Pragmatism, minimalism, and the space of reasons

In this paper I want to explore some lines of thought leading people in each of two directions. One is towards 'inferential role' semantics, and the other is towards minimalism in the theory of truth. At first sight these may seem to have little to do with each other, and little to do with the overt topic of this seminar, which is the theory of content. But among other things I want to show how the themes interweave. I am not, in fact, going to say much directly about inferential role semantics itself, for instance as it is developed in the work of Robert Brandom. But I shall say something about the Sellarsian roots of that movement, perhaps by way of excuse for sidestepping its later flowerings. My hope is that by the end of the paper I shall have done enough to deconstruct the imagery that motivates an opposition between inferential and referential or representational semantics.

1. Pragmatism and Realism.

We can begin with Richard Rorty. Rorty is famous for advocating a certain replacement. We are to replace a vocabulary of 'objectivity' or 'representation' with a vocabulary of 'justification' and 'solidarity'. The idea is that 'we understand knowledge when we understand the social justification of belief, and thus have no need to view it as accuracy of representations. Instead of seeking 'vertical' relationships between language, or ourselves as language users, and the world, we must concentrate upon 'horizontal' or inferential processes, whereby we advance and accept reasons from each other. Justification becomes a 'social phenomenon' rather than a transaction between a 'knowing subject' and 'reality'.[1] This substitution of course coincides with realizing that, contingently and historically situated as we are, the norms that govern this activity are *our* norms. They are not norms provided by the world itself, or 'nature's own norms'

Before turning to the alarm bells that some of this may ring, I would like to start by elaborating on the idea of nature's own norms, since it brings the replacement Rorty advocates further into focus. Rorty often presents his Realist opponent as supposing that there is 'one privileged discourse' or a preferred vocabulary: the vocabulary of the Book of Nature. The enemy is the idea that 'the final vocabulary of physics will somehow be Nature's own',[2] or that there is a vocabulary that is 'somehow already out there in the world, waiting for us to discover it'.[3] As Jacques Bouveresse says, discussing these passages, the target seems to be absurd, and taking this absurdity to imply the defeat of realism is 'to hold over realism a victory that is frankly much to easy not to be held suspect'.[4] The absurdity is evident from the familiar realist image of the landscape and the map. Maps may, obviously, be better or worse. They can be created with more or less care and attention and accuracy, and they can represent the landscape more or less well as

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[1] *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 9.

[2] *Consequences of Pragmatism*, xxvi.

[3] *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 6.

[4] Jacques Bouveresse, 'Reading Rorty, Pragmatism and its Consequences' in *Rorty and His Critics*, ed. Robert B. Brandom, Blackwell, 2000.

a result. But a landscape has no voice: there is nothing in the landscape that *literally* dictates there to be just one preferred or privileged way in which it is to be mapped.[5]

Now this association of realism with a speaking world, an association that on the face of it looks so absurd, is not a peculiar idiosyncracy of Rorty's own. It is in fact a consequence of at least one of his central thoughts. This is the bipartite Sellarsian doctrine that causation is not justification, and that only beliefs justify beliefs. It is supposed to follow from this that there is no *rational* relationship between anything outside the sphere of language—as the world might seem to be—and mental states expressible by means of language. There could at best be *causal* relationships between anything 'outside the sphere of thought' and our thoughts themselves. Our interactions with the world are just the boundary crossings as one buzzing hive of particles and energies (outside) interacts with another buzzing hive of particles and energies (ourselves). Just as the human race attains one stage of maturity when it realizes there is no alien, external giver of laws, so it is to attain a further one when it realizes that there is no alien, external giver of descriptions. Rorty's fundamental thought is that there is no 'alien authority': his hostility to the notion of 'representation' is that for him it goes along with the idea of an objective reality which constitutes this authority.

This gives us the difference encapsulated in the metaphor of two spaces: the space of causation and the space of reason. It also seems to introduce an uncomfortable dilemma. Either reality, the world, plays no part in justifying our beliefs, but at best impinges on us causally, or reality, the world, is itself inside the space of reasons or the sphere of thought. So *either* reality is lost sight of from within the 'space of justification' *or* the world must be itself conceptual, that is, having its own vocabulary or its own language. Realism is supposed to be an acceptance of the second horn of this dilemma. According to realism, in this conception, the world *demands* certain descriptions, and forbids others. But this demanding and forbidding could only be possible if the world has a voice that all by itself dictates the privileged vocabulary for its adequate description. The burden of thinking thus becomes misconceived as an exercise of pure receptivity. This, I take it, is why the absurdity of which Bouveresse complains, is, for Rorty, an inescapable consequence of realism.

The realist horn of the dilemma is also accepted by McDowell, when he insists that reality itself lies within intentional space, the space of justification. 'There is no ontological gap between the sort of thing one can mean, or generally the sort of thing one can think, and the sort of thing that can be the case'.[6] Here too the world is presented as linguistic or cognitive in its shape. It is articulated or 'carved up' just as we articulate it or carve it up: it has species and kinds and qualities just inasmuch as we talk of species and kinds and qualities. But this kind of speaking world is not supposed to be absurd. On the other hand, it is supposed to sit congenially with recognition of our own responsibility for our own descriptions: our situated or contingent and historical natures. One might worry whether McDowell avoids the charge of idealism. Certainly it is possible to feel that he has at best pretended to enlarge the void in which we spin, as Berkeley may be supposed to have done when he talked with the vulgar.

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[5] Of course, there may be facts about the landscape that require one kind of representation given a history of cartographic conventions, and stability of expectations and interests of map makers and map readers.
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Still, when it comes to his debate with Rorty, at first sight, I suspect, many of us will be inclined to sympathize with McDowell. In Moorean fashion, McDowell presents himself as vindicating a properly modest concept of 'answerability to the world' and, happily, an accessible world. Where Rorty seems to substitute chit-chat in the coffee house for work in the laboratory or the library, McDowell restores common-sense. One is inclined to sympathize with McDowell's insistence that the 'disquotational' properties of the notion of truth are sufficient, all by themselves to determine a norm of truth or warrant:

> An utterance of "Cold fusion has not been achieved, so far, in the laboratory" has (if I am right about the physics) a warrant, a justifiedness, that consists not in one's being able to get away with it among certain conversational partners, but in —now I disquote and implicitly make a claim—cold fusion's not having been achieved, so far in the laboratory. Here the terms "warranted", "rationally acceptable," etc, have collected an obvious answer, not to the question "to whom?," but to the question "in the light of what?," and the question "to whom?" need not be in the offing at all.

McDowell goes on to talk of the "innocuous transcendence" whereby answering to the world, illustrated by examples such as these, is in our thought a different thing from "gaining the assent of our peers". We can gloss this point by saying that our gaze is fixed not on the assent of our peers, but on whether cold fusion has been achieved, so far in the laboratory.[7] Thus any sentence comes with its own 'norm' of truth: the norm given by disquotation. So the very *content* of a sentence determines the serious inquirer where to look and how to evaluate it (and only some very small subset of contents concern the assent of our peers).

Rorty's attempt to answer this is instructive. I shall separate out three elements. First, he insists that his view allows for the distinction between the serious and the frivolous (just as in another context he insists that he can make a distinction between Akeel Bilgrami's "bullshitters" and sober practitioners of enquiry). "What, I still want to ask, is so "mere" about getting together with fellow inquirers and agreeing on what to say and believe?" (p. 125). This is by way of resisting McDowell's sneer comparing social unison to that aimed at in 'some perhaps purely decorative activity on a level with a kind of dancing'.

Secondly, where McDowell insists on the distinction between two 'norms': one of answerability to the facts, and the different one of unison or solidarity. Rorty replies that he sees only one norm, rather than two. Rorty admits some content to the cautionary or

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[7] Here I can't help recalling an anecdote I told in *Ruling Passions*, about a historian and philosopher of science I once heard at a conference, who took himself to have learned the lesson of displacing the norm of truth by the norm of assent of our peers. The problem he then posed for his own view was that Michael Faraday, long celebrated as one of the greatest experimentalists, only seemed to have designed instruments for registering such things as electrostatic charge, and never ones designed to detect the approval of his peers. The idea was that Faraday should have been more concerned to invent something like a Gallup poll, or perhaps an internet chat room, since consensus was his aim.

What seemed left out was that one of the things Faraday's instruments were excellent at doing was not *registering* the assent of his peers, but precisely *creating* such a consensus. When, hitherto, people did not have a view or share views on electrostatic charge, after Faraday they came to do so.

fallibilist thought that current practice may tell us to affirm that X happened, but the facts may be otherwise. But he glosses the distinction as that between two answers to the question 'to whom?', namely 'current practitioners' on the one hand or 'some other, better informed or more enlightened practitioners' on the other.

But thirdly, When McDowell presents answerability to the facts as a norm, Rorty replies that he fails to see how a fact can be anything but a hypostatised true sentence, and fails to see 'how anything can be relevant to deciding whether a sentence *is* true except the outcome of actual or possible practices of justification to our fellows'.

It may be illuminating to compare the dispute with a parallel example. Stanley Fish, a counterpart to Rorty, has conducted a longstanding dispute with Ronald Dworkin, a counterpart to McDowell.[8] Fish objects to Dworkin's elaboration of the idea of 'law as integrity'. Dworkin presents this conception of legal practice as a satisfying alternative lying between two different poles. One is 'positivism' or the view that legal practice is entirely dictated by pre-existent facts, such as the black letter statutes and decisions that are, as it were, on the page, or 'just there anyway'. The other, confusingly called 'realism' in the philosophy of law, is the subjective or purely pragmatic view, according to which what judges and lawyers do is answerable to nothing except their own perceptions of the needs of the moment (or even their own needs of the moment). Faced with these unappetizing alternatives, Dworkin's idea is that of a suitably serious, intelligently hermeneutic approach, according to which practitioners endeavour to fit their judgements into the pattern that, in their view, is best exemplified by previous decisions and statutes. This can all sound like good, cautious, professional common-sense, and indeed in one way it is. The trouble, Fish complains, is that it is such good, cautious professional common-sense that it is, in fact, entirely vacuous. It represents no peculiar or admirable or contestable ideal at all, yet it is as such that Dworkin presents it.

The reason, Fish argues, is that neither of the two 'poles' between which Dworkin is carefully steering represents a landmark. The positivist fantasy is one of constraint by precedent in a way that is *uncontaminated* by interpretation, revisitation, rethinking, or active engagement with the meanings of what lies on the page or in the record. The positivist forgets that those meanings, being meanings *for us*, do not lie on the page or in the record. Here 'the record' plays the role of the buzzing causal flux, which only comes into consciousness when interpreted or understood in one way or another. On the other hand the subjectivist, or in the philosophy of law sense 'realist', fantasy is one of 'judgement' that does not answer to the norms that in fact dictate what judgement *can be* in this area. A "judge" who does not look at statute and precedent is, in legal practice, no judge at all, but perhaps someone who has gone off his head, or a maverick who is deliberately or cynically making a mockery of the whole institution. Avoiding *that* is a condition of playing the game, just as avoiding carrying a cricket bat is a condition of playing soccer.

In Fish's view this means an entire convergence of 'trying to judge according to the legal facts' and 'trying to judge so as to gain acceptance of your peers'. Judicial activity can be described as either. For to be accepted as peers a group must submit themselves to the very discipline that is 'trying to judge according to the legal facts'. There is no standpoint of proclaiming oneself or anyone else to be a competent judge, but

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[8] Fish's contributions are well seen in his *Doing what Comes Naturally*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989. Dworkin's relevant writings include *A Matter of Principle*, Cambridge, Mass: 1985, and others.

unconcerned about legal truth, any more than there is one of proclaiming oneself or another as a competent scientist or historian, but unconcerned about the scientific or historical facts. Fish describes the community within which assent is generated in terms of Gerald Postema: 'an interpretive community takes the form of a shared discipline and a thick continuity of experience of the common world of the practice'. [9] (This may sound optimistic in the life and times of doubtful legal bodies like the Renquhist Supreme Court, but even actively corrupt bodies maintain backhanded conformity to norms, to the extent of disguising their corruption. As Akeel Bilgrami notices, even liars honour truth, for this is why they find it essential to disguise it).

If we look at Rorty's response to McDowell in this light, certain things fall into place. Firstly, I think we have to confess, the whole issue becomes slightly deflated. What presents itself as a wholesale confrontation between a sensible realism and a revisionary pragmatism reconfigures itself into two surprisingly close ways of saying the same thing. For now we can imagine a Rorty who *accepts* a 'sane' conception of answerability to the facts: attempting to get the facts straight is just what anybody who is a paid-up member of the relevant community of inquirers must be described as doing. At a given time and for a given subject matter these inquirers—the serious scientists or historians who have mastered the methods of the discipline—constitute the relevant normative community. And this sane conception can coexist peacefully with recognition of the amount of history, culture, learning, or immersion in a shared discipline, it takes to create a capacity so to confront the facts. In truth, we may not have to imagine this rapprochement. For in recent work Rorty announces that he is no longer opposed to any modest notion of 'getting things right', nor of the very idea of word-world relations.[10] These turn out to be compatible with the view he wants to take. And McDowell himself clearly accepts the rich conception of the things it takes to create a capacity to confront the facts, since these are just the elements that go to constructing what he likes to call our 'second nature'.

To reinforce the rapprochement, we can consider in more detail the first part of Rorty's response to McDowell, where he allows himself the resources to distinguish between the frivolous and the serious. Elsewhere he makes the same claim, trying to rebut the charge of Dennett and Bilgrami that he offers comfort and solace to the: relativistic postmodernists and their ilk, the 'bullshitters' of the academy:

> I have no wish to cast doubt on the distinction between the frivolous and the serious. This is a serious and important distinction. It is well exemplified in the contrast between the silliest, least literate, members of academic departments of literature and honest, hard-working, intellectually curious, laboratory scientists — just as the distinction between sel-rightous priggery and tolerant conversability is well exemplified by the contrast between the sulkiest, least literate, members of academic philosophy departments and honest, hard-working, intellectually curious, literary critics.
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> Neither of these distinctions, however, has any connection with the difference of philosophical opinion between those who do and those who do not

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[9] Fish, op. cit. p. 580, quoting Postema, 'Protestant Interpretation and Social Practices', *Law and Philosophy* (vol. 6, no. 3, December 1987).
[10] Rorty, in Brandom op. cit., p. 375.

believe that truth consists in accurate representation of the intrinsic nature of reality. [11]

Rorty then unveils his favourite comparison: 'Does he love truth' is, he claims, no more verifiable than 'is he saved?' or 'does he love the Lord his God with all his heart and soul and mind'? So how are bullshitters to be detected? They are distinguished not by their goal (not being bothered to get things right) rather…they are 'unconversable, incurious, and self-absorbed' Others are 'serious, decent, and trustworthy'.

There are two questions here: first, is Rorty entitled to say as much as he does, and second, if he is, why can he not say more? The first question would zero in on virtues he does evidently regard as detectable, such as curiosity and seriousness. So we have to postulate an interpretive community has the ability to winnow out those who are not really curious whether *p* or who are not serious in their inquiry whether *p*. Perhaps, as it were, these impostors get their opinions from the newspapers or show alarming tendencies to wishful thinking, or to parroting fashionable jargon. Rorty describes such people as being 'unconversable'. But of course, they are only unconversable if the conversation is of a particular type. Bullshitters can be voluble, and to some audiences readable. The postmodernists whom Sokal exhibited as having no understanding whatsoever of the science they loved to use in their writings had big enough audiences. The failure they really show is better located by the word 'incurious'. But incurious just means, not curious whether *p*. And if we can detect those in that state, then the second questions arises: why can't we say more? In particular, why can't we describe these people as having no concern or insufficient concern for the truth? Once more, then, we find that with sufficient beef put into the notion of an inquiry, and a community of inquirers, the promised contrast between radical pragmatism and sane realism threatens to evaporate.

So has the circus really left town? I think we have to go one more round. We need to revisit a Sellarsian premise that McDowell shares with Rorty, that the order of causation is different, toto caelo, from the order of justification. It is this that Rorty constantly returns to when under pressure. His 'anti-authoritarianism', which he thinks survives any concession to a modest notion of 'getting things right', remains: there is no Reality before which we must bow down. The buzzing hive of energy that is our contact with the world does not tell us anything.[12]

Now the difference between causal and rational relations is also a central theme of *Mind and World*, when McDowell repeatedly claims that causal impacts, impacts from outside the 'boundary of the space of concepts' only at best exculpate us, but can never justify us:

> What I want is an analogy to the sense in which if someone is found in a place from which she has been banished, she is exculpated by the fact that she was deposited there by a tornado. Her arriving there is completely removed from the domain of what she is responsible for…[13]

[11] Ibid. p. 104–5.
[12] Ibid, p. 376.
[13] McDowell, *Mind and* World, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1994, p. 8.

At first sight this is an unappealing comparison. It is not only 'externalists' and 'reliabilists' in the theory of knowledge who see it as valuable to compare us to instruments well-calibrated to respond differentially to causal impacts from the environment. It is obviously implicit in any sane conception of observation that its exercise is responsive to surrounding objects and forces. Photons and sound waves are not the preserve of conservative, or realist philosophical theorizing. They are, today, part of our common-sense theory of the world. And even before science told us this much, folk-theory said the same. Indeed it is implicit in the very notion of 'receptivity', which not only implies passivity, but differential responsiveness, and that is a causal notion.

McDowell, of course, does not really intend to deny this. Indeed, just a page later, he says very much the kind of thing that is presented here as the beginning of a question mark:

> Of course this is not to deny that experiencing the world involves activity. Searching is an activity; so are observing, watching, and so forth… But one's control over what happens in experience has limits: one can decide where to place oneself, at what pitch to tune one's attention, and so forth, but it is not up to one what, having done all that, one will experience. This minimal point is what I am insisting on.

This is well-said, but what McDowell does not notice is the extent to which it jeopardizes the Sellarsian dichotomy. The inquirer who searches and observes and watches is not at all like someone deposited somewhere by a tornado, and the difference immediately affects the issue of justification. In everyday transactions a fundamental exercise of reason is putting yourself in the way of appropriate causal impacts from the world, and another is inability or reluctance to form beliefs in their absence. Your reason for thinking there is cheese in the cooler is that you went and looked; your reason for supposing your spouse is home is that you heard the car in the drive. In giving these reasons we do not cite other beliefs, but cite aspects of our position vis-à-vis the events reported. Your authority derives here from the fact that you were on the spot with your eyes and ears open. And to say that is to say the single most pertinent thing about their justification.

In this light consider the Davidsonian formula that 'nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief'. Obviously there has been some reshaping of common sense for this to be sayable. Consider Mary waiting for her spouse. Common sense allows that Mary's justification for thinking her spouse is home is that she heard him, and here 'that she heard him' is not identifying a content of a belief she has, but identifying a causal relationship between Mary and her spouse—the very causal relation that stops Mary from appearing seriously deranged when she suddenly comes to believe that her spouse is home. It is precisely by couching the discussion in terms that make this relationship invisible that coherentists like Davidson invite the charge of leaving us with belief systems 'spinning frictionlessly in the void'. The sound of the arriving spouse stops the adjustment of belief from being 'frictionless' and stops the subject from being in a void. McDowell is right to pose the problem to Davidson, but his own attachment to the Sellarsian division undermines his own attempt to avoid it. In answer to 'Why are you here?' 'I was dropped by a tornado' indeed takes us away from justification. But in

answer to 'why do you believe your spouse is home', 'I was on the spot/I heard him/he was crashing about' does not.

The question now is whether the reshaping of common sense that Davidson represents has an excuse. The only promising excuse must be parallel to the 'just more theory' move that Putnam once made at a similar point. We can envisage this being applied at two points in the discussion. The first, weaker application reminds us that in Mary's mouth 'I believed he was home because I heard him' represents 'just more theory': she believes she heard him and believes he is home and believes that the second belief arose as it should in response to his being home. Then one might suppose that accepting that this is Mary's justification fails to dislodge Davidson's claim, since it is just more theory—just what Mary believes about her situation. But this ploy fails, for the fact it cites about Mary is irrelevant. The ploy trades on an ambiguity in the idea of 'Mary's justification'. What *Mary* would offer as a justification, what she would say if challenged, is of course an expression of her belief that she was receptive to a causal impact from her spouse, for what else would she offer? This just means that she does not escape beliefs as she expresses them. But that is irrelevant, for it remains that the content believe in, and that we believe to justify Mary, is something about her position and her causal relationship to the world. It is not *just* something about Mary's other beliefs, nor about our own. Both Mary and we, as reflective and self-conscious agents, are aware of that content, of course (which is why the label 'externalism' in the theory of knowledge strikes me as quite inappropriate).

The other point of application of the 'just more theory' move turns to us rather than Mary. What *we* say if asked what justified Mary—that she heard him—is an expression of *our* belief in the same relationship. Return for a moment to the convergence between McDowell and Rorty, in which a sane conception of 'answering to the facts' and a sane appreciation of the place of human practices in creating the ways in which we do answer the facts seemed to come more or less into harmony. We can still imagine theorists insisting that one, rather than the other, of these wears the trousers. So the second application of the 'just more theory' move will be that 'answering to the facts' is itself a creature of theory. It is not enough to say that Mary heard her spouse, or that some fact or another leapt to the eye. For there is more to meeting the eye than meets the eye. And what there is, the 'just more theory' move now insists, includes the emphasis on norms and conventions and consensus (and even on 'coping' rather than 'copying') that Rorty insisted on all along.

Seen this way the Rortian position would be analogous to my own 'quasi-realism' in connection with the normative. The quasi-realist has no problem with talking of moral facts, and even of our own sensitivity to them. We can even say, if we want, that moral facts leap to the eye. But all the quasi-realist sees in such talk is another expression of attitude, an exercise of the conative disposition that, according to him, constitute our moral commitments. Similarly, at this point, we are to imagine that 'just more theory' in the pragmatist's discourse parallels 'just more attitude' in that of the quasi realist. What we get following this line of thought is also something parallel to Rorty's reconstruction of 'first-person privilege' in the philosophy of mind from the Sellarsian standpoint of hostility to The Given. That reconstruction in effect sees the privilege as a gift from the social practices governing reportage and avowals. It is we who allow the privilege. Similarly at this point it is we who allow Mary her justification given the auditory

presence of her spouse, and equally it would be our norms that she violates, appearing seriously deranged, if the belief popped into her head without any connection to some similar stimulus from her circumstance. Epistemology is normative, and the norms are social norms.

Now taken one way this is quite correct, but we have to wonder about its intended significance. The mistake to be avoided is any implication that the social norms are in any way arbitrary or conventional, so that a different social practice could with equal propriety accord quite different positions an equal status in regard to the same fact. This idea would have us imagine that in a different social setting a Mary who heard nothing, or who listened to voices, or who tossed a coin, or was nowhere near the scene, could be justified in believing that her spouse was home. But, except at the margins, this is not a coherent suggestion. Sufficient disconnection between Mary's sentences and the event disqualifies those sentences from being taken as beliefs about the event at all. Trying to think of Mary judging the *same* content in entirely different ways collapses into thinking of her judging a very different content, or not succeeding in judging at all, but only in mouthing words. In this sense at least, the meaning of a sentence is its method of verification. This should not however be confused with the mad holism that would make it impossible to allow new sensitivities to old facts. Mary who has fixed up a video camera in the drive now has a new way of telling whether her spouse is home—she has new inferential routes to that knowledge—but it is essential to what she is doing, and what she understands herself as doing, that this simply enables her to judge the same old thing, only more efficiently than just by listening.

This is not to deny the variations possible in the enterprise of trying to judge according to the facts. Insisting, as I have done, on the place of causation in justification does not deny that we can be caused to believe different things by the same environment. It is here that contingency, situatedness, historical and social determinants indeed have their sway. Consider once more the enterprise of legal interpretation. We might want to say that the only *constraint* that the record of past judgement provides at any time has to be seen as causal rather than *in itself* justificatory. Fish's idea is that to function as justifications for one decision or another, texts need *taking up*, and then the possibility arises that they can be taken up in different ways depending on the contingent, historical, situation of the judges who construe them. Similarly of course, the causal impacts of the environment on us need to go through our sensibilities before they sway our judgements (this is also true both of the causal impacts that constitute conversation with one another, and of those that become taken as showing that we are coping—causal impacts about which Rorty is strangely complacent). Sensibility, in this sense, just is the name for whatever takes causes as input and delivers judgement as output. And it is no surprise to learn that our sensibilities are the products of nature and nurture, with some concepts owing more to one and others more to the other. So all we seem left with, from the 'just more theory' move, is the platitude that only thinkers think. We are left with nothing that undermines the thought that in this thinking we often manage to represent to ourselves the way of the world.

2. Minimalism and Representation.

I now turn to a rather different source of worry about representation. This belongs to 'minimalists' in the theory of truth, and I am going to consider it as it develops in the work of Hartry Field and Paul Horwich. Suppose we start with a natural worry about minimalism. The worry is that what minimalism solves in one chapter, it presupposes in another. For instance, when a minimalist like Horwich presupposes some notion of 'proposition' or 'judgement', then the charge would be that this notion is itself dependent upon some conception of truth, or of aiming at the truth, or in a nutshell, depends upon some conception of representation. If, like Field's version, minimalism avoids talking of propositions but talks instead of 'utterances-as-understood' then the same doubt arises. An utterance is understood only by a subject capable of judgement, and the powers involved in doing that will very likely turn out to be powers of representation.

Strawson mocks a philosophy of truth that presupposes a concept of judgement in a remark that Keith Simmons and I quote in our introduction to *Truth*:

> And it is indeed very strange that people have so often proceeded by saying "Well, we're pretty clear what a statement is, aren't we? Now let us settle *the further question*, namely what it is for a statement to be true"

It is important to realize that this remark targets not only substantive or 'robust' theories of truth, but any minimalism that simply turns its back on the further question, if the material necessary for answering it already went into the story about what a statement or judgement or proposition is. To avoid the problem, it is clearly tempting to stick to predicating truth of sentences. But each of Horwich and Field had a good reason for moving from good old-fashioned sentences, relying on a Tarskian version of the T-schema as the schema whose instances together give a recursive definition, or an infinitary definition of truth, albeit for one language at a time. The defect of minimalism cast that way is that the individual instances of the T-schema seem to be contingent, and furthermore contingencies of which additional knowledge does not augment anyone's grasp of the truth predicate. It is not just, as is sometimes carelessly said, that Tarski 'relativizes truth to a language', for that can sound fairly harmless. It sounds harmless when it is taken to mean no more than that the truth of the overall biconditional depends upon the language of which the sentence disquoted is supposed to be a member. But it is not at all harmless when it implies that speakers of different languages cannot share a conception of truth. This is far from harmless; in fact it is obviously false. It is avoided, as I have said, by Horwich who treats propositions and not sentences, and in a different way by Field, who in effect prevents us from raising the topic by restricting us to a conception of truth that applies only to utterances-as-understood.

But the question I just posed still arises. Isn't the notion of a proposition itself going to need unpacking in terms of some notion of representation? Field himself talks interestingly of the creeping threat that robust notions of 'representation' pose to his kind of deflationism.[14] His own preferred theory of meaning centres upon 'conceptual role', but expands therefrom:

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[14] Hartry Field 'Deflationist Views of Meaning and Content', reprinted in Blackburn & Simmons, eds, *Truth*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999. The quotations are from pp. 356 – 9.

conceptual role isn't enough: it is both 'internalist' and 'individualist': and a plausible deflationism is going to have to give to content both 'externalist' and 'social' aspects.

Let us concentrate upon the first. Field recognizes that there are 'external' correlations between circumstances and dispositions to utter: I am a very accurate indicator of whether there is rain falling on my head, so I tend to believe that there is rain falling on my head if, and only if, there is rain falling on my head. And if I tend only to utter the appropriate sentence when I believe in its truth, then my disposition to utter will itself correlate with rain falling on my head.

> This is simply a correlation, there to be observed; and a deflationist is as free to take note of it as is anyone else, and as free as anyone else to deem it an ingredient of what he calls content

The threat to deflationism is now apparent. For why aren't these relations, which Field calls 'indication relations' themselves *sufficient* to give birth— no doubt a birth followed by a life of refinements and subtleties—to the very notion of representation, or of a truth-condition that deflationism exists to deny?

This is in fact how I presented the matter some time ago in *Spreading the Word*, highlighting the way in which we see ourselves as *responding* to the facts. It is an integral part of our theory of the world that the cat being in the garden causes many things: 'the shadow on the parsley, the absence of the birds, or my belief that it is there' (p.246). But then our conception of ourselves as responding to things and facts about things seems a promising starting point for a theory of representation, and eventually, perhaps, an inflationary account of truth.

Field, however, resists this reasoning. His principal objection is subtle. He acknowledges that the deflationist can recognize facts about indication, and can 'even use the disquotation schema to formulate the distinction between one of his belief states indicating its own truth conditions and it indicating something else…'. This distinction is illustrated in turn with two examples. One is a case of systematic exaggeration. Consider distance. It may be that my saying that something is n metres away correlates with its being f(n) metres away, where fx starts dropping off rapidly from x after a few metres. Thus, my saying that things are 100 metres away will actually correlate with them being (say) 75 metres away, and so on. The other is an example of indirect causation, so my beliefs about events in Bosnia may not correlate at all with events in Bosnia, but only with newspaper reports of events in Bosnia.

Field's admission that a deflationist can make these distinction is welcome. It would be a reductio of the position if it couldn't find the resources to distinguish between the circumstance in which someone's remark that an object is 100 metres away is true, and the circumstance in which his saying it is a reliable indicator that the object is 60 metres away. Or, between distinguishing when it is right to say that there has been a massacre in Bosnia, namely when there has, and the circumstance in which it may be explicable or justifiable for people to be saying that there has, when there has not, because they have received misleading reports. 'But' says Field:

> What [the deflationist] can't do, it seems to me, is say that *this distinction* is of much explanatory importance: for that would give truth conditions (rather than indication relations) a central role in the theory

of mind; and the claim that truth conditions have a central role in the theory of mind is the defining characteristic of inflationism.

Field admits that this looks quite implausible, but claims that it can grow upon one 'after one has spent some time trying to say just what its explanatory importance is'. But I think this idea should not grow upon us.

The claim, remember, is that the distinction between a belief state reliably indicating its own truth condition, and it reliably indicating something else is of little explanatory importance. I find this claim quite hard to interpret, and very hard to accept in any feasible interpretation. Consider, for instance, the systematic exaggerator. Suppose he is the caddy to a golfer, and constantly overestimates the distance to the green, telling his player that it is 200 metres when it is in fact 150, 300 when it is 200, and so forth. His mistakes have consequences; when he is trusted his employer loses the game and he loses his job. Perhaps his mistakes have interesting mind/brain causes: he is astigmatic or strangely habituated or whatever. Does his trait play a 'central role in the theory of mind'? It is very hard to know what this demands. He could, certainly, go on living in a fool's paradise in which his inadequacy seldom or never comes to light, and so behave much as someone who gets distances right behaves. But this is unlikely, and more likely there are not only social events (his losing his job) that the quirk rather obviously explains, but more overtly mental events, such as his belief that he has been unjustly sacked, or his depression, or his envy or hatred of others more successful. And even in the unlikely event that his quirk remains idle, for he is seldom or never called upon to judge distances, it is still *potentially* explanatory of all manner of things.

Turning to the Bosnia example, we get the same structure. It is no doubt true of me that my beliefs about Bosnia correlate as well or better with newspaper reports than with actual events on the ground, and we know why that is so. But suppose I now become a member of the elite: those whose reports on events in Bosnia are authoritative for the others, including the newspapers. As we saw discussing Fish and Rorty, this authority goes with a definite responsibility: I have to get on the spot, and use whatever devices I can for ascertaining events. Just as the scientist or lawyer cannot use the coffee shop rather than the laboratory or the library, so the journalist cannot use other newspapers rather than events and their participants. So I am now put in the position of reporting on events in Bosnia, taken there, and made to file eyewitness reports. Suppose I only file reports that correlate with what (other) newspapers are saying, and not with events on the ground. This trait may be explicable, if I only hang out in the bar with the other reporters. Is it of little or no explanatory importance? In favourable circumstances it explains my losing my job, once more. In unfavourable circumstances it might start a war.

In these cases the consequences come about through social mechanisms, but of course, they do not have to. The propensity to get distances wrong could easily affect you without your having misled other people: you misjudge the distance and fail to hit the deer or jump the river or avoid the rain. Your reliance on other newspapers comes to a head when, having said that X is not a warlord, you run into one of his roadblocks. We need to avoid any model where belief is, as it were, purely 'inside the head', so that it may make no difference whether my beliefs reliably indicate the truth. 'Inside the head' a belief is a belief, with the same mental relations whether or not it is true or false. But beliefs are not inside the head. They are states of active engaged agents, and it very much makes a difference to these agents whether they are beliefs in things that are so, or not.

Not only are these things so, but we are always aware that they *might* be so. The distinction between a remark being true and it being only an indication of something else is one that is often in our minds. 'I might have been misled by the newspapers' is not a thought that belongs solely to philosophers, and nor is 'My eyesight might be letting me down'. In other words, the distinction is explanatory of thoughts about our own fallibility or security. It is required to explain a range of attitudes we may hold to ourselves as good judges of the truth. It explains things in the mind.

Of course often I am unaffected by truth or falsity. I believe that O.J. Simpson was guilty, but things are unlikely to go better for me if this belief is true, or worse if it is false. But it is easy to envisage holistic resources to cope with this. It is also easy to imagine *social* resources. That is, things go better if *we* believe that people are guilty if and only if they are, rather than in some skew subset of cases.

It seems to me that Field has nodded. Explanatory importance cannot be the issue, for apart from anything else almost any fact can assume almost any explanatory importance, given the right circumstances, and almost any fact can be imagined to explain very little, again given the right circumstances. The key fact, rather, is that we *do* have the resources to distinguish indication relations from representation. But that is to say no more than that we naturally, and without philosophical theory as aid or hindrance, know the difference between whether someone gets it right that *p* in some range of cases, and whether his saying that *p* correlates at best with other things.

But then, if the difference between resources open to the deflationist and those needed for inflationism are not categorized in Field's terms we are left wondering how they are to be categorized, and Field, as I understand him, offers us no further help. The crucial concession, it seems to me, is that we must adopt a theory with the resources to distinguish between truth-conditions and mere indication relations. Once that is conceded, the inflationist cannot be charged with making this distinction 'more explanatory' than it is. It seems that all sides need to join in suggesting what the distinction comes to, but recognizing, as I have suggested, that reliable indication is likely to be a core ingredient in any identification of truth conditions.

If we turn to Horwich we find a rather different way of resisting the inflationist potential in the notion of a proposition or judgement. Again, however, the key issue concerns explanation.

So consider, as an essential part of any theory of the proposition, the component of simple reference: 'rain' in English refers to rain. Horwich claims that it is permissible here to talk of a relation, between in this case an English word and rain. However:

The question of whether or not this relation of reference is constituted by some underlying causal relation—or by some other non-semantic relation—is an entirely separate issue. And part of the deflationary position, as I see it, is that the reference relation is very unlikely to have any such underlying nature. For it is plausible that the explanatory basis for all facts regarding reference is a theory whose axioms are instances of the disquotational or equivalence schemata. This is because, on the one hand, such axioms appear to suffice to explain all other facts about reference; and on the other hand, it is not likely that these facts will themselves be explained in terms of something more fundamental. (*Meaning*, p. 124)

Once more it is not easy to interpret this. It is not easy to see what is meant by claiming that the explanatory basis for all facts regarding reference is the described theory. For that theory is in essence just a conjunction of axioms of the very kind in question: 'rain' refers

to rain & 'snow' refers to snow & so on. It is, to say the least, stretching things to say that such a conjunction 'explains' the truth of its individual conjuncts.

Horwich's modesty here (in Dummett's sense) sits uneasily with his pursuit of a 'use' theory of meaning. If the *last* thing to say is that 'rain' refers to rain, then there is no need to pursue a story about aspects of the use of the term that explain or even 'constitute' this contingent fact. But in fact Horwich's pursuit of a use theory is surely well-motivated, for the modesty suggested by this passage is a false modesty. The classic way of showing this is by imagining a slightly variant language, let us call it Englick, which is like English except that the word 'rain' (the syntactically identified string of letters) does not refer to rain, but let us say, to hail, while the word 'hail' refers to rain. The 'theory' of Englick is just as simple as the theory of English. So the question arises: what makes it true that *we* speak English, and not Englick? It is no good here citing 'axioms', for one set gives one result and the other gives the other result. It is no good saying that it is 'analytic' or somehow guaranteed by logical principles governing disquotation that we speak English and not Englick, for that is just false. We clearly *could* have spoken Englick (this shows that nothing is gained by defining a language in terms of syntax *and* semantics, making it analytic that 'bears' refers in English to bears, for instance. The contingency just shifts its place, requiring us to ask in virtue of what contingencies it is true to say that we speak English—the so called 'actual language' relation). The obvious gap requires some kind of story to fill it: something to do with causation, proper function, dispositions, indication relations, and the like. And then, as with Field, the suspicion arises that a sufficient investigation of these relations gives us a substantive or robust, non-deflationary account of reference.

Horwich's more official position is not in fact as modest as the above quotation suggests. His general line is not that there is nothing more to be said than that 'rain' refers to rain, but rather that there are *different* things to be said about *different* instances of reference. On this account the vice is *abstraction*, not immodesty. He acknowledges that for each word there is a 'certain explanatorily basic regularity governing its overall deployment' but says that basic use regularities 'need have no common form', in particular, 'they need not relate the words they govern to the members of their extensions' (p. 113). On this account, immodesty is fine, but one should be immodest in different way on different occasions. We have a kind of pluralistic immodesty.

Pluralistic immodesty collapses into total modesty only if we recoil from the vice of abstraction to the opposite extreme of extreme particularism. That is, we not only give up any attempt to say what reference is in general, but give up any attempt to find a commonality underlying the different modest things we say. On this line, there is something to say about 'rain' —that it refers to rain—and 'hail' —that it refers to hail. But we give up any attempt to see these as instancing a common *pattern*. When he compares his overall use theory of meaning to deflationism about truth, it sounds as though this may be what Horwich intends. For a defining characteristic of deflationism about truth is that there is indeed no common pattern discernible in the different instances of the T-schema. As I put it in *Spreading the Word*, 'penguins waddle' is true iff penguins waddle, and 'snow is white' is true iff snow is white, but there is 'nothing much in common' between deciding whether penguins waddle and snow is white. (*Spreading the Word*, p. 230).

However it stands with truth, it is hard to believe in extreme particularism when it comes to reference. Surely there is the possibility of some uniform pattern at least distinguishing families of co-explicable instances of the reference schema? The awful vice of abstraction, as Berkeley would have it, might lead someone to think that the very same kind of thing explains the fact that '2' refers to the number 2 and that 'rain' refers to rain. And this may be a mistake. But there may be no mistake in thinking that the very same kind of thing that explains 'rain' referring to rain also explains 'hail' referring to hail and 'snow' referring to snow. Are patterns really impossible? On the face of it, and in spite of Berkeley, they look to be as innocent as any other kind of generality. We might say something like this: 'once the learner can reliably associate the term '*t*' with the weather condition it is used to indicate, as part of a norm-governed pattern of communication, she is deemed a fully fledged member of the linguistic community, meaning *t* by '*t*'— and that would be a schema equally applicable to rain, snow, and hail. Other refinements would follow on.

In spite of the lapses, I do not read Horwich as really intending to prove or even argue that pattern is impossible. The very idea of a use theory suggests otherwise.

I find it interesting that Horwich runs together two different concerns when he treats these issues. One is the Berkeleian hostility to abstraction, or to a 'general account' of the structure of 'x means F'. The other is hostility to the idea that the basic regularities of use governing words should relate the words they govern to members of their extensions. See, for example. p. 113:

> For the basic use regularities of different words—like different laws of nature—need have no common form; and they need not relate the words they govern to members of their extension.

Now it is obviously possible to separate these claims. As I have said, we may admit the lack of common form without going wholly particularist. We might work in terms of families of words, admitting different kinds of explanation. Almost any theorist would admit this over, say, the difference between the form of explanation of use one might give of logical operators, as opposed to the form one might give of proper names of persons, for example. We might similarly sort one particular category, say that of predicates, into different families: many theorists believe in a different explanation of the way natural kind terms work from that in which other terms work, for instance. But what of relationship to members of the extension?

Here it seems to me Horwich may be right, and certainly for the purpose of this paper I have no quarrel with his claim. But notice how weak the claim is. It is only that the fundamental acceptance properties governing the use of a term *need not* relate the understanding user to the extension. But it clearly *can* do so, for certain terms, or certain families of terms. For example, Horwich's own example (p. 45) of the basic acceptance property for a simple colour term does so:

> The explanatorily fundamental acceptance property underlying our use of 'red' is (roughly) the disposition to apply 'red' to an observed surface when and only when it is clearly red.

If this simple stimulus (redness) response (disposition to acceptance) account is fundamental for some terms, a question arises whether some version may apply to bigger families than Horwich, in his minimalist guise, seems to admit. Indeed, so much seems

implicit in the general treatment of proper names, where a good candidate for the fundamental acceptance property of a sentence predicating F of a would be the disposition to accept it when and only when a is clearly F.

It is, I think, a difficult question how far this betrays the advertised minimalism about reference. Clearly, if we raise the question of *how*, non-miraculously, someone might have this disposition, we enter the territory of causal relations, the ability to recognize features that subjects possess, and mechanisms that enable transmission and indication relations. Equally, if we consider putative counterexamples, such as knowing what 'Sherlock Holmes' means, we would need a theory of understanding in the absence of extensionally certified dispositions of application. All these issues will take us back into the same inflationist territory that threatened Field.

Incidentally, and quite tangentially to my principal concerns in this paper, one thing that becomes visible, given a pluralistic story that includes potentially non-relational accounts of various terms, is that it opens up space for precisely the kind of theory exampled by expressivism. It could be, that is, that there is a family of terms, say moral or ethical terms, whose use requires a different kind of description from that of others, and that these descriptions do not consist in relating understanding users to members of their extensions. The expressivist says that this is indeed so: the fundamental stories about the use of these terms requires concentrating upon their practical function in directing choice and action. Furthermore, this story does not require that the user is in any relationship at all to features of action or properties of character or whatever it is that actually deserve describing in those terms. The user can be wrong, almost without limit, about which kinds of things to value or to require from others.

A distinctive claim of expressivism, however, will be that this kind of account should not be given of *all* predicates. There are those, such as 'red' in the account above, for which the fundamental story is quite different. It has no relationship to anything like choice or motivation, and it does have a clause relating the user to the extension. If 'representation' has its home in these cases, then we have the requisite contrast.
But would we still be minimalists? Consider the atomic sentence 'a is F'. For the minimalist the last word about truth is, in Horwich's version, our disposition to accept this instance of the schema : the proposition that a is F is true if and only if a is F, for ordinary middle-sized, observational a and basic empirical F. The opponent insists on a theory of judgement, and we are now imagining such a thing being provided. Its clauses are going to include something like:

> The basic acceptance property governing 'a….' is that the user is disposed to assent to 'a….' when and only when a is clearly ….
> The basic acceptance property governing '…is F' is that the user is disposed to assent to '…is F' when and only when … clearly is F.

Do these compromise minimalism? The thought that they do must be this: you cannot be a minimalist about truth and an inflationist about the other semantic relations, since we know that these are interdefinable. An atomic sentence 'a is F' is true if the reference of a falls within the extension of F. If the clauses of the use theory inflate these sub-sentential semantic relations, then they also inflate truth.

I think there is a schism here in the minimalist camp. It is at least noteworthy that early deflationists *contrast* minimalism about truth with whatever thick or robust stories might be given about reference. Typically, it was the elusive nature of *facts* that bothered them. *Things* are fine, and so in principle are the relations whereby words *pick out* things. Why shouldn't they be—for after all you can design physical instruments and processes that select or pick out things from other things? So, for instance, when the later Wittgenstein recants on the *Tractatus* conception of sentences as pictures of facts, he explicitly contrasts elusive facts with everyday things and complexes of things (for example, you can move a complex of things, but you cannot move a fact).

But it is not at all clear that the clauses suggested above do compromise deflationism. For they don't give us explicit definitions of semantic relations between sub-sentential parts and things.

Still, there remain grounds for unease. Imagine a toy language, perhaps used by a machine. The machine can recognize certain individuals, a, b, c… in the sense that faced with one of them it comes up with the correct label. We know the physical processes underlying this capacity—suppose it has a gallery of images and a way of checking optical input against them. Furthermore it has 'predicates', and rules of application: it can sort items in the domain into ones that are F and ones that are not. Perhaps, for instance, it operates a colour checking procedure and sorts things by colour. Putting these capacities together, it can issue reports, such as 'a is F', or 'not (b is F)'. There is nothing mysterious in the capacity, since we understand the component recognitional part, and the component selection mechanism.

For this simple device we have a 'theory' of reference and a 'theory' of predication, in the sense that we understand why it recognizes what it does, and why it classifies as it does. The operation of the device is wholly transparent. Suppose now it outputs the sentence 'a is F', and someone asks me what that means. I reply that 'a is F' is true if and only if a is F. Do the things we have already said about the 'fundamental acceptance property' or basic 'use' of this sentence compromise a minimalist understanding of this T sentence?

It seems to me that they do. Or, rather, they remove any *point* from highlighting minimalism about truth. The minimalist may gain the position that there is no last chapter waiting to be written about truth. But that is because rather substantial first chapters needed to be written about representation: the semantics of the components of the sentence.

It seems to me, therefore, that each of Field and Horwich, our most distinguished contemporary minimalists, are occupying unstable positions. I side with Davidson in believing that the tasks that they admit suffice to accomplish the tasks they want to deny; the theory of the proposition cannot be given without a theory of representation, and this in turn will provide the material for subsentential semantic relations. An across-the-board minimalism is not possible. Or at least, if it is possible, that is only by adopting a more substantial 'modesty' than anyone in the contemporary debate embraces. And this in turn leads to me scepticism about the representationalist versus inferentialist or 'use' camps in semantics. Just as we found reason to force Rorty and McDowell into greater conformity than the official rhetoric suggests, so here, when we have found the common ground all sides need to agree upon, the ancient rivalries threaten to fade into the gloom.