

Manifestation and Compositionality

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RESUMEN

El desafío de manifestación contra el realismo plantea la cuestión sobre cómo es que el realista puede explicar la comprensión de las condiciones de verdad de proposiciones para las que cualquier evidencia trascendería nuestras capacidades epistémicas. El realista parece estar comprometido a la aceptación de estas proposiciones inverificables. Aquí se sostiene que el requerimiento de manifestación debe ser interpretado en coherencia con el principio de composicionalidad del significado. Cuando tanto el principio de manifestación como el principio de composicionalidad son considerados, entonces gran parte de la fuerza del argumento contra las concepciones realistas del significado se pierde. Se consideran los casos particulares de proposiciones sobre eventos pasados, otras mentes, regiones inaccesibles del espacio-tiempo y sobre dominios no-recorribles mediante un procedimiento finito. Finalmente se considera y contesta una línea de argumentación anti-realista según la cual en cada caso debería hacerse una distinción entre los componentes sub-sentenciales cuya contribución se encuentra bajo el alcance de nuestras capacidades epistémicas y los componentes sub-sentenciales cuya contribución putativa es trascendente a la evidencia que se pueda tener en favor (o en contra) de ellos. El alegato anti-realista será rechazado.

ABSTRACT

The manifestation challenge against realism raises the question of how the realist can explain the understanding of the truth-conditions of evidence-transcendent propositions, to which he seems to be committed. Here it is contended that the manifestation requirement should be construed in tandem with the principle of compositionality of meaning. When both the manifestation and the compositionality principles are taken into account then much of the force of the argument against realist conceptions of meaning is lost. The particular cases of propositions about the past, other minds, inaccessible regions of space-time and about unsurveyable domains are considered. Finally, a line of argument on the part of the anti-realist is considered and addressed to the effect that a distinction should be made in every case between the sub-sentential components whose contribution is under the reach of our epistemic capabilities and the sub-sentential components whose putative contribution is evidence-transcendent. The anti-realist claim will be rejected.

This work is concerned with one aspect of Dummett's famous manifestation challenge for realism. A realist position can be understood here as the doctrine that the truth conditions of propositions or sentences¹ obtain (or fail

to obtain) quite independently of our awareness of that fact, or even, quite independently of our cognitive capacities for coming to know that they obtain or fail to obtain. A realist semantics for a certain domain of discourse, in some way, discloses the entities, objects, properties, events and states of affairs about which such discourse talks. If those states of affairs are ontologically robust, i.e. if those states of affairs obtain objectively and independently of human opinion — or so we believe — then the semantics of the sentences talking about those states of affairs should reflect that fact. Within a realist semantics the propositions of the domain in question determinately and objectively obtain or not. It is well-known how Dummett sees here the ground for some classical logic laws like the law of excluded middle or the semantic principle of bivalence, at least when the domain of propositions considered is not effectively decidable. Consider the case of a proposition with a determinate truth-value although that truth value is, in fact, unknowable for us. It seems that a realist semantics where truth conditions are independent of our cognitive capabilities has to admit the possibility of such unknowable proposition with a determinate truth value. The manifestation challenge questions the intelligibility of this admission and, then, questions the intelligibility of a realist semantics in general.

The general idea is the following.² The meaning of a proposition is something that surely each competent speaker of the language in question should grasp. The understanding of the meaning of a proposition (or a sentence, if you prefer) has to be manifested in the verbal explanations of that meaning displayed by the speaker, if questioned about it, or in the correct uses that the speaker makes of the proposition in different circumstances. Verbal explanations clarify the meaning of a proposition making reference to other propositions whose meaning is taken as already understood. It is obvious that these verbal explanations should stop somewhere. So finally speakers should manifest their linguistic competence in their linguistic uses. Now, a linguistic usage can only be deemed “correct” if there are recognizable circumstances where the proposition in question is known to obtain — or known not to. Suppose again the hypothesis of an unverifiable proposition. If that proposition really has a meaning constituted by certain truth conditions entertained by the speakers who, in fact, do grasp its meaning, then how can those speakers manifest the understanding they putatively have of the truth conditions constituting its meaning? There are no recognizable circumstances where the uses of the proposition could be correct or incorrect, so there is no possibility that they could manifest their understanding of its meaning. How then, can one say that the speaker really understands the meaning of such a proposition?

There are many things to say about this train of thought, not the least of which is whether meaning should always be considered as supervenient on linguistic uses or whether a determinate meaning can be gathered as superven-

ient on linguistic uses or even dispositions of “correct use” for a proposition. The well-known paradoxes proposed by Kripke (interpreting Wittgenstein) seem to suggest that they cannot.³ However all these questions will be left aside here. This paper is concerned with a more specific issue considering the manifestation challenge, as has been usually construed by philosophers with anti-realist inclinations, in relation with the principle of compositionality. It is generally agreed that the capacity of a speaker of understanding potentially infinite sentences that can be formed with the terms of a language and with its syntactic formation rules, can only be explained in terms of a finite repertoire of items known by the speaker. It is unfeasible to hypothesise an infinite capacity on the part of speakers to grasp expressions for they are simply finite human beings. It is supposed that speakers are capable of understanding the meaning of potentially infinite different sentences framed within a language because they are in command of a finite — or recursive — set of “axioms” constituting the truth theory for the language in question. These axioms deliver the truth conditions of each of the infinite possible sentences as theorems. The crucial point in question in this work is whether the same idea by which understanding of infinite sentences on the part of finite creatures — like us — could also be used to explain how we can understand the truth conditions of propositions that appear to transcend the evidence we may gather to support them.

To make sufficiently clear the central argument of this work, it will be required a certain amount of prior conceptual clarification of the crucial concepts involved here of manifestation and compositionality, and of the corresponding principles by which meaning is supervenient upon use and by which the meaning of a proposition is constituted by the systematic contributions of its semantic parts. However, it may be convenient to explain before why the defenders of the manifestation argument and, specifically, the defenders of anti-realism motivated by the manifestation argument are inclined to think that considerations arising out of the principle of compositionality are of no avail to the realist who wishes to address the challenge. Here is the explanation given by Neil Tennant of how the anti-realist may answer a criticism which appeals to the compositionality of meaning:

We shall be able to identify at least one constituent responsible for the undecidability of S . Let us suppose it is universal quantification over numbers. The universal quantification even of a decidable numerical predicate can be *pro tempore* undecidable; the classical meaning of the universal quantifier accordingly contributes a possibly recognition-transcendent ingredient to the meaning of any arithmetical sentence in which it occurs. Now such recognitional capacities as *can* be exercised in evidence of semantic understanding are, in the arithmetical case, always concerned with the status of texts as *proofs*. But, given the well-known incompleteness phenomena (which, it is worth noting, can be established intuitionistically), the semantic understanding whose manifestation is

thus limited cannot support attributions to arithmetical statements of such meanings as can be relied upon in general to render them determinate in truth value [Tennant (1987), p. 112].⁴

The realist might suggest here that a certain statement *S* has determinate truth value although it transcends what we can recognise in the circumstances. Our understanding of the meaning of statement *S* comes, like in any other case, from our knowledge of the terms occurring in *S* and their mode of connection. The fact that *S* is undecidable should be a result — somehow — of the contribution made by their terms and their mode of connection. Tennant contends that the capacities of recognition involved with the understanding of the terms connected in *S* do not guarantee that there is a determinate truth value for *S*. For example, if *S* were an arithmetical statement, the incompleteness results would prevent the idea that there must be a proof either of *S* or of $\neg S$. In other words, the ability to recognise the obtaining of the object (or property) to which a sub-sentential component makes reference is not sufficient to guarantee determinate bivalence for the propositions where those sub-sentential components occur. As far as the realist wants to defend the bivalence of the propositions in the domain in question — whatever this domain may be — then, the considerations coming from compositionality are insufficient to address the challenge posed by the manifestation argument.

But, are they? It is obvious that there is some misunderstanding here. The realist is just trying to contend that an undecidable proposition can be understood as possessing determinate truth value and that this understanding comes from the sub-sentential components connected in the proposition in question and their manner of connection. The realist is *not* contending that there should appear a way of determining the truth value in question from the meaning of the sub-sentential components appearing therein and their mode of combination, i.e. the realist is not contending that the sub-sentential components of the sentence can deliver a decision procedure by which we can come to a verdict about whether the sentence in question is true or false. Of course, understanding should be connected to the knowledge of how to verify or refute the sentence in question if, *petendo principio*, one were to suppose that understanding of meaning only happens as the anti-realist says that it happens, but this is surely something that cannot be taken for granted in an argument designed to argue in favour of semantic anti-realism.

Maybe, then, there are other reasons whereby the considerations coming from the principle of compositionality can be neutralised, but it seems clear that this sort of argument put forth by Tennant cannot neutralise them. It will be better, now, to proceed to clarify the key concepts and principles involved here, and then, consider in detail some crucial cases where the hypothesis of this work can be put into test, i.e. statements about the past, statements about other minds, statements about inaccessible regions of space-

time and statements about unsurveyable domains (like the transfinite in mathematics).

I. THE PRINCIPLE OF MANIFESTATION

As has been said, there are here two crucial principles at work, both independently plausible. Consider first the principle of manifestation. In rough form, what is stated by the principle is that one can only attribute to a speaker understanding of the meaning of a proposition p if that speaker displays in the relevant circumstances the required linguistic behaviour by which he could be deemed to have correct dispositions to use p . Understanding of meaning should be supervenient on uses. Let, then, the principle of manifestation be:

$$(1) \forall p \forall S ((p \text{ is understood by } S) \leftrightarrow (S \text{ manifests dispositions of correct use of } p)).$$

Here, in (1), “ p ” is ranging over sentences, and “ S ” is ranging over speakers. The idea is that a condition both sufficient and necessary for S to have understanding of a sentence p is that S has manifested dispositions of correct use of p . In other words, that in which understanding of the proposition p consists is having the said correct dispositions of use. Some comments are in order here.

First, why does the notion of “understanding” appear in (1)? It is a common contention that the meaning of a certain sentence s is that which is known by a speaker about what makes such sentence true or false. And that which is known about the truth conditions of sentence s is the understanding that S has of the meaning of s . It is supposed that the very least that is required for a speaker of a language to make successful speech acts in that language is to grasp the meaning of the expressions of the language he is using. In principle, it should be taken for granted that any speaker knows the meaning of the expressions he is using for communicating. Although normally a speaker cannot give precise and explicit formulations of that which he understands when he utters a sentence, it is supposed that a sufficiently conscious reflection on the part of such speaker would make that content explicit. The meaning of a sentence s is, then, what a speaker understands could be the case if s were true in the relevant circumstances. Of course a speaker may not know whether a certain sentence s is true or not, but when one attributes to him grasp of the meaning of sentence s the very least that one is attributing to him is understanding of the truth conditions of s .⁵

Second. Principle (1) can be further explained by the working of another more special principle, to the effect that having dispositions of correct use of p is a matter of displaying those dispositions in correct uses of p . A

speaker, then, “manifests” understanding of the meaning of a proposition by using correctly that proposition in different contexts. Then:

$$(2) \forall p \forall S ((S \text{ has dispositions of correct use of } p) \leftrightarrow \exists s (s \text{ is a correct use of } p \text{ by } S)).$$

Although here principle (2) appears as saying that one correct use of p is required to postulate a disposition of correct use by S , the formulation should be taken as a first step towards a more precise qualification of what it takes for some speech act s to manifest the dispositions of which it is, in some way, a result.⁶ The point is that that postulation of dispositions is just a matter of existing correct uses of p by S . The manifestation challenge works swiftly under these premises if the hypothesis of a certain unverifiable proposition q is considered. As the realist separates truth from verification (or idealised verification, or super-assertibility, if it is preferred), he should grant that there might be unverifiable propositions. But a proposition can be correctly used just if there are circumstances where it recognisably obtains, i.e. where it is verifiable. Then:

$$(3) \forall p ((p \text{ can be correctly used}) \rightarrow (p \text{ is verifiable})).$$

Now, suppose that q is unverifiable. It follows from the quantified conditional (3) that q cannot be correctly used, so there is no correct speech act s by speaker S of proposition q . By the principle stated in (2) this means that S does not have dispositions of correct use of q . By the principle stated in (1), moreover, this means that speaker S does not understand proposition q . If meaning is constituted by truth conditions that are possibly evidence-transcendent, as the realist wants, and, further, if the meaning of a proposition is that which is understood by the speaker about those truth conditions, we have got a contradiction.

The principle of manifestation, in brief, connects meaning to dispositions of use, and, then, connects dispositions of use to correct linguistic uses. That is, meaning comes to be supervenient on linguistic uses. As is usual with questions about supervenience, whether meaning just *is* a set of dispositions for linguistic uses or, more cautiously, whether meaning is simply somewhat *dependent* on dispositions of use should be left here as indeterminate. The usual justification for the principle of manifestation comes from some considerations concerning how can one attribute to a speaker understanding of the meaning of an expression, and this sort of justification inclines one to think in terms of a less strong connection between meaning and dispositions of linguistic use. In general, facts of type A are said to be supervenient on facts of type B if and only if any two possible worlds w_i and w_{ii} that are alike in exactly the same B facts should also be alike in exactly the

same A facts. Contrapositively, if any two possible worlds w_i and w_{ii} have at least one difference in respect of the A facts obtaining there, then there should be at least one difference in respect of the B facts obtaining in those worlds. As has been remarked by several philosophers, the relation of supervenience under this characterisation need not be asymmetric,⁷ but this fact should not bother us too much. The formulation can be supplemented sufficiently to render the desired kind of connection between facts A and facts B. Let, then facts A be supervenient on facts B *and* facts B not supervenient on facts A (if you like, we can call this new relation supervenience*). When the case under consideration is related to attributions of meaning-understanding to a speaker and the linguistic uses displayed by that same speaker, the relation of supervenience can be further refined by taking it to work not just in the case of the distribution of facts over complete worlds, but relating it to the distribution of facts over some specific parts of them, namely, the distribution of facts about understanding of meaning by speakers. Then, the desired supervenience could admit of a formulation along the following lines: let a M-fact be a fact about whether a speaker S understands the meaning of an expression p of the language. On the other hand, let a U-fact be a fact about speaker S's uses of p. Then, any two speakers concerning whom the U-facts are alike are such that the M-facts about them are also the same. Contrapositively, any two speakers concerning whom the U-facts differ should be such that the M-facts relating them also differ.

There are many issues that arise concerning the supervenience relation described. For example, it follows from the formulation that any two speakers who have at least one different use of an expression p should understand it differently (if they are both really entitled to have "understanding" of p). This seems on the face of it too strong. Where can one find two speakers who have exactly the same uses of a certain expression of their common language? It seems to follow from this that there are no two speakers of a language, or almost, with the same understanding of — almost — any expression of their language.⁸ Important as these questions might be, it is not necessary to answer here them. One can simply suppose here, at least for the sake of argument, that a single set of linguistic uses of an expression p allows one to postulate the existence of a disposition of correct use of p and that — further — this single disposition allows one to postulate on the part of the speaker to which such linguistic uses and such disposition of use have been attributed the understanding of the meaning of expression p.

A third comment in relation to the principle of manifestation, as has been explained above, has to do with how it can be related to a principle of individuation for propositions. In general, a principle of individuation is a theoretical thesis by which the conditions of identity of certain type of entities are introduced by an equivalence relation obtaining between entities of other sort, i.e.

$$(4) \forall \alpha \forall \beta ((\# \alpha = \# \beta) \leftrightarrow (\alpha \approx \beta)).$$

Here in proposition (4) “ α ” and “ β ” are ranging over entities of some or other sort. The function $\#$ maps the entities in the domain to which both α and β both belong to entities of the desired domain that is introduced by the principle. On the other hand, the relation \approx is an equivalence relation obtaining between the entities of the domain which the principle of individuation is taking as a base.⁹ The general idea behind a principle of individuation following this general form is that, if there are some type of entities to which we can make legitimate reference in our theorising about the world, with sufficiently sharp conditions of identity, then a principle like (4) authorises to make legitimate reference to entities of other domain which works as counter-domain for the function $\#$. Entities in this latter domain have sufficiently sharp conditions of identity in so far as the entities of the base domain have themselves sharp conditions of identity and the equivalence relation \approx defined over them is sufficiently precise. A stock example in contemporary philosophy of one such principle is the so-called “Hume principle” for the introduction of numbers: the number of Fs is identical to the number of the Gs if and only if the objects falling under F can be put in a one-to-one and onto relation with the objects falling under G.

In the present case related to propositions, the base domain is constituted by linguistic uses and the entities introduced are going to be propositions. Then:

$$(5) \forall p \forall q ((p = q) \leftrightarrow \forall s ((s \text{ is a use of } p) \leftrightarrow (s \text{ is a use of } q))).$$

Here “ p ” and “ q ” are ranging over propositions, of course, and “ s ” is ranging over linguistic uses. The rough idea behind an abstraction principle could be that any two propositions that have the same correct linguistic uses are just one and the same proposition. Hence the sets of correct uses are conditions of identity for propositions. There are many problems ahead to make this principle really workable, but, again, it is not necessary to go into those problems here. For the purposes of this work, one need only take into account the fact that the principle of manifestation can induce a principle of individuation to introduce abstract entities into our preferred ontology. If our ontology admits as legitimate entities “correct” linguistic uses of an expression and, further, accepts certain relations of equivalence between these linguistic uses, i.e. that of being correct uses of the “same” content, then there should not be any qualm in relation to the introduction of propositions into our ontology as precisely those entities whose conditions of identity come by the classes of correct uses of them.¹⁰

II. THE PRINCIPLE OF COMPOSITIONALITY

The other great principle involved in the argument of this work is the principle of compositionality. The usual justifications of the principle focus on two basic facts: (a) human beings, speakers of known languages, have finite cognitive capacities. When it is said that a human being “knows” a certain language *L*, that in which knowledge of *L* consists should not be something that could demand an infinite amount of memory or an infinite amount of cognitive processing on the part of speakers said to know it; (b) the second fact concerns the infinity, or potential infinity of propositions that can be meaningfully constructed in a language. A speaker knowing a language, having a finite repertoire of words, can in principle construct and understand an infinite number of sentences uttered in that language.¹¹ This fact requires explanation, and the most plausible explanation for it rests on the structure of composition by which sentences in a language are composed. A common speaker should be in command of a certain “theory” by which the “basic pieces” of language are given and by which the mode of correct combination of those basic pieces is grasped. If the basic elements and the formation rules of sentences out of the elements are mastered by a speaker, then there seems to be a strong reason for thinking that the language as a whole is mastered by that speaker. A speaker understands a language *L* if he understands the finite items constituting the “theory” by which any expression of *L* can be constructed.

There may be further discussion about what is the exact form of the theory of meaning for a certain language, and also there may be further discussion about in what sense can a speaker be said to “know” the theory of meaning for a language *L*,¹² when normally a speaker cannot explicitly state such “theory” as a precise set of postulates for *L*. According to received lore a theory of meaning for a language *L* has the same structure as a theory of truth for that language along the lines designed by Tarski.¹³ In traditional truth theories the notion of meaning is taken for granted and used as a way of illuminating the nature of “truth” for that language (if the tarskian procedure counts as — really — “illuminating” what does truth consist in for that language). The idea of Davidson, in contrast, is that exactly the same theoretical structure can be exploited to elucidate the meaning of the expressions of a language *L*, taking this time the notion of truth for granted and using it to illuminate the meaning of the expressions said to be true. Meanings are, then, explained as truth-conditions that will obtain (or will fail to) in different circumstances according to how the expression is constructed out of its linguistic elements.

A competent speaker of language *L* is said to understand the expressions of *L* precisely because he is capable of delivering the meaning-theorems for each one of those expressions, given his previous grasp of the

axioms and rules of the theory of truth for L. But, as should be obvious by now, the “understanding” of the meaning of, say, p, is that which is subjected to the conditions postulated by the principle of manifestation. The principle of manifestation states that speaker S has understanding of the truth-conditions of proposition p in so far as he has dispositions of correct use of p, which can be postulated in accordance with the overt linguistic behaviour displayed by speaker S in his linguistic uses of p. At the same time, the principle of compositionality states that speaker S comes to understand proposition p in accordance with how such proposition is constructed out of its basic linguistic elements. In other words, speaker S comes to understand proposition p from his previous understanding of the axioms and rules for the theory of truth for language L where p is framed. Now, it appears that there are two different stories about how understanding of meaning is “possible” or “explainable” and one could ask further whether those two different stories can cohere and, if so, how.

Now, the point is that a theory of truth for a language L in some sense “represents” that which a competent speaker of L knows when that speaker knows the meaning of the expressions of language L. If the question is whether, for example, a speaker understands the proposition Fa, the answer to that question comes from the usual axioms and rules of the theory of truth for L. If a speaker S knows to what entity the name “a” refers and to what property the predicate “F(ξ)” refers, and — further — if he knows that the proposition Fa is true if and only if that object to which the name refers and that property to which the predicate refers are such that the object falls under the property, then he understands the meaning of Fa. There is no indication here of dispositions of use of that proposition, nor of overt linguistic behaviour on the part of speaker S by which one could be justified in postulating the disposition of use of the proposition Fa. The suggestion given by the picture of the theory of truth for a language L is that a speaker S understands a proposition like Fa if and only if S understands basically what the name “a” and the predicate “F(ξ)” refer to, i.e. what entities are about which one is talking here.

How can the principle of manifestation enter into this picture? There are, *prima facie*, two ways by which the operation of the principle of manifestation can be conceived of in the broad context of a view of meaning, in which it comes from the axioms and rules of derivation of a theory of truth for the language in question. One way is conceiving simply that each of the propositions of the language should have associated dispositions of use and, moreover, overt linguistic behaviour by which these dispositions can be sufficiently hypothesised. Now, under this form of construction of the manifestation principle, it follows that attribution of understanding of the meaning of the propositions of a language to a speaker S is only possible if S has dispositions of correct use for each one of those propositions, and only if S has shown in linguistic uses of all those propositions that he really has disposi-

tions of correct use of them. That is, he should have correctly used all of them in a manner sufficient to postulate an underlying “disposition” of correctly using them. Normally a single correct use would not be sufficient for postulating a disposition in S, so S should have to display multiple uses of each one. It might be obvious that this construction of the manifestation requirement could be completely at odds with the basic tenets of the principle of compositionality. In fact, no being with finite capacities — cognitive or otherwise — could possibly “manifest” understanding of the meaning of the infinite propositions of a language. Language, then, could result in being unlearnable for finite beings like us.

There is another construction of the manifestation requirement, nevertheless, much more feasible and that, very probably, is more into line with what has been envisaged by their proponents.¹⁴ The rough idea is that a speaker can be said to understand the meaning of the expressions of the language he uses just in case he displays the disposition of correct use of the expressions of that language. What expressions? Not complete propositions, or sentences, as should be now obvious. He should display correct uses of the elements of the language that enter into the axioms of the theory of truth for the language considered, i.e. the names and predicates, and then, the connectives and operators. It is not necessary for the speaker to show dispositions of use specific for each of the propositions of the language. One could perfectly well maintain that a speaker S understands a language if he has dispositions of correct use for each of the names and the predicates. In other words, his dispositions of correct use of propositions have to be deemed somewhat dependent on his dispositions of correct use for elementary expressions. For example, one might ask whether a speaker S understands the proposition “Fa”. The proposition “Fa” is constructed by the saturation of the predicate “F(ξ)” by the name “a” and its truth condition is the fact — if there is one — of the object denoted by “a” falling under the property denoted by “F(ξ)”. How can S “manifest” his understanding of Fa? Well, there is always the alternative that he might have used the same proposition Fa on other occasions where his speech act of stating that Fa has been found correct by all standards, epistemic and pragmatic. But, there is also the possibility that he has not used Fa before. This is the normal situation with most speakers, when one comes to ask whether he understands or not some expression. In this second case, one may simply inquire if he has used the name “a” correctly before and if he has used the predicate “F(ξ)” correctly before. If the answer is positive for both of these questions, then one will have reason to suppose sufficiently justified that speaker S has dispositions of correct use of “a” and “F(ξ)”, and, consequently, that he understands the meaning of “a”, “F(ξ)” and that he understands the meaning of the proposition “Fa”.

The point can now be seen in the following way. There are two restrictions on how a speaker can understand the meaning of a potentially infinite number of propositions of a language. First, the capacity required on the part of the speaker must not be infinite, or — otherwise — simply too large for rational beings like us. Second, one can only attribute understanding of the meaning of an expression to a speaker if he can be supposed to be endowed with dispositions of correct use of those expressions. By the principle of compositionality a speaker understands a language if he understands its parts and their mode of combination to form more complex expressions. In what does the understanding of such speaker of the parts and modes of combination of them consist? The manifestation requirement proposes that the understanding consists in the possession of dispositions of correct use. So, there are no dispositions of use for complete propositions, at least, no immediate dispositions, but dispositions that could be characterised somewhat as “derivative” from the basic ones related directly to the elements occurring in the axioms of the theory of truth and in the modes of combination incorporated in the clauses for the logical connectives, other operators (modals, tenses, etc.) and the rules of formation of meaningful expressions from meaningful expressions.¹⁵

This train of thought, by which the manifestation requirement is connected tightly with the deliverances of a theory of meaning for a language, broadly construed as a theory of truth for that language, has obvious consequences — or so it seems — for the manifestation challenge. Consider again the situation. The anti-realist is challenging the realist to explain how it is that a speaker could have understanding of the truth conditions of propositions that are evidence-transcendent. An unverifiable proposition is a proposition that cannot be correctly used, for there are no recognisable circumstances where speakers of a language could assess whether the statement is true or false. But, now it appears that this question is wrong from the beginning. The problem is not — in any case — the problem of how to explain understanding of evidence-transcendent *propositions or sentences*. As in any other case, the understanding of such proposition can be explained by the understanding of its semantic elements and their mode of combination. If there are dispositions of correct use for the semantic elements that are integrating the offending unverifiable proposition, and if — further — the speaker displays also dispositions by which he shows how to master the form of connection of those semantic elements to form a more complex meaningful expression, then there should not be any further question of whether the speaker *really* understands its meaning.

The challenge, if there is one, has to be posed in relation to specific semantic components of the propositions of a language that have themselves such a nature, that no speaker could possibly display overt linguistic behaviour by which he could be deemed to possess dispositions of correct linguistic

usage of them. That is, once again, semantic components out of which propositions are constructed, *not* complete propositions as such. It is perfectly possible, on the other hand, that unverifiable propositions result from a construction out of some semantic components that are themselves perfectly legitimate and well understood by speakers grasping them. This has to be taken as simply a matter of the result of licit semantic combinations that deliver from some legitimate semantic components, some other semantic complexes.

Of course, this train of thought could be of no avail against someone that is not inclined to think that the meaning of a proposition — or sentence — is a function of only the semantic components that appear in that proposition or sentence and the mode of their combination there. If there is an irreducible contribution coming from the context where an expression is used, not amenable to general treatment or theorising, then the existence of dispositions of correct use connected to the clauses of a theory of meaning for a language constructed in the vein of a Tarskian theory of truth for that language, will not be sufficient to deliver the required dispositions of correct use for the complete propositions or sentences that are considered. Some other dispositions of use will be irreducibly connected to complete propositions, if speakers can be credited with understanding of those propositions at all. In the case of indexical expressions we are used to the taming of those contextual elements. Indexical expressions are usually understood as expressions where there is a systematic reference to a variable contextual element. But here, although the context is variable, the aspect of that context that should be taken into account is always the same and is connected, as a matter of general semantic discipline, to the “character” of the expression. This phenomenon, then, is no real threat to the principle of compositionality. A speaker might be said to develop a certain disposition of correct usage connected to the peculiar character of a certain expression, although this character may deliver multiple propositional contents when used in different contexts. The real problem comes when it is sustained that no amount of general semantic theory can handle all possible different meanings that the same expressions can have when used in different contexts.¹⁶ If the deliverances of the compositional clauses of a theory of truth for a language are simply not sufficient to render the meaning of any expression that can be formulated in that language, then it is useless to think in dispositions of correct use connected to those compositional clauses. Understanding of the meaning of an expression will require some other dispositions somewhat connected to complete propositions and to classes — probably vaguely defined — of contexts of utterance sufficiently similar between them. The solution proposed here will not work if someone prefers this style of semantic theory.¹⁷

Naturally, here is not the place to discuss — not even roughly — the merits of this different approach to semantic theory. This work is simply conducted under the supposition that a semantic conception where the princi-

ple of compositionality is not sufficient to deliver a complete understanding of the meaning for a language is false, because it will make the language unlearnable for finite beings like us. It will be convenient to recall nonetheless, that as a matter of fact, almost all convinced anti-realists have embraced the principle of compositionality in its full strength.¹⁸ It may happen that committed anti-realists should prefer a more relaxed compositional principle if they pretend to maintain their position with real impact against more traditional realist semantics. The point is that *if* the principle of compositionality is respected when coming to understand how the expressions of our languages have a definite meaning that can be grasped by speakers like us with finite cognitive capabilities, then the manifestation challenge is much less formidable than many of those committed anti-realists have so far envisaged.

III. SOME CASES

As has been shown, then, there is a case for maintaining that the manifestation challenge should not bother a realist too much, at least not when it comes to the question of whether there are reasons coming from the manifestation argument recommending, for example, global anti-realism. But it may be now too early for this conclusion. The point is that, although in general there seems to be a quite general strategy to which the realist may resort for addressing the manifestation challenge in different areas, when one comes to consider how the challenge can be addressed in specific cases, the difficulties might subsist for reasons completely inherent to how propositions of the offending class are constructed out of their semantic components. This section will try to explore how the considerations coming from the principle of compositionality fare in different specific areas of debate for which concerns have been raised about whether there could be truth-conditions in the realist sense instead of anti-realist assertibility-conditions. The cases that will be considered are: propositions about the past, propositions about other minds, propositions about inaccessible areas of space-time and propositions about unsurveyable domains.

III.1. *The reality of the past*

In the case of propositions about the past, the debate between realist and anti-realist conceptions has been focused on whether the understanding of truth-conditions of past-tense propositions could — or could not — be rendered intelligible by the procedure of “truth value links”. Consider a sample past-tense proposition:

- (6) Caesar was stabbed by Brutus on the ides of March.

If one applies the manifestation requirement to the proposition (6), then a speaker S will be said to understand it only in case he has dispositions of correct use of (6) in the appropriate circumstances, under standards both epistemic and pragmatic. As the anti-realist may point out, a speaker S can only display the linguistic uses by which the existence of such disposition can be assessed if there is available evidence at the disposal of speaker S to justify the fact that Caesar was stabbed by Brutus on the ides of March. We think we do have that evidence in the case of proposition (6), but suppose that all traces by which the fact could have been tracked had disappeared in the course of the centuries. Suppose, for example, that the invasion of the hordes of Huns had been much more terrible and destructive of the ancient culture. Atila and his heirs, suppose further, ruled over the West for a thousand years and destroyed every single record of an independent past of the people inhabiting the shores of the Mediterranean Sea. If proposition (6) were unverifiable, as it seems the situation could suggest it was, then the issue might appear whether a speaker S could really grasp the meaning of the truth-conditions of proposition (6) for — in principle and as far as the manifestation challenge goes — there are no circumstances where S could display linguistic behaviour by which his understanding could be assessed.

In the classical treatment of Dummett, these considerations lead to a general scepticism concerning the ontological status of the past.¹⁹ The realist is inclined to think that, although one could not have evidence to affirm (or to deny) that Caesar was stabbed by Brutus on the ides of March, it should be a fact — somewhat inscribed in the book of time — that Caesar determinately was or determinately was not stabbed by Brutus on the ides of March. The manifestation challenge questions this basic realist assumption remarking the fact that a speaker S in the envisaged epistemic circumstances does not seem to grasp such objective and independent truth-conditions for (6), for he does not know if any of those alternatives obtain, or is in the situation to somewhat improve the epistemic situation in order to determine whether any of the alternatives obtain. If the meaning of a proposition is something that a speaker should grasp, then there seems to be no guarantee that there is really a *truth* at all about whether Caesar was or was not stabbed by Brutus on the ides of March.

The strategy that has been usually discussed to address the challenge has focused — as was said above — on the possibility of “truth-value links”. A truth-value link comes to be in this context an explanation of what it is to be true for a proposition in a tense other than the present by resource to the understanding of what it is to be true for the same proposition in the present tense. Consider again, in effect, proposition (6). It can be analysed in the usual way with a core proposition in present tense and a tense-operator indicating past tense.

(7) In the past it was the case that: (Caesar is stabbed by Brutus).

The general idea of the truth-value link is to think of the understanding of the truth conditions of (7) as constituted by the understanding of what are the present-tense truth-conditions of Caesar being stabbed by Brutus, and “projecting” that understanding to the past. The general strategy is to think of something like “in the past it was the case that: in the present it is the case that: Caesar is stabbed by Brutus” (taking the last clause as tenseless).²⁰ In other words, the understanding of the meaning of proposition (7) comes from the understanding that a speaker S might have of an utterance in present-tense saying that Caesar is being stabbed by Brutus now (you should imagine someone uttering these words on the ides of March of the year 44 BC). Under this strategy of addressing the manifestation challenge the realist still has to face some difficulties if the requirement of manifestation is construed as applying to complete propositions. In effect, a speaker that understands a truth-value link relevant for the case considered should display dispositions of correct use of: (i) the proposition in the present-tense, and (ii) the character of being past of *that* present-tense proposition. Obviously, a speaker in the present and supposing — *ex hypothesi* — that all or most traces of the death of Caesar have disappeared, is in no position to display correct linguistic uses of a present-tense utterance of the proposition “Caesar is being stabbed now by Brutus”.

But there is another strategy that is much more feasible and easy to address the challenge.²¹ If the requirement of manifestation is construed — as was defended above — as bound to the structure and deliverances of a theory of truth for the language in question, then the problem in respect to proposition (6) comes to be a problem about the understanding of certain names, predicates, temporal locations and the past-tense operator. It is not important to know if a speaker S can or cannot know if Caesar was or was not stabbed by Brutus on the ides of March, but simply if this speaker S understands the meaning of the names “Caesar” and “Brutus”. It is a question, further, of understanding what it is “to stab”, what it is to locate an event on the ides of March (which will require some acquaintance with the Roman culture in general, as well as the understanding of the meaning of the names “Caesar” and “Brutus”). Finally, it may be a question of understanding the past-tense operator in general. In every case, the dispositions of correct use should be displayed with respect to the semantic components of proposition (6), whatever they might be. If a speaker has legitimate and reasonable understanding of all these semantic components and their mode of combination, there is no further question of whether he really understands the meaning of the proposition. And here there appear to be no special problems with the understanding — even by anti-realist standards — of any of those components on the part of the speaker. It is a matter of common linguistic competence to know how to use the past-tense in general (remember that the problem is not how to verify if Caesar was stabbed by Brutus, but to know in general how a past-tense proposition is verified) and all the other semantic items involved.

In this alternative strategy that exploits the compositional character of meaning, the operation of a truth-value link may be implicit, as was originally envisaged by the previous discussion of Dummett, but the point is that the difficulties raised by the manifestation challenge cannot be adequately answered if not by focusing on the general understanding of the sub-sentential components and the manner of their combination.

III.2. *Other minds*

A case very similar to that of the past is concerned with attribution of intentional states — or consciousness — to other beings. The basic difficulty lies in the fact that intentional states are accessible, in principle, from the first-person perspective. This fact seems to make those states opaque to third-person public observation. Consider a proposition like:

(8) Oedipus is in severe pain.

Suppose that in the situation Oedipus does not manifest pain by any of what are usually taken to be the characteristic forms of behaviour manifesting pain. Then, there appears the question of whether a speaker uttering (8) really understands its meaning.²² A truth-value link strategy to deal also with this case has been proposed here. Under the truth-value link strategy, the understanding of the meaning of proposition (8) comes from a dissociation in its truth-conditions between a part open to first-person authority and a part attributing that grasp to a third person. Hence, (8) could eventually be understood as:

(9) (Oedipus is in severe pain) \leftrightarrow (“I am in severe pain” could be correctly uttered by Oedipus).

This is supposed in the same way as it was in the case of the stabbing of Caesar

(10) (Caesar was stabbed by Brutus) \leftrightarrow (“Caesar is stabbed by Brutus” could have been correctly uttered in the past).

And, as in the case of the past, there seems to be scarce remedy for the realist predicament in the truth-value link procedure if the requirement of manifestation is connected to complete propositions. In effect, if the meaning of the proposition stating that Oedipus is in severe pain is understood — and the manifestation requirement is construed in the more restrictive way, affecting complete propositions — the speaker S can only understand it if he has dispositions of correct use of *that* precise proposition under whatever truth-value

link analysis. If the speaker cannot verify what could be for Oedipus to utter — truthfully — that he is in severe pain, then there will not be sufficient evidence to postulate dispositions of correct use in S, i.e. there will not be sufficient evidence to postulate understanding of the meaning of (8) on the part of speaker S.

Let us now turn to a compositional construction of the manifestation requirement. Under this more relaxed construction, a speaker has to show dispositions of use only of the semantic components of proposition (8) and of their mode of combination. In the case considered of the severe pain of Oedipus, all that seems to be required on the part of speaker S is understanding of what it is to be under severe pain and what is the meaning of the name “Oedipus”. Now, understanding of the meaning of those semantic components may come from very different sources. A speaker may manifest understanding of the meaning of the predicate of being under severe pain making correct statements about his own case and making also correct statements describing the mental states of other beings as these states manifest in overt behaviour (maybe also taking into account what those beings report linguistically about their own severe pains). It should be remarked once again, that to attribute this understanding to speaker S it is no problem if, for example, there is no way of verifying if Oedipus is or is not in severe pain. What really matters for the manifestation requirement in this case is that there are some circumstances — not necessarily linked with what happens with Oedipus — where there are criteria by which the speaker can verify if someone is or not in severe pain and others can correct his statements if they were inappropriate.

III.3. *Inaccessible areas of space-time*

It is a result of the views put forward by the theory of relativity that there are (or might be) areas of space-time from which no signal could get to us, giving us information about what happens in those areas. As no signal can travel faster than light, then it follows that certain events, although not simultaneous with us, are so distant that it is physically impossible that someone could come to “observe” them in the present. Suppose that the coordinates x , y , z , t give the location of a space-time point inaccessible to us in the way just explained and consider the following proposition about what happens in that space-time point:

(11) A supernova exploded in x , y , z , t .

Now, surely it happens that a speaker S cannot display correct linguistic uses of proposition (11), no matter how astronomically sophisticated he might be. There are no recognizable circumstances under which S could know that a supernova exploded in x , y , z , t and, hence, could correctly assert that a su-

pernova exploded in x, y, z, t . Following the stricter construction of the manifestation requirement, speaker S cannot manifest his understanding of the meaning of proposition (11) giving clues about his dispositions of language usage.

Once again, if one adopts a construction of the manifestation requirement connected with the compositional structure of language, a feasible response is at the disposal of the realist. In the case of proposition (11) all that he has to manifest is understanding of what a supernova is, what is to explode and, finally what the location designated by the coordinates x, y, z, t is. Of course, in this last case, it is not necessary that the speaker should know exactly that space-time point for himself. It suffices if he knows that there is a systematic procedure by which all these locations are singled out from a certain frame of reference.

III.4. *Unsurveyable domains*

The last general case that will be considered here is concerned with domains over which some quantifier may range but that are unsurveyable by finite procedures of effective decision. It is supposed that a finite domain will always be “surveyable”, so the discussion is restricted to infinite domains, at least here (doubts will be raised below regarding this point). In this last case, there are sometimes procedures to “survey” certain domains by means of, for example, mathematical induction. The point appears in relation with infinite domains where — presumptively — there are no such procedures. Consider, for the sake of argument, Goldbach’s conjecture:

$$(12) \quad \forall n \exists m \exists r ((n \text{ is even}) \ \& \ (n > 2)) \rightarrow ((m \text{ is prime}) \ \& \ (r \text{ is prime}) \ \& \ (n = m + r)).$$

That is, every even number greater than 2 is the sum of two prime numbers. Currently we have not either proved or refuted this statement. Suppose there is no inductive procedure by which one could come to prove it. Suppose even that — given our limited mathematical capabilities — we will never come to prove it. Suppose that coming to know about its truth is just a matter of “checking” the validity of the principle contained in proposition (12) individually for all the even natural numbers greater than 2, a task than could only be accomplished by God, if it can be accomplished at all.

This is a case, where by anti-realist standards a speaker S could not have dispositions of correct use of proposition (12), for there are no recognizable circumstances where the correctness of his assertion of (12) could be assessed. In the case in question, proposition (12) cannot be proved by the speaker, but it is also the case that the speaker cannot even recognise a proof of it, if he were presented with one, for there is no such proof at the disposal

of our finite cognitive capabilities. How do the considerations coming from the principle of compositionality work here? The compositional construction of the principle of manifestation requires dispositions of correct use connected with the semantic components occurring in the proposition. Here, those semantic components are the predicates “being even”, “being prime” and “being the sum of n and m ” with the logical constants and operators. It is obvious that a normal speaker — with sufficient knowledge of elementary arithmetic — does have the understanding of the meaning of (almost all) these items. The concern arises, notwithstanding, in connection with the universal quantifier operating over the entire proposition. An anti-realist might say here that it is this quantifier that is responsible for the lack of dispositions of correct use of proposition (12), because it alone produces the result of evidence-transcendence.

The point in debate, nevertheless, is not simply whether this quantifier makes the proposition unverifiable, but whether this fact is a reason to think that the speaker does not have understanding of its truth-conditions. The anti-realist is inclined to maintain that an evidence-transcendent proposition cannot have a meaning of which there is grasp by a speaker. It has been shown above how the inclination of the anti-realist can be resisted in general without rejecting the principle of manifestation, but just construing it in a more sensible way, in line with the compositionality of meaning. If there is lack of understanding of the meaning of a proposition, that should reside in the specific contribution of some semantic component of the proposition in question or in some specific mode of combination of those semantic components going against some rule of the language for well-formed expressions. The issue here of whether a speaker has or does not have understanding of what is stated by (12) should be answered, then, considering whether the speaker has or does not have understanding of one precise sub-sentential component of the offending proposition. If the speaker has general knowledge of how to use universal quantifications, for example, displaying that ability in cases where the universal quantification is surveyable, then there are no remaining questions whether he understands universal quantifications in the unsurveyable case. Certainly, there are provable statements that have the form of universal quantifications over all natural numbers and also there are provable statements that have the form of universal quantifications over all real numbers, so — under strict anti-realist standards — there should be dispositions of correct use on the part of speakers of the sub-sentential components involved in those statements. If the universal quantifier is understood in those cases, then it can be understood generally in all the contexts where it may occur.²³

IV. AN ANTI-REALIST REJOINER

It is obvious that a speaker can be deemed as having dispositions of correct use of the quantifier, for example, if he in general uses this operator correctly in linguistic uses. And surely, any competent speaker knows how to use a universal quantifier. But an anti-realist would eventually raise the question of whether there is a problem here in the case considered when the quantifier ranges over an unsurveyable domain. An anti-realist may be inclined to contend that a speaker having dispositions of correct use for a quantifier *over surveyable domains* does not have dispositions of use of quantifiers ranging *over unsurveyable domains*: at least, he will contend that it is not obvious that the former entails or guarantees the latter. So the question can be restricted to quantification over an unsurveyable domain. Does a speaker understand the meaning of this kind of quantification? Does the understanding he does have of quantifiers ranging over surveyable domains suffice for the unsurveyable case? Consider also, that an argument in similar lines would be displayed by the anti-realist also in the case of a past-tense operator, or even in the case of third-person attributions of mental states to a person. The anti-realist might contend here that our understanding of a past-tense predication where we have reliable methods of verification is not guarantee that we will have also understanding in the case of past-tense predications where there are no verification procedures at our disposal. So, the problem considered here has a general character, although the discussion will be focused in the case of quantification over unsurveyable domains.

The reasoning — on the part of the anti-realist — for distinguishing the case of surveyable from the case of unsurveyable domains may be along the following lines: when a speaker has dispositions of correct use of an universal quantifier, he should have displayed those dispositions in correct linguistic speech acts by which he could have asserted that certain universally quantified proposition obtains. A speaker can only make “correct” assertions of universally quantified propositions when there is evidence sufficient for that proposition and, one may suppose, that evidence can only be gathered in the case of a domain surveyable to our cognitive capabilities. Hence, it seems that there is no “manifestation” in the required sense coming from the principle of manifestation construed in accordance with the principle of compositionality. In the case of statements about the past, on the other hand, the fact that a statement about the stabbing of Caesar’s is unverifiable comes from the specific contribution of a tense operator ranging over times over which our epistemic capabilities are seriously deficient. The anti-realist will, then, be inclined to contend that understanding of a past-tense operator ranging over surveyable past instants of time does not guarantee understanding of a past-tense operator ranging over unsurveyable instants of past time. Everywhere a rift between the surveyable and the unsurveyable should be posed by the

theorist and, hence, the general compositional strategy will fail to address the general explanatory tasks posed by the manifestation requirement.

This line of anti-realist rejoinder will be answered by two different kinds of response. In first place, it will be argued, there seems to be a basic difficulty in the anti-realist's interpretation of what counts as a universal quantifier ranging over an unsurveyable domain. This point relating the universal quantifier generalises to the related cases of operators dealing with times or regions of space-time. In second place, the anti-realist claim relies in a sharp distinction between operators over surveyable and unsurveyable domains that is unwarranted and, even more, should be rejected if we are going to understand the workings of a theory of meaning by what speakers actually manifest about the structure of those theories.

IV.1. *What is "surveyable"?*

A determinate notion of what could count as "sufficient evidence" is required for a quantifier ranging over a "surveyable" domain. What is a "surveyable" domain? Is it simply a "finite" domain? Of course, the anti-realist is thinking of rather abstruse cases in mathematics dealing with the transfinite, but the problem comes when one considers how to validate certain quantifications that are normally deemed non-problematic for most philosophers. We can take the case of universal quantifications that appear in, for example, theories of natural science, as perfectly in order both for realists and anti-realists. Consider, for example, the following proposition:

$$(13) \forall x ((x \text{ is an atom}) \rightarrow (x \text{ has a nucleus})).$$

It should be taken as neutral ground between the realist and the anti-realist that a speaker sufficiently conversant with our contemporary worldview of the physical understands the meaning of a universal quantification like (13). If a speaker S understands the meaning of (13), by the manifestation principle, he should have dispositions of correct use of the semantic items appearing in (13) and their manner of combination. In particular, speaker S should have dispositions of correct use of the universal quantifier in front of proposition (13), duly manifested in correct uses where the quantification is sufficiently justified for our epistemic standards. Now, for our common epistemic standards, as those standards are displayed in the rational activity of accepting and rejecting theories and hypotheses in natural science, a certain amount of finite and limited evidence is perfectly sufficient to justify a universal quantification like (13) where it is not the case — not at all — that the evidence attained is exhaustive.

The problem for the anti-realist comes here when one asks whether the evidence gathered, for example, for the universal quantification in proposi-

tion (13) is sufficient, i.e. whether, the domain over which the quantifier is ranging in (13) is or not really “surveyable”. A dilemma ensues, as both answers to this question are rather embarrassing for the anti-realist. Suppose, in fact, that the answer of the anti-realist were “no”. Then a common speaker could intelligibly use universal quantifications only in the limited case of domains where a finite and quite limited survey could be taken. Natural science, almost in its entirety, would fall into the realm of the evidence-transcendent. We will have to convict most scientists for “not understanding” what they are talking about. Suppose, on the other hand, that the answer of the anti-realist were “yes”. Then, the realist would be immediately inclined to ask why this case is different from the case of the “unsurveyable” domains in mathematics. For surely, the anti-realist must have some principled way of saying why some domains are outside the limits of what a speaker can duly manifest in correct linguistic uses of universal quantification. The realist could further contend that, as in the case of the generalisations in natural science, the evidence one can gather in the case of, for example, the domain of the natural numbers over which the quantifier in proposition (12) is ranging, is quite limited. It is evidence limited to how a certain domain of mathematical entities is constituted as an objective realm. This knowledge, or putative knowledge (if you prefer), gives one reason to think of proposition (12) as having a determinate truth-value albeit unknown or even unknowable. The general ontological conception — by whatever means it were justified — is the ground for regarding the truth-value of proposition (12) as definite.²⁴ This evidence is, in a sense, “incomplete”: it can be improved and defeated by further evidence, but in any case we never have “complete” warrants for our beliefs, even for our best entrenched theories.

Of course, the anti-realist might contend that the evidence presented by the realist for his ontological conception of, for example, the mathematical domain of the natural numbers is faulty, but this could be another issue and not one by which one could *a priori* exclude understanding of the meaning of a universal quantification for considerations having to do specifically with the requirement of manifestation. Consider again the entire dialectical situation. The anti-realist is saying that there are no dispositions of correct use of universal quantifiers when they range over unsurveyable domains, for there are no circumstances where a speaker may display correct linguistic usage of those quantifiers. The realist asks the anti-realist to explain what counts as an “unsurveyable” domain. The best way to understand the notion of the “unsurveyable” is to connect it to our cognitive powers for detecting what is going on in a certain realm. Suppose now that our cognitive powers are sufficient to survey what is going on in the physical realm, as far as this realm is described by natural science. Then it follows that a normal speaker understands the meaning of quantifiers ranging over the entities in the physical realm although our beliefs about the physical realm are neither infallible

nor complete. The point now is: if incomplete evidence is sufficient for understanding in the case of the physical realm, why not also in the case of the domain of, say, real numbers? Here the anti-realist can only continue defending his case criticising the grounds for accepting the ontological realm of, for example, a non-denumerable infinity of real numbers, but he does not have an *a priori* argument to say that a speaker does not understand the meaning of universal quantification in this case. The speaker should be deemed as understanding the meaning of quantification over real numbers in dependence of the question of whether the realm of real numbers is or not “surveyable”, and, of course, if one knows that there is a certain objective domain of entities of which some well defined properties and relations determinately obtain or fail to obtain, one does have reason to think that a proposition like (12) has a definite truth-value. In this case, the domain is — in some sense — “surveyable” and a speaker should understand the meaning of (12) if he is conversant simply with the universal quantifier and with the other semantic components there occurring. As should already be apparent, it is not the case here that a certain domain of entities and states of affairs where those entities enter might be dismissed for reasons having to do with our understanding of the meaning of the propositions stating facts about the domain in question, but on the contrary, the ontological questions about what there is are what settle the issue of whether a speaker really “manifests” understanding of universal quantification.

In other words, the issue of whether a certain domain counts as really *unsurveyable* turns finally to the usual ontological questions about the reasons there are to think that a certain domain is objectively and independently constituted. It should be recalled that the manifestation challenge has been devised as an argument for an anti-realist conception of meaning and, hence, for an anti-realist ontological conception about realms of (putative) entities. But the efficacy of the argument turns finally into the question of whether a realm is “surveyable” in the relevant sense. And the question of whether a realm is “surveyable” — in the relevant sense — finally turns into the question of whether there are reasons to think that the realm is objectively constituted. But this was what the argument was proposed to show to begin with! So, there are no conclusions following from the manifestation argument, at least from it alone, in the way envisaged by the anti-realist, or so it seems.²⁵ This strategy of response can be generalised to similar anti-realist’s rejoinders in relation with past-tense operators or other kinds of offending evidence-transcendent statements.

IV.2. *Conditions of identity of an operator*

The anti-realist rejoinder relies on a crucial distinction between the operator over surveyable domains and the operator over unsurveyable domains.

It seems obvious, at least at this point, that the understanding that should be manifested by speakers is attached to the sub-sentential components to which the workings of a theory of meaning for the language in question are connected. It follows that a speaker that manifests how to use correctly a semantic sub-sentential component in some contexts should be deemed as having dispositions of correct use of that sub-sentential component in general in *all* contexts.²⁶ So, to repeat again a crucial point, if it is really the *same* operator that is working in universal quantifications over surveyable domains and over unsurveyable domains, then there cannot be any further question whether the speaker really understands the operator in general, if he displays dispositions of correct use in actual correct uses of the quantifier in cases where the correctness can be duly assessed, v.gr. in cases where the quantifier is ranging over domains that are surveyable by our epistemic capabilities.

The anti-realist rejoinder can only work, then, if there is a real difference in nature between the quantifier ranging over surveyable domains and the quantifiers ranging over unsurveyable domains so that understanding of the former does not imply understanding of the latter. The same kind of distinction should be defended in the case of other operators where the anti-realist may be disposed to pose the same type of criticism. But can the distinction be defended? It seems that it cannot. The clauses of a theory of meaning in which our understanding of names and predicates — as well as different types of connectives and operators — is involved are designed to deliver a precise explanatory duty, that is, to explain how it is that a speaker can, in principle, understand the meaning of a potential infinite number of different sentences in a language from the understanding of the elements from which the sentence has been constructed and the understanding of the mode of combination of those elements. One basic semantic element requires one axiom of the theory that rules its function and its contribution to the truth-conditions of the sentences where it occurs. Now, if there is a real difference in nature between, e.gr. the universal quantifier ranging over surveyable domains and the quantifier ranging over unsurveyable domains, then there should be different axioms or different rules for those different semantic operators.

The problem with this line of argument is that such a difference between two different kinds of operator should manifest itself in some semantic difference of recognisable structure. And there is no such recognisable difference. We do not make any recognisable difference between the occurrences of “any” or “all” when talking about a finite domain of entities or about an — let us suppose — undenumerably infinite domain. Nor do we make any difference in the past-tense utterances involving past events about which we have reliable information about what may have happened there and those involving past events about which we do not have such information, or we do not have any information at all. In other words, the anti-realist contention of a certain dif-

ference in nature between operators over surveyable or unsurveyable domains requires overt semantic evidence in the structure of the languages we speak that does not actually exist.

The anti-realist may reply to the foregoing that there cannot appear any overt semantic structural difference between the operators because there is just one axiom ruling it. The point is that that sole axiom rules an operator over surveyable domains, so it is not strange that no special operator appears on the surface ranging over the unsurveyable. It is possible, in fact, for the anti-realist, to contend that there is just one axiom of which understanding can be attributed to the speaker: the axiom ruling the quantifier over surveyable domains; there will be no other putative axiom for a quantifier over unsurveyable domains. So it will result, as it is obvious, that the speaker will be able to understand utterances using the former but not utterances using the latter. Now, the problem with this anti-realist contention lies in the fact that the sole operator in question — acceptable by anti-realist standards — can be used in statements that turn out unverifiable. Suppose, for *reductio*, that there were an operator just as the anti-realist wants it to be, ranging only over surveyable domains. Let us suppose that it is a past-tense operator acceptable for the anti-realist “It was the case in the past that: [...]” Now surely there are possible worlds where there is no way for us to coming to know whether Brutus stabbed or did not stab Caesar on the ides of March of year 44 BC.²⁷ Surely in those situations we can construct the sentence:

(14) It was the case in the past that: Brutus stabbed Caesar.

Now, (14) appears on the face of it as well constructed as any proposition, and not only in relation to our cognitive situation in regarding the death of Caesar in the actual world, but also in the situation envisaged in a possible world where our cognitive situation would be extremely worse. The point is that just because the semantic components can be freely combined to form sentences in the language, whatever may be the restrictions imposed by the anti-realist, it is always possible to devise statements where those components occur and which are unverifiable. If the anti-realist were right, then (14) should appear in the circumstances immediately as ungrammatical, but it is not. The anti-realist, then, is not right.

V. CONCLUSIONS

The manifestation challenge has been devised as an argument purported to show that there are serious deficiencies in a realist conception of meaning in so far as this conception embraces the possibility of propositions endowed with determinate evidence-transcendent truth-conditions. It has been shown

here that a more reasonable form of construing the manifestation requirement in connection with the principle of compositionality of meaning — a principle as well justified as the principle of manifestation regarding attributions of understanding of meaning — gives the realist the resources to address the challenge in the areas that have been usually taken as crucial. The cases of propositions about the past, propositions about other minds, about inaccessible regions of space-time and about unsurveyable domains appeared after examination to be perfectly explicable by all the standards coming from the manifestation requirement.

It results, then, that the areas over which the manifestation requirement could pose a real challenge for the realist conception of meaning appear as much more restricted and localised than originally envisaged by the proponents of the manifestation argument. As far as one can tell, it is restricted to cases where a certain specific semantic component cannot have dispositions of correct use associated with it because there are no circumstances where a speaker can recognise the obtaining of the facts expressed by a proposition where the offending semantic component occurs. And there seems to be no such cases, as far as one can tell.

Finally, a possible anti-realist rejoinder to the line of argument developed trying to distinguish the cases of operators over what is verifiable and operators over what is not has appeared after examination to be faulty. In the first place, a domain can only be deemed as “unsurveyable” after some crucial decisions about its ontological character have been taken, so the unverifiable character of the sentences produced by an operator cannot be used to devise an argument designed to defend an anti-realist conclusion about that domain that should have been duly justified already. In the second place, the purported distinction between different semantic operators when the domain over which they range is surveyable or unsurveyable is badly lacking the sort of evidence that may render it plausible. We have no reasons to think that the operators are really different in nature. On the face of the issue it appears that they are the same kind of operators, and it seems also clear that we do understand those operators in correct uses manifesting dispositions of correct use. Hence, under the more exacting anti-realist standards coming from the manifestation requirement, the propositions usually taken by anti-realists as posing a challenge for realist conceptions of meaning seems to be perfectly acceptable as having legitimate meaning and content.²⁸

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NOTES

¹ The terminology will be rather loose in the foregoing about “propositions” and “sentences”. In principle the object of a theory of meaning should be the sentences of a language and not, or at least, not directly the meaning of those sentences, v.gr. the propositions expressed by those sentences when uttered by a speaker in a precise context. Nonetheless, the primary philosophical interest in a theory of meaning for a language lies in the deliverances that such a theory can render regarding the question of the nature of thought and the nature of the contents of those thoughts, v.gr. the propositions constituting those thoughts. This is the reason why sudden transition from “sentences” to “propositions” need not concern us unnecessarily.

² M. Dummett developed the manifestation challenge in many places. Cf, v.gr. Dummett (1978a), (1978b), (1978c), (1991), (1993a), (1993b). A general presentation of the dialectic can be consulted in Hale (1997); also Wright (1987), pp. 1-43. More detailed discussion of the structure of the argument in Tennant (1997), pp. 1-62, 159-244.

³ Cf. Kripke (1982), specially pp. 22-37.

⁴ A related argument is defended in Wright (1987), pp. 18-21.

⁵ The reference here to truth conditions should not be taken as a sort of pre-judgement in favour of realist semantics. The difference between a realist and an anti-realist semantics can be taken to lie in the conception of truth for the sentences in question. For the realist a sentence is true objectively and independently of our judgement-responses. For the anti-realist a sentence is true only granted some kind of cognitive contribution on our part. Then, in this latter case, some kind of appropriate cognitive response or appropriate epistemic state is constitutive of the truth conditions of the sentence in question.

⁶ A better formulation, although less simple, would be:

$$(2') \forall p \forall S ((S \text{ has dispositions of correct use of } p) \leftrightarrow (C \rightarrow \exists s (s \text{ a correct use of } p \text{ by } S)))$$

In this modified principle (2') the correct uses of a proposition p count as “manifesting” the existence of dispositions of correct use by the speaker S only if some condition (or conditions) C obtain(s). Those conditions are introduced here to guarantee that the uses are indeed sufficient to render the desired result.

⁷ Cf. Divers (2002), pp. 11-14. Facts A might be supervenient on facts B compatible with the fact that facts B are supervenient on facts A . Of course, the idea that one usually tries to convey by the statement of a supervenience relation between two domains of facts is that of a sort of asymmetric dependence between those domains.

⁸ It seems wiser to formulate the supervenience relation in terms more tied to “dispositions of use” rather than use. Then, any two speakers with the same “dispositions of use” will be deemed as having the same understanding of meaning. On the other hand, different bases of linguistic behaviour displayed by different speaker can be considered sufficient for the postulation of a single disposition of use. There are many issues also arising here about this — more refined — supervenience relation that shall not and should not be addressed here.

⁹ For a very complete and thorough discussion of the nature and metaphysical consequences of a principle of individuation as a mean to deliver a new category of

entities (what is called an “abstraction principle”), related in particular to the mathematical case, cf. Hale & Wright (2001), pp. 1-27.

¹⁰ Consider, as one of the problems that a principle in these lines should face, that the equivalence relation between linguistic uses is defined as being the relation of being the use of a same *p*. Now, this means that the equivalence relation that is giving the conditions of identity for the entities in the introduced domain seems to be obviously dependent on the existence of some or other propositions *p* by which the idea of “being a use of *p*” can make sense. The — supposed — principle, then, could only deliver the desired identity-conditions if, previously, the entities for which identity-conditions are going to be given, are already there. This procedure seems, on the face of it, to be question-begging. The principle in question should be formulated again so that the equivalence relation defined over linguistic uses does not presuppose the previous existence of the propositions that the principle is presumptively introducing for the first time. Of course, it is not necessary to enter into this topic here.

¹¹ The *locus classicus* for this formulation is, of course, Davidson (2001).

¹² Cf. for these topics Evans, (1985), Miller, (1997).

¹³ Cf. Tarski, (1997), (1944).

¹⁴ Here I am overlooking some other alternatives by which the principle of compositionality and the principle of manifestation can be made coherent with each other, because they seem less natural or (in some cases) simply unfeasible as part of a sound understanding of semantic theory. For example, one may seem inclined to think in a “No-Theory” theory by which the compositional character of a proposition may be sometimes despised in favour of a particular context of utterance where the meaning will be interpreted differently and in which the dispositions of correct usage are linked directly to the complete proposition and not to the semantic components. It is not the case here that the dispositions of usage are linked always directly to complete propositions. What a “No-Theory” will sustain is that there is no general basis by which it may be decided when the deliverances of the compositional principles should be despised. A less radical conception may sustain that the deliverances of the compositional clauses must be despised in certain precise contexts of usage when some general philosophical reasons require a different interpretation. What is common to all these alternatives is the supposition that meaning is *not always* a function of the semantic components of an expression and their mode of composition. Some other factors may produce huge differences in meaning (not coming from the explicitly indexical character of an expression), coming from the context of utterance, for example. This general approach to semantic theory will not be considered here.

¹⁵ Cf. with the clauses of tacit knowledge of the deliverances of a theory of meaning proposed by G. Evans: “we might say that a speaker *U* tacitly knows that the denotation of *a* is John iff he has dispositions such that:

$\Pi\phi\Pi\psi$ if

(i) *U* tacitly knows that an object satisfies ϕ iff it is ψ

(ii) *U* hears an utterance having the form $\phi^{\wedge}a$,

Then *U* will judge the utterance is true iff John is ψ .

Connectedly, we say that a speaker U tacitly knows that an object satisfies F iff it is bald iff he has a disposition such that:

$\Pi x \Pi \alpha$ if

(i) U tacitly knows that the denotation of α is x

(ii) U hears an utterance having the form $F \wedge \alpha$

Then U will judge that the utterance is true iff x is bald.

In these formulations, ‘ Π ’ is a universal substitutional quantifier, with variables having the following substitution classes: ϕ , names of predicate expressions of the (object) language; α , names of names of the (object) language; ψ , predicate expressions of our language (the metalanguage); and ‘x’, proper names of our language” [Evans, (1985), p. 329].

¹⁶ A position like this in semantics is usually associated with J. L. Austin. It has been now defended by Ch. Travis. Cf. for a statement of the position, Travis, (1997).

¹⁷ Probably it should not be called a semantic theory but, instead, the simple rejection of semantic theory as a theoretical fruitful enterprise.

¹⁸ Cf. for example, Dummett (1991), pp. 221-44; C. Wright, “Can a Davidsonian Meaning-Theory be Construed in Terms of Assertibility?” in Wright (1987), pp. 287-316.

¹⁹ Cf. Dummett, (1978c), pp. 358-74.

²⁰ This is the explanation of Dummett: “If I now (2.45 p.m. 12 February 1969) say, ‘I am in my College room’, I make a present-tense statement which is, as I say it, true: let us call this statement *A*. Suppose now that exactly one year later someone makes the statement (call it *B*) ‘A year ago Dummett was in his College room’. Then it is a consequence of the truth-value link that, since the statement *A* is now true, the statement *B*, made in one year’s time, is likewise true. Now, the realist claims, it is from an understanding of the truth-value link, as exemplified in such a case, that we derive a grasp of what it is for a statement in the past tense, whenever made, for example one made now, to be true” [Dummett (1978c), p. 363].

²¹ This strategy is proposed explicitly by McDowell (1998).

²² It should be noted that the problem presented here for the verifiability — and, hence, for the understanding — of propositions about mental states of persons other than oneself, need not arise if the general conception of the nature of those mental states prevents the asymmetry between the first and third person perspectives in some form or other. For example, if mental states are conceived as *identical with* some physical states of the brain, then there should not appear any problem about the public observability of mental states of a subject as far as those physical states are publicly observable; if, on the other hand, mental states are identified with dispositions of public behaviour or, simply, if they are identified with a certain class of public and characteristic behaviour, then — again — the contrast between what can be ascertained from the first-person perspective in relation with one’s own case and what can be ascertained by public criteria open to third-person scrutiny, disappears. Here, none of these positions are prejudged. The cases considered in the text simply consider first/third person contrast because under that supposition, a certain problem for realist semantics arises.

²³ I am grateful to Stephen Williams for this last point.

²⁴ It should be noted here that the contention is that one can have certain

evidence that a proposition like (12) has a definite truth value, although — of course — one does not have any evidence about what is that truth-value. If one has relevant evidence concerning the objectivity of a mathematical realm of entities, then one has also a *prima facie* strong reason to sustain that proposition (12) should have a definite truth-value. This notes should not be taken as the endorsement of any specific position in the philosophy of mathematics.

²⁵ A useful comparison with the systematic difficulties put forward here can be made with the related, although different, difficulties raised in Edwards (1995). The difficulties annotated by Edwards are related with the requirements for canonical introductions of universal quantifiers in the context of a general verificationist theory of sense, where the meaning of logical constants is fixed by the joint operation of introduction and elimination rules. It happens that a universal quantifier can only be introduced if the *a posteriori* warrants for its introduction are of the same or higher order of complexity than the introduced proposition where the universal quantification occurs. It is needed some sort of knowledge that the instances of the relevant predicate recognized are somehow “exhaustive” of the domain considered.

²⁶ This requirement is what has been called the “Generality Constraint” by Gareth Evans. Cf. Evans (1982) pp. 100-5.

²⁷ Suppose that in this possible world *w* the Huns destroyed the Roman Empire completely and ruled one thousand years, etc. In *w* we — or our counterparts, if you want — speak English, and in *w* we can construct the sentence saying that in the past Brutus stabbed Caesar.

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