Metaphysics Handouts
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# Metaphysics // Fall 2026

## Handout 8

## Truth: Dummett

**THE CHALLENGE.** The following sentences look perfectly meaningful:

(8-1) Jones was brave.

(8-2) A city will never be built on this spot.

(8-3) There is an odd perfect number.

But consider: Jones is dead and never met danger. Nobody will live long enough to check (8-2). Nobody has found a number for (8-3) or a general proof that there is none. Still, each is either true or false, isn't it? Dummett asks what entitles us to that 'or'. His answer is that for sentences like these nothing does, and that seeing why elicits a change in metaphysics, as well as in the picture of meaning we inherited from Frege and the *Tractatus*.

**THE CIRCLE.** Frege made truth-values the references of sentences. That leaves out, Dummett says, that we aim at making true statements, just as a rule-book that has final positions as 'Win' and 'Lose' leaves out that players play to win. An account of truth must give the concept's point. The redundancy theory, on which 'It is true that *P*' has the same sense as *P*, doesn't. And until we know how truth-conditions determine meaning, stating them tells us nothing about meaning. 2 3 4

Now the Tractarian (also Fregean) conception is: to explain a sentence's sense is to lay down the conditions under which it's true. Add the redundancy theory and you have a circle. To learn the sense of *P* from being told when *P* is true, you must already know what it is for *P* to be true, and if that's just asserting *P*, you must already have the sense of *P*. The same circle traps the logic. We assert '*P* or not *P*' with evidence for neither limb and justify it by the truth-table for 'or'. But the table licenses that only if every statement is true or false, and on the redundancy theory that claim just says we're always justified in asserting '*P* or not *P*'. So either the redundancy theory gets supplemented or we give up our preconceptions about truth, among them its central place in the theory of meaning. Dummett takes the second road. TLP 4.063 7 6 7 7

*Question* 1. Does the circle need the assumption that sense is *taught* by stating truth-conditions? A theory might hold that to understand *P* is to know its truth-condition without anyone ever stating it.

**REALISM.** We dropped the correspondence theory, but it expressed something the redundancy law leaves out: a statement is true only if something in the world makes it true. Holding on to that, we remain realists 'au fond'. Realism here is the belief that for any statement there must be something in virtue of which either it or its negation is true. 14 14

Note the 'either': this is bivalence. Only this belief, Dummett says, justifies giving truth-conditions as the general form of an explanation of meaning. The paper exploits that link: remove bivalence for a class of statements, and truth-conditional meaning goes with it for that class. 14

*Remark* 2. The *Tractatus* is realist in exactly this sense: truth is the agreement of a proposition's sense with reality. An elementary proposition is true if its state of affairs exists and false if it doesn't. TLP 2.222 TLP 4.25

*Question* 3. Someone might hold that every truth has something that makes it true without holding that every statement or its negation has. Which is realism, and does an argument against the second affect the first?

**JONES.** Suppose that *A* imagines Jones dead, having never encountered danger. *B* says (8-1) can still be true: it's true if Jones would have acted bravely had he met danger. *A* agrees that this is what (8-1) comes to, but adds that however many facts we knew of the kind that normally ground such counterfactuals, we might still have a ground for neither. *B* can't grant that and still insist that (8-1) or its negation is true: he'd be holding that a statement may be true though nothing whatever would count as evidence for it, which Dummett calls absurd. 15 15

So *B* needs a fact that settles (8-1). Either a fact of the usual kind must exist, which just denies *A*'s possibility, or there's a fact of an extraordinary kind, 'perhaps known only to God': a 'spiritual mechanism', Jones's character, in place before and apart from any behaviour that would reveal it. Now the premise that does the work, and it's about meaning, not about what we can find out. If (8-1) is true, it's true in virtue of the sort of fact we were taught to treat as justifying its assertion. A fact of a wholly different sort, of which we can have no direct knowledge, can't make it true, since then (8-1) wouldn't have the meaning we gave it. Side with *A* and you make a small retreat from realism. You give up a realist view of character. 15 15 16

*Question* 4. Is *B*'s hidden fact absurd, or just unverifiable? We learned (8-1) from behaviour. Why should what we learned it *from* limit what it's *about*?

**THE TEST.** Generalise *A*'s ground. Statements of a given kind admit a realist account of truth when, for any such statement *P*, it must be that knowing sufficiently many facts of the sort we normally treat as justifying *P* would put us in a position to assert *P* or to assert its negation. 'Sufficiently many' carries weight. 16

*Example* 5. Even with an oracle that answers every question of the form 'Will there be a city here in 1990?', 'In 2100?', you may never be able to declare (8-2) true or false. Wouldn't knowing all its answers at once settle it? Dummett asks what knowing infinitely many facts could mean. A direct 'No' to 'Will a city ever be built here?' is *B*'s hidden mechanism again. A general argument, say because 'here' is the North Pole, isn't guaranteed to exist. And answering each dated question leaves you where the oracle left you. 16

*Definition* 6. We're entitled to say that *P* must be true or false only when *P* is 'effectively decidable': when we could in a finite time bring ourselves into a position in which we were justified in asserting *P* or in denying it. 16-17

Bivalence is attributed statement by statement. It isn't a gift of logic. Nor is the restriction trivial: statements like (8-1) are concealed conditionals, statements like (8-2) contain an unlimited generality. 17

*Remark* 7. The *Tractatus* builds bivalence into what a proposition is, i.e. it must restrict reality to two alternatives, yes or no. Only logical propositions are formally decidable, while the truth of any other proposition can't be read off that proposition. TLP 4.023
Dummett puts this in reverse: finite decidability (by us) becomes the condition of bivalence for each statement. TLP 6.113

*Question* 8. Decidable by whom, in whose finite time, and with what instruments?

**Meaning as assertibility.** Dummett says he has transferred to ordinary statements what the intuitionists say about mathematical ones. What would make (8-3) true is some particular number's being odd and perfect. So asserting (8-3) is 17
claiming to be able to assert one of its instances, and we're justified only if we have a method for finding one. Insist that 17
(8-3) is true or else every perfect number is even, with no procedure that would settle which in a finite time, and you give the universal statement a meaning beyond the one our training in universal statements provides. In general, we learn the 17
logical constants by being trained to assert the statements containing them under certain conditions: '*P* and *Q*' when we can assert both, '*P* or *Q*' when we can assert one, a generalisation when we have a general method for its instances. So a statement's sense is given by when it may be asserted, in terms of when its constituents may be, not by its truth-value in terms of theirs. 18

What's the basic reason for this contention? Because it's how we in fact learn to use these statements, and also because beyond the decidable, truth and falsity can't be explained well enough to found an account of meaning. One consequence: 18
outside the decidable, excluded middle stops being a logical law, not because there's a third truth-value but because meaning, and so validity, is no longer explained in terms of truth-values at all. The anti-realist doesn't say that (8-1) is 18
neither true nor false. He declines to say that it must be one or the other. 'True' and 'false' stay, with the redundancy law as their whole explanation. Dummett calls the result dethroning truth and falsity from the centre of the theory of meaning, and ties it to the later Wittgenstein's doctrine that meaning is use. 19

*Remark* 9. Carnap's 'The elimination of metaphysics' also ties meaning to what we can verify. But for Carnap an unverifiable sentence says nothing, while Dummett's (8-2) has its meaning, its assertibility conditions, and loses only a 'guaranteed' truth-value.

*Question* 10. A mathematical statement is settled by proof, an empirical one by evidence that comes in degrees and can be overturned. Does the transfer survive that? And what separates declining to assert that (8-1) is true or false from asserting that it's neither?

**Idealism?** Intuitionists speak of mathematical anti-realists. Mathematics, according to them, is constructed, it isn't there waiting to be discovered. It can look as if their case against truth-conditional meaning rests on that, and so can't be 18
generalised to statements for which there is an independent reality. But Dummett's exposition rested only on considerations about meaning. Nor need the anti-realist swing to the picture of our creating mathematics as we go, on which, with 18
Wittgenstein's *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, no step we take is forced on us (according to Dummett's controversial 'infer as you wish' reading of RFM). A third picture is available: a reality not already in existence but coming into being as we probe, where what our investigations bring into existence isn't of our own making. Right or 18
wrong for mathematics, it transfers to other regions of reality, so we can abandon realism without falling into subjective idealism. 19

**1972 amendments.** In the 1972 postscript Dummett distinguishes two grounds for rejecting excluded middle. The 19, 23
'superficial' ground is that in recognisable circumstances a statement is neither true nor false. Most of the article, on empty names, conditionals, bets and commands, argues that such talk bears only on how the sentence behaves inside compounds. The 'deep' ground is anti-realism proper: we agree, for every recognisable circumstance, whether it settles 23
the statement as true or as false, and none is held to leave it neither, but no effective method guarantees that we reach a circumstance of either kind. 23

There are also two corrections. First, the principle that a statement is true only if something makes it true isn't realist, after all. Both parties to the Jones dispute accept it: the anti-realist infers that (8-1) needn't be true or false, the realist that what makes it true or false can't be identified with *our* ways of recognising it. So the two sides differ over understanding: 23
for the realist it's grasp of truth-conditions that determinately obtain or fail whether or not we can tell, for the anti-realist it's knowing which recognisable circumstances settle the statement. That realist conception is the truth-conditional one 23
Dummett already found in the *Tractatus* in 1959, at 4.063. (Also compare 4.024: to understand a proposition is to know what is the case if it's true, and you can know that without knowing whether it's true.)

Second, calling *B*'s position absurd was 'very bold', and a realist should reject that claim. What both can accept is 23
weaker: a statement can be true only if it's in principle capable of being known to be true. The anti-realist reads 'capable 23-24
of being known' as by us. The realist reads it as by a hypothetical being whose powers may exceed ours, conceived by analogy with our own, and the anti-realist calls that conception 'an illusion of meaning'. 24

Dummett now grants that the realist has more to say for himself than the article allowed, and he calls the dispute far from resolved: it's unclear whether the realist's defence can be made convincing, and just as unclear whether anti-realism can be made coherent. Still, this issue is one of the most 'fundamental' problems of philosophy. 24

*Question* 11. Can we give a sentence a sense by imagining capacities we lack? We seem to understand what it would be for a being to survey every year to come and answer (8-2) outright. Is this genuine understanding, or the illusion the anti-realist diagnoses?