Davidson's antirealism?

Antirrealismo de Davidson?

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Abstract

Frederic Stoutland (1982a, 1982b) has argued that a Davidsonian theory of meaning is incompatible with a realist view of truth, on which the truth-conditions of sentences consist of mind-independent states of affairs or concatenations of extra-linguistic objects. In this paper we show that Stoutland's argument is a failure.

Keywords: Truth. Meaning. Realism. Davidson.

Resumo

Frederic Stoutland (1982a, 1982b) argumentou que uma teoria davidsoniana de significado é incompatível com uma visão realista da verdade, em que as condições de verdade de sentenças consistem em estados de coisas independentes da mente ou concatenações de objetos extralinguísticos. Neste artigo vamos mostrar que o argumento de Stoutland é um fracasso.

Palavras-chave: *Verdade. Significado. Realismo. Davidson.*

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To what extent is Donald Davidson's philosophy of language properly describable as realistic? In this paper, we shall approach this question by examining an answer that has been given to it by Frederic Stoutland. According to Stoutland (1982a, 1982b), Davidson's position in the theory of meaning is *inconsistent* with realism[1]. We shall argue that the central argument he gives for the inconsistency between Davidson's theory of meaning and realism fails.

1. According to Michael Dummett, realism about a region of thought and talk D can be equated with the view that (i) a speaker's grasp of the meaning of a declarative sentence S in D consists in knowledge of its truth-condition and (ii) that truth-condition is potentially recognition-transcendent[2]. A truth-condition is potentially recognition-transcendent if it is capable of obtaining (or failing to obtain) even though we have no guaranteed way (even in principle) of recognising that it does (or doesn't). Thus, a realist about arithmetic would hold that our understanding of Goldbach's Conjecture — "Every even number is the sum of two primes" — consists in knowledge of its truth-condition, even though we have no guaranteed way (even in principle) of generating a proof or a counterexample. And a realist about the past would hold that our understanding of the sentence "Julius Caesar stepped into the Rubicon with his left foot first" consists in knowledge of its truth-condition, even though we have no guaranteed way (even in principle) of locating evidence that he did or evidence that he didn't.

Stoutland rejects Dummett's idea that realism can be formulated in this way for reasons that we find congenial. He argues that an anti-realist in metaphysics may well be able to accept the thesis in the philosophy of language that Dummett equates with realism:

> Take, for example, a philosopher who argues that a sentence is true or false in virtue of other sentences held true in a linguistic community, surely an anti-realist position. He may, nevertheless, hold that a sentence

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[1]   Stoutland is mainly concerned with the view developed in the classic papers from the late 60s and early 70s collected in Davidson (2001). A fuller investigation of the issues would of course need to encompass Davidson's subsequent papers on these matters, but we do not attempt this here.

[2]   See for example the papers collected in Dummett (1978, 1993).

is true or *is* false, even if we have no way of recognizing which. We may not know, for example, whether or how that sentence is related to other sentences held true (i.e., to our evidence for it), even though it is related in a determinate way. Or the anti-realist might argue that we need to consider not only sentences held true *now* but sentences that *will* be held true, in virtue of which a sentence we now hold true *is* true or *is* false, even though we have no way of knowing which (STOUTLAND, 1982a, p. 18).

In order to get realism, Stoutland argues, we need to add a distinctively ontological or metaphysical component:

> The realist conception of truth […] gives an account both of what it *is* for a sentence to be true and that *in virtue of which* a sentence is true. And it gives an account of both by saying that the truth-conditions of sentences consist of extra-linguistic objects or concatenations of objects. A sentence is true if and only if the extra-linguistic objects which are its truth-conditions exist (or obtain): it is true or false in virtue of those extra-linguistic objects (STOUTLAND, 1982a, p. 18-19).

Thus, although he doesn't put it in quite these terms, Stoutland's view is that a realist must hold that sentences are true (when they are true) in virtue of mind-independent facts or states of affairs[3].

So far, we are in complete agreement with Stoutland's criticism of the Dummettian conception of the debate between realism and anti-realism and of the need to include a specifically ontological or metaphysical component in the characterisation of realism (see e.g. MILLER 2003, 2006, 2014 and footnote 5 below). However, Stoutland now goes on to argue that Davidson's position in the theory of meaning is *inconsistent* with realism, so-construed. Stoutland's argument goes as follows. Suppose that, as Davidson claims, the meaning of a sentence consists in its truth-conditions. So we have:

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[3] For Stoutland (1982a, p. 13), the debate between realism and antirealism is "a metaphysical dispute about the relation of truth, as a property of language (or thought), to reality". In criticizing Dummett, then, Stoutland is arguing that this metaphysical dispute cannot be framed within the philosophy of language, purely in terms of speakers' grasp of potentially recognition-transcendent truth-conditions.

a) The meaning of a sentence consists in its truth-conditions.

Suppose also that you are a realist about a region of discourse D and let S be a sentence of D. Then, since according to realism the truth-conditions of a sentence are constituted by mind-independent states of affairs ("concatenations of objects") we have:

b) The truth-conditions of S are constituted by a sequence of ex-tra-linguistic objects.

Now (as we'll explain below) on the kind of Tarskian theory of truth that Davidson takes as his model for a theory of meaning for a natural language, a (closed) sentence is true if and only if it is satisfied by *all* sequences of extra-linguistic objects. So:

c) A (closed) sentence of D is true if and only if it is satisfied by all sequences of extra-linguistic objects.

It now follows (according to Stoutland) that:

d) All sentences in D have the same truth-conditions.

However:

e) It is not the case that all sentences of D have the same truth-conditions.

For example, if D is discourse about the past, the truth-condi-tions of the sentence "Julius Caesar stepped into the Rubicon with his left foot first" are different from those of "Joseph Conrad was born in Poland" (or for that matter, from those of "Julius Caesar stepped into the Rubicon with his right foot first" or "Julius Caesar never crossed the Rubicon"). So we now have a contradiction:

(f) (d) and not-(d).

From whence we can conclude that we must give up either (a) or (b): in other words that it is impossible to combine a Davidsonian view in the theory of meaning with a realistic view of the relevant subject matter.[4] As Stoutland (1982a, p. 16) puts it himself "Davidson's Tarski-style theory is inconsistent with realist accounts of meaning and truth". And again, "A realist account is not available to Davidson: his theory of meaning does not allow that sentences are true in virtue of extra-linguistic objects"(STOUTLAND, 1982b, p. 37).

Clearly, the key move in Stoutland's argument is the inference from (a), (b) and (c) to (d), and it is this move that we shall challenge. Stoutland argues as follows for the move:

> [G]iven Tarski's definition of truth in terms of satisfaction, the truth-conditions for a sentence (insofar as we are thinking of them as *extra-linguistic*) are simply sequences of objects, with true sentences being satisfied by *all* sequences and false sentences by *none*. However, if true sentences are satisfied by *all* sequences, and if sequences *are* the *extra linguistic* truth-conditions of sentences, then the conditions under which any sentence is true or false are the same as the conditions under which every sentence is true or false. We can therefore, no longer appeal to T-sentences to *explain*, in terms of extra-linguistic reality alone, why a particular sentence is true or false, for *every* sentence has the same extra-linguistic truth-conditions (STOUTLAND, 1982a, p. 42).

This argument, however, is a very poor one. We can see this via a brief reminder of how the truth-conditions of a sentence are generated by a Tarski-style theory of truth doing duty, in Davidsonian fashion, as a theory of meaning.

2. Suppose we have a simple language L consisting of 5 proper names, 5 predicates, the existential quantifier, brackets and variables. Suppose we have a Davidsonian theory of meaning which has the following axioms:

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[4] We've set Stoutland's argument up as a *reductio* of the combination of (a) and (b). It would also be possible to take it to go directly from step (d) to: *(e*) the obtaining of a sentence's truth-condition cannot be cited in explanation of its truth (where true).* Our objection below to the derivation of (d) from (a), (b) and (c) would block this construal of Stoutland's argument too, so nothing hangs on this.

"a" refers to Marnie;

"b" refers to Harvey;

"c" refers to David;

"d" refers to Ashleigh;

"e" refers to Kirsty;

$\forall$x [x satisfies "F" $\leftrightarrow$ x is male];

$\forall$x [x satisfies "G" $\leftrightarrow$ x is Scottish];

$\forall$x [x satisfies "H" $\leftrightarrow$ x is blonde];

$\forall$x [x satisfies "I" $\leftrightarrow$ x is a Rangers supporter];

$\forall$x [x satisfies "J" $\leftrightarrow$ x is female];

$\forall$X: X satisfies ^$\Phi\alpha$^ $\leftrightarrow$ the referent of α satisfies Φ;

$\forall$X: X satisfies ^Φx_i^ $\leftrightarrow$ Xi satisfies Φ;

$\forall$X, A: X satisfies "$(\exists x_i)$A" if and only if there is a sequence Y, differing from X in at most the ith place, such that Y satisfies "A".

As usual, L is the *object-language* and the axioms of the theory belong to the *meta-language*. The Greek characters are meta-linguistic variables ranging over expressions in the object-language. "^$\Phi\alpha$^" is read as "the result of concatenating Φ and α in that order".

With this much on board, we can now give a definition of what it is for a closed sentence of L to be true-in-L:

Definition: A closed sentence is true-in-L if and only if it is satisfied by all sequences.

We can use the axioms and the definition to generate truth-conditions for sentences of L. For example, take the sentence "Fa":

"Fa" is true-in-L if and only if is it is satisfied by all sequences (from *Definition*).

"Fa" is satisfied by all sequences if and only if it is satisfied by an arbitrary sequence X.

An arbitrary sequence X satisfies "Fa" if and only if the referent of "a" satisfies "F" (from axiom (xi)).

The referent of "a" satisfies "F" if and only if Marnie satisfies "F" (from (i)).

Marnie satisfies "F" if and only if Marnie is male (from (vi)).

Thus

(A) "Fa" is true-in-L if and only if Marnie is male.

We can derive the truth-condition of "$\exists x[Fx_1]$" by utilising the fact that a closed sentence is satisfied by all sequences if and only if it is satisfied by at least one sentence (see MILLER, 2007, p. 287 for the details):

"$\exists x[Fx_1]$" is true-in-L if and only if it is satisfied by all sequences (from *Definition*).

"$\exists x[Fx_1]$" is satisfied by all sequences if and only if it is satisfied by at least one sequence.

"$\exists x[Fx_1]$" is satisfied by a sequence X if and only if there is a sequence Y, differing from X in at most the 1st place, such that Y satisfies " Fx_1".

For a given sequence X, there is a sequence Y, differing from X in at most the 1st place, such that Y satisfies " Fx_1", if and only if someone is male (if there is someone suitable — David say — we can replace the 1st member of X with him; if there is no-one suitable, there will be no suitable Y_1 and hence no suitable sequence Y).

Thus

(B) "$\exists x[Fx_1]$" is true-in-L if and only if someone is male.

We can now see why Stoutland's move from (a), (b) and (c) to (d) in the argument outlined in the previous section is a non-sequitur. On the Tarski-Davidson account the truth-conditions of the sentences of L are given by the theorems that are generated as the output of the theory, as exemplified by (A) and (B) above: the truth-conditions of "Fa" and "$\exists x[Fx_1]$" are given by the right-hand sides of (A) and (B) respectively. *These are different, irrespective of whether we take the proper names of L to denote extra-linguistic objects: the T-theoretic output of the Davidsonian theory of meaning for L would be the same regardless of whether the objects are extra-linguistic or some kind of linguistic or mental construction.* The fact that the theory generates (A) and (B) via *Definition* does *not* imply that all of the sentences of L have the same truth-condition: to infer this is to mistake a part of the theoretic machinery used in generating the T-theorems for the theorems themselves. In other words, it is to confuse the role of a general clause utilised in generating T-theorems with the T-theorems themselves. Or in other words yet again, it is to confuse the ordered sequences that oil the wheels of the theory with the states of affairs that appear on the right-hand sides of the T-theoretic output. Indeed, we can take Davidson himself to be making a similar point when he writes:

> Since different assignments of entities to variables satisfy different open sentences and since closed sentences are constructed from open, truth is reached, in the semantic approach, by different routes for different sentences. All true sentences end up in the same place, but there are different stories about how they got there; a semantic theory of truth tells the story for a particular sentence by running through the steps of the recursive account of satisfaction appropriate to the sentence (Davidson, 2001 [1969], p. 48-49).

In the case of a true sentence, although it is satisfied by all sequences of objects, its truth-condition is different from that of other true sentences, because the "route" via satisfaction by all sequences

takes us to a different truth-condition[5]. So, when the sentence (as in the case of (B)) is true, there is nothing preventing us from citing the fact *that someone is male* in explanation of its truth or as that in virtue of whose obtaining it is true.

3. Stoutland at one point suggests another argument for the claim that Davidson's theory of meaning is inconsistent with realism. Suppose that Davidson accepted the realist claim that

> the meaning of sentences is the extra-linguistic truth-conditions in vir-tue of which they are true or false.
> […]
> From this it follows that we can interpret a sentence in a language only if the interpreting language (the meta-language) has a sentence we can use to state the extra-linguistic truth-conditions of the sentence to be interpreted. Given [realism], […] a society of creatures radically foreign to us […] may speak a language which is completely uninterpretable because we are unable to state its extra-linguistic truth-conditions. Such a language would be unintelligible to us, and though we could not guess at the beliefs its speakers held (because we would have no way to formulate them), they will be true if their truth-conditions obtain (STOUTLAND, 1982b, p. 33).

According to Stoutland, then, realism is committed to the possi-bility of sentences which are true but untranslatable, a possibilty which Davidson rejects (most famously in Davidson 2001 [1974]). So we can-not plausibly construe Davidson's position as realist.

In Stoutland's view, instead of following the realist and constru-ing meaning in terms of extra-linguistic truth-conditions, Davidson sees the meaning of a sentence as determined by its place in the struc-ture of a language, where:

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[5] Strangely, Stoutland (1982b, p. 43) takes this passage to confirm his interpretation of Davidson as an antirealist! Stoutland (1982a, p. 43) quotes this passage and imagines a defender of realism using it to reply to his argument by arguing that "even if different (closed) sentences do not have different extra-linguistic truth-conditions, different predicates (open sentences) have different extra-linguistic satisfaction-conditions, which justify our application of a predicate, i.e., explain why it is satisfied by a class of objects". Since our reply to Stoutland does not concede that closed sentences do not have different truth-conditions, these remarks fail to undermine our critique of Stoutland's argument.

"Structure" means here the logical form analyzed by a truth-theory, which shows the relations both of the truth-conditions of simple sentences to the truth-conditions of complex ones and of the satisfaction--conditions of words to the truth-conditions of sentences generally (STOUTLAND, 1982b, p. 34).

Given this, Stoutland argues, "[a] sentence is necessarily interpretable and hence translatable":

It is necessarily interpretable because […] to interpret it is to find a sentence which has the same place in the structure of our language that the sentence to be interpreted has in the structure of its language (STOUTLAND, 1982b, p. 34).

Stoutland goes on to argue that there is no difficuly in principle in finding a particular sentence in our language that fits into the structure:

We know that our language has all the structure a language requires: it has a finite supply of components (words) to generate a (potentially) infinite number of sentences, and it has the necessary truth-relations among sentences. So there is no problem about the structure. The trick will be to find the particular sentence in our language which fits into the structure, but that presents no difficulty in principle (assuming the cogency of the proposal [to interpret the speakers by applying the principle of charity]) (STOUTLAND, 1982b, p. 34-5).

Thus, we have a guarantee that sentences are interpretible and hence translatable[6].

In reply, we accept that if the meaning of a sentence is determined by its place in the truth-structure of a language, then (given Davidson's views on the principle of charity), it will not be possible for there to be true but untranslatable sentences. However, given the result of the previous section, there is no reason to think that we cannot *combine* the idea that the meaning of a sentence is determined by its place in the truth-structure of an interpretable language with the

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6   For an account of the workings of the principle of charity, see Miller (2007, p. 292-300).

view that its truth-condition is a mind-independent state of affairs or concatenation of extra-linguistic objects and that (where true) the obtaining of the sentence's truth-condition can be cited in explanation of its truth. The only thing preventing that combination of views was Stoutland's argument that a realist view of truth-conditions married with a Davidsonian theory of meaning leads to the absurd conclusion that all sentences of a language have the same truth-condition. Given that that argument was despatched in the previous section, although there may well be forms of realism that imply the possibility of true but untranslatable sentences, that particular style of realism is not obligatory to those of a realistic bent: for all that Stoutland has shown, it is perfectly possible to combine a Davidsonian approach to meaning with a realistic view of truth-conditions, such that there is no commitment to the possibility of true but untranslatable sentences.

4. In conclusion, then, we can say that Stoutland's argument to the effect that a Davidsonian approach to meaning is inconsistent with realism is a failure. For all that has been shown, a Davidsonian account of meaning is perfectly consistent with realistic view that takes the truth-conditions of sentences to be mind-independent states of affairs[7].

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[7] Stoutland's main stalking horse in the papers we have discessed is Mark Platts. According to Platts (1979, 1980), Davidson's position in the theory of meaning is *intrinsically realistic*, in that it *implies* a realist view. While we disagree with Stoutland's claim that Davidson's position is antirealist, we do not disagree with his criticisms of Platts. Platts suggests that Davidson's view is realist because "it assumes that we can know what it is for a sentence to be true or false, that we can know the truth-conditions of a particular sentence, even if it is beyond our capacities to recognise whether those truth-conditions obtain or not" (PLATTS, 1979, p. 5-6, 1980, p. 1). As argued in Miller (2003, 200-201), this position is consistent even with a form of antirealism as extreme as Berkeley's idealism about the external world: if material objects are ideas in the mind of God, and if we have no guaranteed access to the ideas in God's mind, then our grasp of sentences about the external world may well involve grasp of potentially recognition-transcendent truth-conditions. So our position is that a Davidsonian approach to meaning is neither intrinsically realist nor intrinsically antirealist. For further (congenial) discussion, see Wright (1993).

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