are no clouds in the sky or there are (always) very many clouds in the sky.

TWO GRADES OF REALISM

- What is it to commit oneself to *realism* in some domain of discourse?
  - Realism involves an *independent existence claim*: there are—in some specified domain of discourse—entities answering to our discourse.
    - Typically this will be understood (as I understand it) as a claim to the effect that there are mind- and language independent entities. Such objects and their characteristics do not depend essentially or existentially on us; were we not on the scene, they would *be there anyway*.
  - Realism as often as not involves, additionally, a *kind claim*: the entities in a given domain of discourse form themselves into natural kinds.
    - Typically this will be understood as the claim that the world comes ready-made, pre-packaged, or pre-sorted into kinds.
      - Plato recommends that that we should strive to 'cut up each kind according to its species along its natural joints' (*Phaedrus* 265e), implying, then, that nature *has* natural joints or divisions, that kinds of beings—among others, the biological species—precede our perceptual and cognitive interaction with the perceiver-independent world.

MIND-WORLD INTERFACE

- Consider a typical macroscopic object: a tree in the forest.
  - The independent existence claim: it would be here, were we not.
    - N.b. This is to say that it is no more than causally dependent upon us (perhaps we planted it, as part of our reforestation programme, or perhaps not); once made, it does not depend upon our activities at all.
    - In particular, its existence does not depend upon our perceptual or cognitive faculties, upon our linguistic proclivities, or even upon our conceptual schemes.
- This is independent of the question of whether all of the tree's properties enjoy such independence.
  - For example, in some (surprisingly difficult) sense, its colour properties implicate our perceptual faculties in their existence.
  - Such questions hover at the mind-world interface.

DOMAINS OF REALISM

- No realist need be a realist across the board, in:
  - category theory
  - mathematics
  - moral theory
  - aesthetic theory
  - scientific kinds
  - ‘common sense’ ontology—tables, chairs, clouds, what have you

REALISM ABOUT CATEGORIES

- The world comes ready-made, both *vertically* and *horizontally*
  - ontologically
    - vertically: dividing into kinds (e.g. particulars and universals)
    - horizontally: exhibiting dependency relations between kinds (e.g. non-basic and basic beings; wholes upon parts)
  - scientifically
    - vertically: dividing into kinds (e.g. being an electron; being H_2O)
    - horizontally: exhibiting dependency relations (the psychological on the neurophysiological; the biological on the chemical)
- Let us call the general realist orientation a commitment to the *ready-made world* (RMW)

REPRESENTATION AND TRUTH

- A cluster of realist inclinations:
  - Thought and language stand in some broadly *representational* relation R to the RMW
  - When R is adequate, where adequacy in perhaps governed by *correspondence*, then the thoughts and statements standing in R to the world are *true*.
    - More exactly, the RMW contains truth-makers: generally speaking there are structured parts of the RMW (facts, states of affairs) which *render true* our true beliefs and true statements.
- The notion of a RMW marries readily with bi-valence.
- Nothing about RMW implies, guarantees, or otherwise requires the actual truth of our beliefs.
  - Truth is verification-independent and epistemically unconstrained.

A SIMPLE ARGUMENT

1. If RMW, then truth is both verification-transcendent (VT) and epistemically unconstrained (EU).

2. Truth is neither VT nor EU.

3. So, not RMW.

4. If (3), then realism is to be rejected and anti-realism embraced.

5. So, realism is to be rejected and anti-realism embraced.

A MOTIVATING THOUGHT

- Meaning is *truth-implicated*:
  - S understands the meaning of *p* only if S understands those conditions under which *p* is true.
- Perhaps this fact alone ushers in a broad anti-realism?
- Can truth really be verification-independent and epistemically unconstrained?

SEMANTIC COMMITMENT

- ‘If a statement is true, then it must be in principle possible to know that it is true’ —Dummett (1993, 61).

- ‘The dispute [between realism and anti-realism] concerns the notion of truth appropriate for statements of the disputed class; and this means that it is a dispute concerning the kind of meaning which these statements have’ —Dummett (1978, 146).

DENYING VT/EU

- The basic thought: given the connection between meaning and truth, the RMW makes inexplicable our incontestable semantic abilities: we understand things, including propositions which are undecidable.

- Given that we do evince understanding even of undecidable propositions, RMW must be rejected.

- In particular, RMW's commitment to VT/EU must go.

- Somehow, then, the world must conform to our conceptual, semantic, and epistemic exigencies; it must not, after all, be ready-made, but rather made as encountered.

TWO ARGUMENTS

- An Argument from Acquisition

- An Argument from Manifestation

A BASIC ARGUMENT

1. If RMW, then truth is VT/EU.

2. If truth is VT/EU, then we cannot have the semantic abilities we in fact have.

3. Obviously, we *do* have the semantic abilities we in fact have!

4. So, not RMW.

IN SUM

- Our manifest semantic abilities require us to regard truth as epistemically conditioned and constrained.

- If so, then the notion of truth required by the RMW is to be rejected—and with it the RMW itself.

- That is, truth depends on what we can know; there are no purely mind-independent facts.

- So, to say that some proposition *p* is true or false is just to say that its assertion is wholly justified or otherwise epistemically warranted.

ONE CONSTRAINT: ACQUISITION

1. Possibly—or indeed actually—we understand the meanings of the propositions of some domain D.

2. If (1) and if RMW, we have grasped the VT/EU truth conditions of the propositions of D.

3. If (2), we have—at least possibly—*acquired* knowledge of those truth conditions.

4. So, we have—at least possibly—*acquired* knowledge of the VT/EU truth conditions of the propositions of D.

5. The propositions of D include some which are undecideable.

6. If VT/EU, it is not possible for us to have acquired knowledge of the truth conditions of the propositions of D.

7. So, If truth is VT/EU, then we cannot have the semantic abilities we in fact have (= BA.2)

ANOTHER CONSTRAINT: MANIFESTATION

1. Possibly—or indeed actually—we understand the meanings of the propositions of some domain D.

2.If (1) and if RMW, we have grasped the VT/EU truth conditions of the propositions of D.

3.Necessarily, if (2) our knowledge of the truth conditions must be implicit or explicit.

4.It is not possible that all such knowledge is explicit.

5.So, at least some knowledge of the truth conditions of the propositions of D must be implicit.

6.Necessarily, we have implicit knowledge of the truth conditions of the propositions of D only if that knowledge can be made behaviourly manifest.

7.If VT/EU, then it is not the case that implicit knowledge of the truth conditions of the undecideable propositions of D can be made behaviourly manifest.

8.So, if truth is VT/EU, then we cannot have the semantic abilities we in fact have (= BA.2)