

Language, Truth, and Representation Dependence

The central task of this paper is to argue that the concept of representation dependence at the heart of the debate between alethic realism and antirealism is empty. By “empty” I mean not that claims about representation dependence are false, but rather that they are devoid of real content (neither true nor false), even though they may have the appearance of sense. This paper has two main parts. Part I sets the stage and gives my argument for the emptiness of representation dependence; Part II outlines and responds to what I take to be the main objection to my position, namely, that it depends on naïve conceptions of analyticity and meaning. I will begin Part I by briefly discussing the relevant aspects of the alethic realism/antirealism debate and the general structure of my argument for the emptiness of representation dependence. Next I will lay out a key way in which Wittgenstein argues that language is autonomous, i.e., that the legitimacy of concepts cannot be verified by appeal to reality. Appealing to the autonomy of language I will then argue in detail for the claim that the notion of representation dependence mentioned above is empty.

Part I

Alethic Realism, the Autonomy of Language, and the Emptiness of Representation Dependence.

Let us define alethic realism as the view that truth is some kind of correspondence relation between truthbearers (whether statements, thoughts, beliefs, or propositions), and representation-independent facts, the truthmakers. The truthmakers are representation-independent in the sense that they are not even in part constituted by anyone’s representations of them. So, for example, the fact that a particular tree has no leaves is not even in part constituted

by someone saying or thinking, “This tree has no leaves.”¹ This kind of realism is often couched in terms of “mind independence”; however, this latter notion can be particularly unclear. The kind of dependence that concerns us is neither causal nor the trivial sense in which thoughts are mind-dependent simply because they are the thoughts of some mind. What is at issue is whether or not some “fact” X is the fact that it is because it is represented as that fact. On this latter notion of representation dependence, X could be representation-independent even if Berkeleian idealism were true, since under idealism, X would be mind-dependent in the “trivial” sense, but it would not be representation-dependent.² According to Hilary Putnam, alethic realism’s holding that all of reality is representation-independent implies that we can give but a single linguistic description of that totality of objects.³ It is in regard to the “number” of descriptions that Putnam raises the problem of conceptual relativity.

Putnam’s argument from conceptual relativity against alethic realism is supposed to show that a representation-independent description of the world is not possible. One of his key examples of conceptual relativity concerns the number of objects that exist. He illustrates his point by considering a world of two individuals, x and y.⁴ How many objects are there? According to Putnam, we could legitimately count two objects or three, namely, x and y, or x, y, and x + y. The number will depend on whether we countenance mereological sums, i.e., the idea

¹ The extent to which representations might be partially constitutive of artifacts, e.g., tables, and “social” facts, e.g., money, is an important question. However, though I won’t be doing so here, I would argue that in neither of these cases are any of the facts representation-dependent in the sense at issue in alethic realism.

² See Fumerton 2002, 4-9, for a very helpful discussion of these issues.

³ Putnam 1981, 49ff. Presumably such a description is not one that we could ever formulate, but the idea is that it would consist of a conjunction of all true, non-synonymous descriptions, e.g., “The cat is on the mat *and* the cherry is on a tree *and*...” See, e.g., Blackburn 1994, 17ff.

⁴ I am simplifying Putnam’s example; his version uses three individuals. The idea, of course, is that what holds for this imaginary world, holds for the actual world.

that the sum of any two objects is itself an object. We are free to count either way—reality does not determine which one is correct.⁵ Putnam’s point is that independent of a choice of description, i.e., representation, of the individuals, there is no determinate number of objects. Putnam is not thereby claiming that *all* truthmakers are representation-dependent, e.g., he does not think a tree is a tree because we describe it as such.⁶ Rather, he is claiming that alethic realism does not make sense because it holds that the world consists of a totality of representation-independent objects when, in fact, what counts as an object is representation-dependent, and thus there is no totality of representation-independent objects.⁷

Both alethic realism and Putnam’s opposing views are flawed. Aside from problems unique to each, the problem that they share is their talk of representation-dependence and independence. We can say that different languages allow for alternative descriptions of the world, *and* truth is a matter of some kind of correspondence between truthbearers and truthmakers; however, we cannot talk *sensibly* about the truthmakers as being representation-dependent or representation-independent.⁸ This is because claiming that facts are representation-independent implies that sense can be made of the idea that there are some objects, properties, and relations that are the REAL objects, properties, and relations—the ones

⁵ See, e.g., Putnam 2004.

⁶ Though he does argue that the question of whether a tree is identical to the space-time region it occupies is similar to the whether the number of objects is 2 or 3 when there are 2 individuals, i.e., it depends on a choice of description. See Putnam 1988, 112ff.

⁷ I am ignoring here the notion of incompatibility that Putnam draws on to argue that there can be multiple descriptions of the “same” state of affairs that cannot be conjoined. In an unpublished manuscript, I argue that this aspect of Putnam’s argument from conceptual relativity is what makes his position flawed.

⁸ However, alethic realism should only be seen as applying to certain types of statements or areas of discourse. I cannot argue this here, but I argue elsewhere that there are important differences between the ways in which “The book is on the table,” “November 4th, 2009 is a Wednesday,” and “It’s illegal to run a red light in the US” (among others) are true. Alethic realism works well for the first, but not the latter two.

that are *really* there, independently of our representations. Drawing on what Wittgenstein has called the autonomy of language, I will argue that such claims about *real* objects is empty, not simply because we have to use language to formulate a description (that would be tautologous—and beside the point), but because any attempt to “point” (refer) to reality to verify that, “There→ those are the true objects, properties, and relations,” would require the concepts of those objects, properties, and relations. Therefore, any attempt to confirm or disconfirm which concepts pick out what is *really* there would be circular, and thus talk of the REAL objects, properties, and relations is empty. Talk of representation-independent objects is not false, but empty (lacking sense, though appearing at first to have sense). Thus, since “Facts are representation-independent” is empty, so is “It is not the case that facts are representation-independent.” And since “Facts are representation-*dependent*” is true if, and only if, “It is not the case that facts are representation-independent” is true, but the latter is empty, so is “Facts are representation-*dependent*.” I need to defend and flesh out this line of argument. The first step in doing so will be to articulate Wittgenstein’s conception of the autonomy of language.

The Autonomy of Language

In the *Big Typescript*, Wittgenstein articulates a set of ideas that he refers to as both the autonomy of language and the arbitrariness of grammar.⁹ What Wittgenstein means by grammar is a difficult question, but for our purposes we can simply note that he made a strong connection between grammar as rules for the use of words and language as a meaningful, normative practice

⁹ The *Big Typescript* is very different from the *Philosophical Investigations* in both form and content, though some of its remarks did end up in the *Philosophical Investigations*. The relationship between the *Big Typescript* and the *Philosophical Investigations* is important and complicated. See, for example, Stern 1995. One of the key differences between the *Big Typescript* and the *Philosophical Investigations* is that the former is much more dogmatic in tone than the latter. For our purpose, we will extract key lines of argument from the *Big Typescript* without thereby attributing our use of them to Wittgenstein as the author of the *Philosophical Investigations*. I emphasize this point because I generally agree with Stern that the author of the *Philosophical Investigations* does not have the same project as the author of the *Big Typescript*.

more generally. For our purposes, we should think of linguistic meaning whenever we speak of grammar. The central arguments of this paper, however, do not depend on a Wittgensteinian theory of meaning (whatever that might be, if anything). So, while some theories of meaning will presumably be ruled out by what follows, what will be said characterizing grammar as arbitrary (language as autonomous) is meant to apply to an appropriate conception of meaning.¹⁰ Let us now look at two of the central ways in which language is autonomous.¹¹

1) Wittgenstein writes: “Grammar is not accountable to any reality. It is grammatical rules that determine meaning (constitute it) and so they themselves are not answerable to any meaning and to that extent are arbitrary.”¹² Here we have two important points. First, grammar is not determined by reality and second, grammar determines meaning and so is not itself determined by something outside or antecedent to it. Grammar is not accountable to reality, since grammar determines the sense of a proposition and it is only when grammar is in place that a proposition can be compared to reality: “What belongs to grammar are all the conditions (the method) necessary for comparing the proposition with reality. That is, all the conditions necessary for the understanding (of the sense).”¹³ The question of agreement between language and reality is possible only once grammar is in place, once meaning is established: “The

¹⁰ One of the many difficulties here is the question of the extent to which we should identify grammatical rules with analytic statements. Here I will simply note that the extent to which grammar should be thought of along the lines of analyticity is an important question, but one I will not address; again, for our purposes, we should associate grammar, meaning, and analyticity, without necessarily identifying them. See Schroeder 2009 for an interesting discussion of the relationship between analytic truths and grammatical propositions.

¹¹ There are further ways in which Wittgenstein conceived of language as autonomous. For a fuller treatment of those see Arrington 1993 and Forster 2004.

¹² Wittgenstein 1974, p184. Compare: “. . . the rules must be laid down arbitrarily, i.e. are not to be read off from reality like a description. For when I say that the rules are arbitrary, I mean that they are not determined by reality in the way the description of reality is. And that means: it is nonsense to say that they agree with reality, e.g. that the rules for the words “blue” and “red” agree with the facts about those colours etc.” Wittgenstein 1974, p246.

¹³ Wittgenstein 1974, 88.

connection between ‘language and reality’ is made by definitions of words, and these belong to grammar, so that language remains self-contained and autonomous.”¹⁴

2) Grammar is unverifiable, i.e., any attempt to justify grammar by verification will be circular or irrelevant, and thus the idea of justifying grammar is empty. The basic idea is that any attempt to justify grammar will require either a description of or a pointing to the part of the world that is to justify or disconfirm the grammar in question. If the description or pointing is to have a sense, then some grammar must be employed in the description or to disambiguate the pointing. If the grammar employed is that which is to be verified, then the verification is circular. Wittgenstein expresses these thoughts so:

Grammatical conventions cannot be justified by describing what is represented. Any such description already presupposes the grammatical rules. That is to say, if anything is to count as nonsense in the grammar which is to be justified, then it cannot at the same time pass for sense in the grammar of the propositions that justify it (etc.).¹⁵

The possibility of the verification or justification of grammatical rules implies the possibility of the rules turning out to be incorrect upon comparison with the world. Centrally, since grammar determines meaning and not truth or falsehood, grammar’s being “correct” or “incorrect” amounts to a given proposition’s having or lacking meaning/sense. Given this, the propositions used in an attempt to justify grammar, propositions whose sense is determined by the rules in question, cannot themselves have a meaning if those rules “turned out wrong.” That is, the verifying proposition cannot at one time have meaning, which is required if reality is to be

¹⁴ Wittgenstein 1974, 97. It is important to realize that the claim is not, nor does it require, that language is created through stipulations of meaning. In discussing Wittgenstein’s views on language, Eike von Savigny rightly notes that stipulating the meanings of expressions requires a language with which to do the stipulating, and thus “if meaning is due to (stipulated) interpretation or to laid-down rules, there can be neither meaning nor rules of language....” Von Savigny 1991, 317. However languages first came about, we are ultimately free to determine the meanings of our words—though there are certainly pragmatic and physiological limitations on this freedom.

¹⁵ Wittgenstein 1975, 55.

unambiguously referenced, and subsequent to being employed in the process of verification, turn out to be nonsense.

Similar considerations hold for any kind of “pointing” to the world to justify concepts and conceptual lines. If one were to point to a glass of water and say, “Look, a liquid really is different from a solid,” the pointing is ambiguous without the grammar/meaning of “water,” “liquid,” “solid,” etc. in place. The attempt to point and justify the concepts of “solid” and “liquid” begs the question. What counts as a difference is not simply read off of the world and then either accurately or inaccurately reflected by our concepts; the conceptual “lines” of a language cannot be justified by reference to reality, since such references presuppose those very “lines.”

Alternatively, if some other grammar is appealed to to justify the grammar of a language, instead of reality itself, then the second grammar is irrelevant. This is for two reasons: first because a difference in grammar implies a difference in meaning—so one grammar will not be cognitively relevant to another; the one would “talk past” the other. Second, the other grammar appealed to would presumably also require a justification, and so on *ad infinitum*, and so would not itself lend ultimate justification to the first grammar.

To help facilitate an understanding of the autonomy of language, let us imagine a people who do not have separate color and shape concepts. Rather, they have different words for a red circle and a blue circle, but also for a blue circle and a blue triangle, and they call two red circles by the same word.¹⁶ So they conceive of one square that is of one color as being a different kind

¹⁶ Compare: “And what about people who only had colour-shape concepts? Should I say of them that they do not *see* that a green leaf and a green table—when I show them these things—have the same colour or have something in common? What if it had never ‘occurred to them’ to compare differently shaped objects of the same colour with one another? Due to their particular background, this comparison was of no importance to them, or had importance only in very exceptional cases, so that no linguistic tool was developed.” (Wittgenstein 1978, III §130)

of thing from another square of a different color. I assume that it is safe to say that for many English speakers, these people would not just have a strange conception of colors and shapes. Rather, they would have the wrong conception, for *if we only look at the world, we can see that there really is a difference between shapes and colors, and those differences justify our color grammar*. It is in relation to this way of thinking that Wittgenstein writes:

One is tempted to justify rules of grammar by sentences like “But there really are four primary colours”. And the saying that the rules of grammar are arbitrary is directed against the possibility of this justification, which is constructed on the model of justifying a sentence by pointing to what verifies it. Yet can’t it after all be said that in some sense or other the grammar of colour-words characterizes the world as it actually is? One would like to say: May I not really look in vain for a fifth primary colour? Doesn’t one put the primary colours together because there is a similarity among them, or at least put *colours* together, contrasting them with e.g. shapes or notes, because there is a similarity among them?¹⁷

Indeed, one wants to say, there are similarities among the colors that make us group colors together, just as there are similarities among shapes that make us group shapes together. It is because we recognize these similarities that our grammar is better, more complete, than the people with color-shape concepts.

But consider:

It’s clear that a mistake arises from, e.g., saying: grammar would have to speak of four primary colors <<words>>, because there were four primary colors. As if the case were be comparable to: Astronomy must speak of the four moons of Jupiter, because there are four moons. (My translation)¹⁸

“If people only had colour-shape concepts, they would have a special word for a red square and one for a red circle, and one for a green circle, etc. Now if they were to see a new *green* figure, should no similarity to the green circle, etc. occur to them? And shouldn’t it occur to them that there is a similarity between green circles and red circles? But what do I want to say counts as showing that this similarity has occurred to them?

They might, *for example*, have a concept of ‘going together’; and still not think of using colour words.

In fact there are tribes which only count up to 5 and they have probably not felt it necessary to describe anything that can’t be described in this way.” (Wittgenstein 1978, III §155)

¹⁷ Wittgenstein 1967, §331. It might appear odd that Wittgenstein speaks of four primary colors, but the number depends on the medium you are using. With paint the primary colors are red, blue, and yellow. With light the primaries are red, green, and blue. With CMYK, for printing, the colors are Cyan, Magenta, yellow, and black.

¹⁸ Wittgenstein 2000, *Big Typescript*, backside, p193. Original German: “Es ist klar, daß es einer Verwechslung

The mistake lies in the idea that grammar, our conceptual distinctions, can be verified in the way that empirical claims such as the number of moons of Jupiter can be verified. It is because of the color concepts that we have that we can we can determinately refer to reality in reference to them and their possible combination. Those concepts must already be “working” if we are to successfully refer to the colored aspects of reality; and thus we cannot refer to reality to justify them. In contrast, reality does determine whether it is correct to speak of Jupiter’s having four moons. We do not read off the world that there are such-and-such colors, or that there are such things as moons, in the same way that we read off a description of what color an object is or how many moons a particular planet has.¹⁹ Therefore, instead of saying something like, “Because of the inherent combinatorial nature of particular light waves, we are correct to say that there are primary colors,” we should say that given what we mean by ‘color’, ‘combination’, ‘mixing’, ‘primary’, etc., it makes sense to speak of such things as primary colors. But that it makes sense does not mean that it is correct in the way that a description of reality is either correct or incorrect.

One objection that I want to address now is the following: assuming we cannot justify or falsify a concept by appeal to reality, can we not show that it is “problematic” in other ways? For example, one might say that the concept of a round square is illegitimate (perhaps even meaningless) because it is self-contradictory. And on some interpretations doesn’t Wittgenstein

entspringt, z.B., zu sagen: die Grammatik müsse von vier primären Farben <<Wörtern>> reden, weil es vier primäre Farben gäbe. Als wäre der Fall vergleichbar dem: die Astronomie muß von vier Jupitermonden sprechen, weil es vier Jupitermonde gibt.”

¹⁹ Compare: “. . . the rules must be laid down arbitrarily, i.e. are not to be read off from reality like a description. For when I say that the rules are arbitrary, I mean that they are not determined by reality in the way the description of reality is. And that means: it is nonsense to say that they agree with reality, e.g. that the rules for the words “blue” and “red” agree with the facts about those colours etc.” (Wittgenstein 1974, p246)

show that the concept of a private language is empty or nonsensical?²⁰ And aren't I, the author of this paper, trying to show that the concept of representation dependence is empty?

The response to this objection is to point out that while a concept may be shown to be empty or self-contradictory in some way other than by appeal to reality, this does not undermine the sense in which grammar is unverifiable by appeals to reality. Nor will it affect the central argument presented below, namely, that since it does not make sense to say which objects, properties, and relations *really* exist independently of our descriptions, that the idea of representation dependence is empty. Admittedly, as the above examples indicate, there may be reasons to call into question the legitimacy of a concept, but they will not show that that which exists is after all dependent (or not) on our linguistic representations. For if a concept is shown to be empty or self-contradictory, then it cannot be used to make any true or false assertions about what exists, and thus will not have any bearing on whether something might possibly exist dependently or independently of a representation.²¹ Let us now apply the above senses of the autonomy of language to the idea of representation dependence.

Representation Dependence and the Autonomy of Language

Let us distinguish in a general way between a weak and a strong sense of representation dependence:

Weak Sense of Representation Dependence: There are truths if, and only if, there are linguistic truthbearers.

²⁰ See, e.g., Candlish, S. and G. Wrisley 2008, for a discussion of the differences between interpreting the idea of a private language as nonsense vs. its being false that there is or can be such a language.

²¹ There is, perhaps, a further way in which a concept might be shown to be illegitimate, namely, in the way that one might argue that universals don't exist. However, this does not touch on the non-verifiability of grammar/meaning/concepts. Presumably no one would describe or point to reality to justify the existence of universals. And further, saying that universals don't exist is equivalent to saying it is false that universals exist, which presupposes the meaningfulness of "universals." The autonomy of language concerns meaningfulness of language, not the truth of existence claims.

Strong Sense of Representation Dependence: For all X, X is X if, and only if, it is linguistically represented as X.

The key aspect of the *weak sense* is that it denies the existence of non-linguistic, eternal propositions that, *inter alia*, act as truthbearers. On this weak sense of representation dependence, there is no truth without a thought, belief, statement, etc., i.e., something cast in language, to act as truthbearer.²² That is, of course, not to deny that there is a world independent of language, it just implies that truth is a property of truthbearers that are linguistic entities.²³ The *strong sense* of representation dependence says that what exists and what facts obtain do so if, and only if, they are represented as the objects, properties, and relations, “that they are.” A key feature of this strong sense is that it provides for a relativism of ontology to language; different languages can provide for (radically) different ontologies, each of which is equally correct.²⁴

One might wonder if Wittgenstein’s “thesis” of the autonomy of language would not imply the strong sense of representation dependence. I will argue that it does not. In fact, we can appeal to it to show that the very idea of representation dependence is empty. To see this, let us look at a simplified way of thinking about concepts, representation, and truth (though it is simplified, I would like to think that a more detailed and robust description would allow for similar results).

²² It is an interesting question whether there can be thoughts and beliefs that are not linguistic.

²³ This is a controversial position; but not one that I will address here.

²⁴ One might think that this strong sense is immediately incoherent, since it claims that something exists if, and only if, it is represented as such, which might seem to imply that it must already exist if it is to be represented, but cannot yet exist until it is represented. That is, indeed, a problematic aspect of the strong sense of representation dependence, though one with which we will not engage..

It is a further question of whether ontological/conceptual relativity requires incommensurability or failure of translation in the way that Donald Davidson seems to think that it does (See, e.g., Davidson 2001). Given what I say about representation dependence, the question is beside the point.

We define a concept C by giving some set of properties that are constitutive of the concept and which something has to satisfy if it is to fall under that concept.²⁵ We can employ the concept in a sentence and it is at that point that we introduce the possibility of truth and falsity. We might say, “That is a C” and this is true if the thing referred to satisfies the conditions for being a C as specified by our definition of C, false otherwise.

At this point if we are thinking of such “natural” objects as trees, rocks, dogs, flowers, etc., we are presumably *not* likely to think of the described state of affairs as being representation-dependent in the strong sense. But if we start drawing “odd” conceptual lines, we might have a different intuition. For example, let’s introduce the concept of a “tree-dirt-area,” for which the constitutive properties are something like, “a living tree of any kind and a sufficient amount of soil and water for it to remain alive under normal conditions.” We can then form true or false sentences with it. Point to a dead tree and call it a “tree-dirt-area” and you speak falsely.

Now one might object that there aren’t *really* any tree-dirt-areas. And by doing so one might be saying that though there aren’t any tree-dirt-areas in the way that there are rocks and dogs, the concept can still be used meaningfully. And when we do use it, we are approaching, if not already at, the strong sense of representation dependence, for such objects do not exist on their own independently of our talking about them.

A reason one might feel uncomfortable saying that such things as tree-dirt-areas *really* exist is that we seem to thereby admit anything as an object into our ontology so long as there is

²⁵ It is, of course, an important and difficult question whether necessary and sufficient conditions can be given for a concept and in what sense they would be analytic of the concept. I am bracketing these important and difficult issues.

a concept to “pick it out”—and thus we have a kind of ontological explosion.²⁶ And philosophers tend to be troubled by the possibility of such an explosion of entities.²⁷ We can easily imagine a philosopher saying in response to this ontological explosion, “But what are the real parts, the real objects, properties, and relations that exist independently of our representations? For they must be there!” But this question falls apart when we bring the autonomy of language to bear on it. The autonomy of language undermines the meaningfulness of asking, “What is there REALLY?” Instead, we can say that there is this and that there is that; but we must leave out the “really.” It is not the case that things such as tree-dirt-areas exist or do not exist representation-dependently in the strong sense, for the whole notion of representation dependence is empty. Here is why.

There are three “possibilities” regarding representation dependence in the strong sense.²⁸

- 1) Some things are representation-dependent in the strong sense and some are not.**
- 2) All things are representation-dependent in the strong sense.**
- 3) Nothing is representation-dependent in the strong sense.**

As a preliminary to looking at these three possibilities, I want to note that there is a perfectly legitimate and ordinary way of saying that Xs really exist. That is, when the existence of something is in doubt, e.g., Sasquatch or ghosts, or remaining dodos, one can sensibly claim that the X(s) in question really exist or do not. One then can reasonably be expected to give evidence for the truth of the claim. Importantly, the claim that Xs really exist in the sense of

²⁶ Ernest Sosa covers this ground in Sosa 1999. For reasons that will become clear shortly, I think his approach is ultimately flawed.

²⁷ Not all of course. One imagines Nelson Goodman of *Ways of World Making* not being terribly bothered by this.

²⁸ I say “possibilities” with scare quotes because if the whole notion of representation dependence in the strong sense is empty, then there really aren’t any possibilities regarding it.

existing independently of our representations is not at all akin to this just outlined legitimate sense of claiming that Xs really exist.

Regarding 1), “Some things are representation-dependent in the strong sense and some are not,” it says that some things are what they are independently of our representations—they *really* exist—and other things exist only relative to a description. However, there is no way to refer to reality so as to verify the representation-independent reality of that which one supposes is representation-independent. For example, we might suppose that the concept of a “tree” is the concept of something that is representation-independent and that the concept of a “tree-dirt-area” is the concept of something that is representation-dependent. However, any attempt to reference reality to confirm or disconfirm the “real,” representation-independent existence of trees requires a meaningful representation of trees. One cannot determinately, i.e. unambiguously, point to reality in the absence of a conceptual/linguistic apparatus. And if it is meaningful to talk about trees, then one cannot then refer to reality to show that reality confirms the real existence of trees in the sense of their being there independently of our representations. When referencing reality with either “tree” or “tree-dirt-area,” trees and tree-dirt-areas are on the same level regarding their representation dependence, namely, neither are representation-dependent nor representation-independent. Claiming that trees are real objects whereas tree-dirt-areas, if anything, are representation-dependent in the strong sense is merely to express a psychological bias in favor of the familiarity of the concept of trees.

Because of the possible slipperiness of the above line of argument, here it is again stated slightly differently. The notion an object X’s existing independently of our representations implies that there is a principled difference between those objects that do exist independently of our representations and those that are representation-dependent (even if the latter group remains

forever uninstantiated). But one cannot in principle refer to reality in a way that would allow us to make sense of such a distinction. We cannot use language to refer to reality to determine a difference between the objects that are really representation-dependent and the ones that are not. This is because, as we saw in the discussion of the autonomy of language, language must be used if we are to refer successfully to reality (an ostensive gesture will not succeed without language due to its ambiguity)—we cannot then refer to reality to verify that our language has accurately reflected the existence of things that exist representation-independently.

Thus, if C is a meaningful concept, then we can employ it to ask whether there is anything that satisfies that concept. But the satisfaction or a concept's failure to be satisfied does not speak for or against whether that which satisfies it, or which might satisfy it, really exists in the sense of existing independently of our representations. The only way to “disconfirm” the concept of, e.g., tree-dirt-areas, is to show that the concept is meaningless. However, showing that it is meaningless cannot be done by reference to reality, nor can showing that it is meaningless in some other way count for or against its being representation-dependent. Therefore, there is no sense to be made of the idea that some things are representation-independent in the strong sense. And therefore there is no sense to be made of the claim that some things are representation-dependent in the strong sense *and some are not representation-dependent in the strong sense*.

Regarding 2), “All things are representation-dependent in the strong sense,” if it is to make sense, then it must imply that *it is false that something is representation-independent*. But if we cannot make sense of saying that something is representation-independent (from 1), then we cannot make sense of “it is false that something is representation-independent,” since attaching “it is false that” to something that is senseless, does not thereby give it sense. And

since the latter's making sense is a necessary condition for 2)'s making sense, but the latter does not, neither does 2).

Regarding 3), "Nothing is representation-dependent in the strong sense," it implies that all that exists is representation-independent. But if we cannot make sense of saying that something is representation-independent (from 1), then we cannot say that everything is representation-independent.

If "possibilities" 1-3 are empty, then so is talk for or against the strong sense of representation dependence. It is neither true nor false that, e.g., water, trees, tigers, mountains, tree-dirt-areas, archipelagos, etc., exist representation-dependently/independently. A further upshot of the emptiness of the concept of representation dependence is that the question of whether the existence of some/all objects, properties, and relations is relative to a conceptual scheme is also empty. The conceptual scheme relativity of ontology presupposes the strong sense of representation dependence. So if the latter goes, then so does the former.²⁹ Different languages may speak of different things, but those things don't exist relative to those languages, though the truths about them might be representation-dependent in the weak sense.

Part II

An Objection and a Reply

There are, of course, a number of objections that one could make to the position for which I have argued in this paper. In the space remaining, I will address what I take to be the most problematic, namely, that the appeal to the autonomy of language in the argument for the emptiness of representation dependence relies on a naïve conception of meaning that is no longer

²⁹ As I said in an earlier footnote, the extent to which representations might be partially constitutive of artifacts, e.g., tables, and "social" facts, e.g., money, is an important question. However, though I won't be doing so here, I would argue that in neither of these cases are any of the facts representation-dependent in the strong sense.

tenable given the objections by Quine in “Two Dogmas of Empiricism” regarding the analytic-synthetic distinction.

The Autonomy of Language and the Analytic-Synthetic Distinction

I am concerned in this section to respond to the objection that the autonomy of language is only viable on a naïve understanding of meaning and analyticity. More specifically, one might object that it is possible that language is autonomous, if, and only if, there are statements that are not synthetic, which can be used to give/determine the meaning of words. However, Quine has shown that the notion of analyticity is unusable; therefore, language cannot be autonomous. Against this, one might appeal to Wittgenstein’s notion of grammar as constituting meaning and argue then that grammatical rules are not the same thing as analytic statements, and thus analyticity is not needed to explain the autonomy of language, only the different and more “sophisticated” notion of a grammatical rule is. However, while I am sympathetic to such moves, I want the position I am advocating to be attractive to someone who does not necessarily endorse a Wittgensteinian view of grammar and meaning.

This is neither the place to give an account of linguistic meaning (if indeed a full account of linguistic meaning is even possible), nor the place to defend fully against Quine’s objections to the analytic-synthetic distinction. Instead, my strategy will be to show some of the problems with denying the analytic-synthetic distinction. Let us begin by discussing a distinction that Paul Boghossian uses in his analysis of Quine’s arguments against the analytic-synthetic distinction. Boghossian defines “Meaning Realism” as follows:

MR: 1) There are properties of the form “...means Q” and 2) there are utterances, e.g., S, where S means Q at time t .³⁰

³⁰ This is not the way Boghossian words it; but I take it that I have captured his meaning (assuming such a capturing of meaning is possible).

So, e.g., “In Peter’s mouth at time t , the token inscription ‘cow’ means *cow*, the token inscription ‘snow is white’ means *that snow is white*.”³¹ We could presumably replace “utterances” with whatever would designate the meaningful instances of language found in books, on signs, etc. The point of meaning realism is simply that there is such a thing as linguist meaning and some written or spoken signs³² have it. Boghossian takes it as obvious that the analytic-synthetic distinction is inconsistent with MR’s falsity.³³ Since MR consists of a conjunction of 1) and 2), there are two ways that MR could be false. The view that denies that 2), i.e., that the property of the form “...means Q” is instantiated by any token utterances, he calls “Meaning-Eliminativism.” Since 2) depends on 1), i.e., that there is such a thing as properties of the form “...means Q,” he calls the view that denies 1)—and thus 2)—“Meaning-Nihilism.” Both meaning-eliminativism and meaning-nihilism are versions of *meaning irrealism*.

Boghossian claims that the majority view (presumably in Anglo-American philosophical circles) is that Quine successfully undermined the analytic-synthetic distinction, but he went too far in his advocacy of some form of meaning irrealism.³⁴ For the rest of this paper, I am going to assume that some form of meaning realism is correct. Importantly, as Boghossian points out, meaning realism is consistent with understanding “...means Q” as either a relational property

³¹ Boghossian 1994, 125. Importantly, then, the property “...means Q” can be a property of either words or sentences/statements.

³² I use “signs” in this sense to mean an uninterpreted mark or sound—a symbol would, then, would be a sign together with its meaning (or a sign used meaningfully if one doesn’t like the talk of meanings).

³³ Boghossian 1994, 125.

³⁴ Boghossian 1999, 331.

between a sign and its meaning or a monadic property of the sign itself.³⁵ So, we needn't decide on an exact, positive account of meaning.

I have purposely avoided giving an account of the analytic, since I want to leave it open; and I will continue to do so. Instead let us consider what it would mean to combine meaning realism with a denial of the analytic-synthetic distinction. There are a number of ways that one might deny that distinction. Putnam, e.g., at one point argues that what he calls "one-criterion words" are the only ones that are truly analytic. An example of a one-criterion word is "vixen." It has only one criterion that determines what counts as a vixen, namely, being a female fox. Nothing could challenge that one criterion without also challenging the meaning of "vixen."³⁶ That is, according to Putnam, the criteria that constitute the meanings of words that have more than just one criterion could, in some instances at least, change without that changing the "meaning" of those words.³⁷ Putnam holds, though, that there is only a limited number of one-criterion, analytically definable words in a natural language.³⁸ Quine, of course, did not mean for his arguments to show that there were only a limited number of analytic statements. Rather, Quine was interested in showing that the idea of analyticity is not workable at all.

Boghossian, however, notes that those who endorse Quine's attack on the analytic in "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" are:

divided on whether to read [Quine's rejection of the analytic] as the claim that the notion of analyticity does not have a well-defined, determinate content, or whether to read it

³⁵ Boghossian 1994, 129-130. I don't want to make too much of the notion of a property here either. Presumably meaning realism is amenable to different, though maybe not all, views of properties.

³⁶ Putnam 1975, 44-45.

³⁷ Putnam 1975, 44-45. Putnam is playing on the ambiguity of "meaning" between intension and extension, sense and reference.

³⁸ Putnam 1983, 89.

merely as claiming that, although it has intelligible content, it is necessarily uninstantiated.³⁹

Boghossian writes that Quine seems to go back and forth between these two possible readings in “Two Dogmas of Empiricism.” Though it is important to note it, we do not need to settle this matter here. My impression is that a view such as Putnam’s, i.e., one that does not outright deny the analytic, is a minority view, and that the majority who go along with Quine also go along with his wholesale rejection of the analytic; and I suspect that they do so along the lines of saying that the notion of analyticity is not well-defined or definable.

So, how would it look to combine meaning realism with a wholesale rejection of the analytic? As Laurence Bonjour points out, the analytic and synthetic are “normally construed as mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive terms....”⁴⁰ Thus, the wholesale rejection of the analytic would mean that whatever kind of property “...means Q” is, whether relational or monadic, statements that specify Q will be synthetic. But how should we understand the nature of synthetic statements? Bonjour defines a statement as synthetic if, and only if, it is not analytic.⁴¹ However, this will not do as a definition of the synthetic if there are no analytic statements. According to A. J. Ayer a statement is synthetic “when its validity is determined by the facts of experience.”⁴² But this “definition” rules out the possibility of synthetic a priori statements, as traditionally understood to be statements knowable independent of experience yet synthetic. While Ayer and Quine were not sympathetic to the idea of the synthetic a priori, we shouldn’t rule it out by definition. Kant’s notion of a synthetic judgment as one where the

³⁹ Boghossian 1994, 123.

⁴⁰ Bonjour 1998, 33 fn. 4.

⁴¹ Bonjour 1998, 33.

⁴² Ayer 1952, 78.

connection between the subject and the predicate is not thought through identity, and where the predicate adds something to the concept in the subject position, is not terribly clear, particularly without his contrasting notion of an analytic judgment.⁴³ Already, we see that a rejection of the analytic results in problems specifying an unbiased notion of the synthetic.

Again, while I do not want to rule out the possibility of the synthetic a priori, let us give Quine what he would presumably want out of the idea of a synthetic statement, so that we might show some of the problems with a rejection of the analytic and the adoption of the synthetic along empiricist lines. Thus, let's define "synthetic statement" as follows:

Synthetic Statement: a statement *S* is synthetic if, and only if, it is true or false because of the contingent state of the world at a given time *t* (where *t* can be any given span of time, i.e., not just a particular moment).

We should notice immediately that this leaves the status of logical and mathematical truths rather problematic. If there are no analytic truths, does that imply that logical and mathematical truths are synthetic? Not necessarily; we might consider them to be synthetic a priori. Kant famously took the statement " $5 + 7 = 12$ " to be synthetic a priori. However, as we have already noted, the above understanding of the synthetic would seem to rule out the possibility of the synthetic a priori.

If we agree that the above definition of the synthetic is problematic if attributed to mathematical and logical truths, then we can 1) appeal to a notion of the synthetic that is more amenable to mathematical and logical truths, 2) we can claim that mathematical and logical truths are neither analytic nor synthetic, or 3) we can abandon the denial that there are no analytic statements and say that there are at least some, namely, mathematical and logical truths.

⁴³ Kant 1787, A7 = B10-B11.

I assume that however we tweak the meaning of “synthetic statement” we will not feel comfortable saying that mathematical and logical truths are synthetic—so 1) is out.⁴⁴

Regarding 2), Bertrand Russell at one point writes, “Everything that is a proposition of logic has got to be in some sense or other like a tautology. It has got to be something that has some peculiar quality, which I do not know how to define, that belongs to logical propositions and not to others.”⁴⁵ Thus, logical statements would be neither analytic nor synthetic. However, even if Russell is right about logical statements, and that is a big if, what he says about logic would not hold for mathematical statements.⁴⁶

If what has been said so far is correct, then 3) will also be unacceptable for someone following Quine in the rejection of the analytic. However, even if we accepted 3), there are reasons to think that we would have trouble making sense of logical truth along analytic lines, for, as Quine argues, analyticity requires language and the use of language itself depends on logic.⁴⁷ At this point, let us note that an account of mathematical and logical statements is problematic if all statements are synthetic in the above sense. Let us now move on to further problems with denying the analytic-synthetic distinction.

Given the above definition of “synthetic statement,” what follows for non-logical/mathematical statements that specify the meaning of words? For the time being let’s stay

⁴⁴ We should note that given Quine’s holism and web of belief metaphor, and the fact that he says that we could conceivably revise even the truths of logic (Quine 1953, 43), he would indeed say that mathematical and logical statements are in some sense synthetic, though closer to the center of the web. However, given the contentious nature of such claims, I am assuming that many philosophers would not go along with calling mathematical and logical truths synthetic—though I recognize that the issue is complicated and that one could reasonably expect an argument for why they are not synthetic.

⁴⁵ Russell 1985, 107-108.

⁴⁶ Perhaps if logicism were the correct view, then mathematics could be ultimately seen as a system of tautologies. However, I don’t think I am alone in my skepticisms about logicism’s being the right view.

⁴⁷ Quine 1976, 77-106.

away from “natural kind” terms such as “water” and “gold.” Natural kinds will be addressed below. For ease, then, let’s begin with an example that is neither an artifact nor a natural kind term. I’ll take “river” as the first example. The OED’s first definition of the first entry for “river” reads: “A copious stream of water flowing in a channel towards the sea, a lake, or another stream.” Let us assume for the sake of argument that the OED has captured the meaning of “river.” If we deny that there are any analytic statements, then that means that “A river is a copious stream of water flowing in a channel towards the sea, a lake, or another stream” (call this sentence “R”) is synthetic. This in turn means that that sentence is true, assuming it is true, because of how the world is at some time t —and not because of the meaning it has or our being able to convert it into a logical truth by substituting synonyms for synonyms.⁴⁸ We should note that by saying that it is synthetic, we are not merely specifying the contingent connection between the sign “river” and the sign(s) “a copious stream of water flowing in a channel towards the sea, a lake, or another stream.” That we use the latter to specify the meaning of the former is clearly dependent upon how the world is at some time t regardless of whether R is analytic or synthetic. Thus, the claim that R is synthetic is presumably that what makes R true, *given the meaning that those signs have*, is the way the world is at some time t .

However, it is not, I maintain, clear how to make sense of the above understanding of R’s being synthetic. Presumably it means that it could turn out to be false that rivers are copious streams of water flowing in a channel towards the sea, a lake, or another stream. At one point, Putnam argues in a way that would imply this is a possible way for R to be synthetic. He uses the example of pencils. The meaning of such nouns has often been viewed as a set of individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions, or, if not that, then some cluster of

⁴⁸ Or however we should understand analyticity (assuming we can intelligibly conceive of it at all).

conditions, a sufficient number of which suffice for identity. Given these models of meaning, Putnam claims, we might be tempted to think that pencils are analytically artifacts. However, it is quite conceivable that we are mistaken about this and that pencils are really a kind of organism. If this is conceivable, “then it is epistemically possible that *pencils could turn out to be organisms*. It follows that *pencils are artifacts* is not epistemically necessary in the strongest sense and, *a fortiori*, not analytic.”⁴⁹ Ignoring the fact that rivers are not artifacts, is such a way of understanding R’s being synthetic plausible?

If R were synthetic in the sense that it could turn out that rivers are not copious streams of water flowing in a channel towards the sea, a lake, or another stream, then we would have made a serious error about what we thought were copious streams of water.... Perhaps what we thought were copious streams of water are actually never-before-discovered life forms whose bodies consist of constantly recycled water. But here the problem is that we must settle whether such a result implies that “river” doesn’t really mean “a copious stream of water flowing in a channel towards the sea, a lake, or another stream” or instead that there are no rivers, or at least fewer rivers than we thought, on earth. In other words, if it turned out that the things we had all along called “rivers” were not copious streams of water flowing in a channel towards the sea, a lake, or another stream, that would require either a change of the meaning of “river,” thus making R false, or would it imply that our statements about the earth’s “rivers” were false. This is a difficult question, but consider this: if settling the question depends in any way on our stipulating/deciding that it is one or the other, then even if we settled in favor of saying that R is false, R would not be synthetic. This is because R’s falsity would not be solely a matter of how the world is at time *t*, but how the world is at time *t* and our deciding to count the way the world

⁴⁹ Putnam 1975, 242.

is at time t as falsifying R instead of falsifying our other admittedly synthetic statements employing “river.”⁵⁰ Moreover, I have a hard time believing that there is anything that would force us to say that the R is false instead of saying that at least some of what we had previously identified as rivers actually were not. Therefore, I conclude that at least for words such as “river,” it is implausible to claim that their meaning is given by some set of *synthetic* statements.⁵¹ This leaves open whether their meaning is given by analytic statements, however analyticity is to be best understood, or whether meaning is determined along the lines of Wittgenstein’s idea of grammar (grammatical rules).

Concluding Remarks

I have argued that the strong sense of representation dependence is empty since no sense can be made of verifying the language-independent reality of what we can meaningfully talk about. Thus, there is no sense to be made of the idea of objects that are really there independent of our descriptions; and thus, there is no sense to be made of the idea that there are objects that are not really there, but only products of our descriptions. This does not imply some kind of linguistic idealism, for the autonomy of language does not imply that what exists is created by language—that would be to reaffirm the representation dependence of everything. It “simply”

⁵⁰ That is “river” with the meaning of “a copious stream of water flowing in a channel towards the sea, a lake, or another stream.” Regarding my claim that stipulating/deciding would make R’s truth or falsity not solely dependent on how the world is at some time t , and thus R would not be synthetic, one might object that the stipulating/deciding is itself a feature of how the world is at some time t , and thus R would be synthetic after all. The proper response is to point out that while the stipulating/deciding is indeed a feature of how the world is at some time t , it is not the fact that it’s a stipulation/decision that decides R’s truth or falsity, but the content of the stipulation/decision that is relevant. There are, of course, facts about what the content of the stipulation is, but it is the content of the decision itself, not the factuality of that content that contributes to R’s truth or falsity.

⁵¹ This claim is conditionally consistent with meaning holism. Even if one were to think that the meaning of a word is determined by or constituted by the overall language (however that should be understood), the idea would be that that whole system would not be plausibly conceived of as consisting of synthetic statements. That leaves open whether other statements in the system are synthetic. Hence its being “conditionally consistent.” The next part of the paper addresses this concern, at least partially.

means that when we speak of what exists, we do so from within a particular language, the weak sense of representation dependence is true—truth requires truthbearers, and the only truthbearers are linguistic entities of one kind or another. But, again, this does not imply that existence is language-relative.

This undercuts the debate between Putnam and the alethic realist, since that debate depends on the coherence of representation dependence. We can say that the world makes certain of our statements true along lines congenial to both (recent) Putnam and the alethic realist, and that different languages provide for different truths simply because of the conceptual apparatus they bring to bear on the world, thereby acknowledging certain aspects of Putnam's conceptual relativity. I expect this result to be more attractive to those sympathetic with Putnam than those sympathetic to more traditional, metaphysically robust, versions of alethic realism.

The above is a significant result, and one that I have tried to show does not depend on naïve conceptions of analyticity and meaning. Instead of arguing directly for some notion of analyticity, I argued that there are significant difficulties for logic, mathematics, and language itself, if it is claimed that all truths are synthetic. This leaves open whether meaning should be thought of in terms of analytic conditions or rules of grammar.

Bibliography

- Arrington, Robert. 1993. "The Autonomy of Language." *Wittgenstein's Intentions*. Ed. John V. Canfield and Stuart G. Shanker. New York: Garland Pub. 51-80.
- Ayer, Alfred J. 1952. *Language, Truth and Logic*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc.
- Baker, Gordon P. and Peter M.S. Hacker. 1985. *Wittgenstein: Rules, Grammar and Necessity*. Basil Blackwell.
- Blackburn, Simon. 1994. "Enchanting Views." In *Reading Putnam*. Eds. Clark, P. and B. Hale. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing. 12-30.
- Boghossian, Paul. 1994. "Analyticity and Conceptual Truth." *Philosophical Issues: Truth and Rationality*. 117-131.
- Boghossian, Paul. 1999. "Analyticity." In *A Companion to the Philosophy of Language*. Eds. Hale, B. and C. Wright. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers. 331-368.
- Candlish, Stewart and George Wrisley. 2008 "Private Language," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. E. N. Zalta(ed). <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/private-language/>.
- Davidson, Donald. 2001. "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme." In *Inquiries Into Truth and Interpretation*, 2nd. Edition. Oxford: Clarendon Press. 183-198.
- Ebbs, Gary. 1992. "Realism and Rational Inquiry." *Philosophical Topics*, Vol. 20. No. 1. 1-34.
- Forster, Michael N. 2004. *Wittgenstein on the Arbitrariness of Grammar*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Fumerton, Richard. 2002. *Realism and the Correspondence Theory of Truth*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, INC.
- Kant, Immanuel. 1787. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Trans. and Eds. Guyer, P. and A. W. Wood. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- Kripke, Saul. 1980. *Naming and Necessity*. Harvard University Press.
- Putnam, Hilary. 1975. *Mind, Language and Reality: Philosophical Papers, Volume 2*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Putnam, Hilary. 1981. *Reason, Truth, and History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Putnam, Hilary. 1983. *Realism and Reason*. Vol. 3 of *Philosophical Papers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Putnam, Hilary. 1988. *Representation and Reality*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Putnam, Hilary. 2004. *Ethics without Ontology*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Russell, Bertrand. 1985. *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism*. Open Court Classics, 1985.
- Quine, W. V. O. 1953. *From a Logical Point of View*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Quine, W. V. O. 1976. *The Ways of Paradox and Other Essays*. Rev. ed. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Schroeder, Severin. 2009. "Analytic Truths and Grammatical Propositions." In *Wittgenstein and Analytic Philosophy*. Eds. Gock, H. J. and J. Hyman. New York: Oxford University Press. 83-108.
- Sosa, Ernest. 1999. "Existential Relativity." *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*. 23. 132-143.
- Stern, David G. 1995. *Wittgenstein On Mind And Language*. Oxford University Press.
- Stern, David G. 2004. *Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations: An Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Von Savigny, Eike. 1991. "No Chapter 'On Philosophy' in the *Philosophical Investigations*." *Metaphilosophy*. Vol. 22, No. 4. 307-319.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1974. *Philosophical Grammar*. Ed. Rhees, R. Trans. Kenny, A. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1975. *Philosophical Remarks*. Ed. Rhees, R. Trans. Hargreaves, R. and R. White. The University of Chicago Press, 1975.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 2000. *The Big Typescript. The Bergen Electronic Edition*. The Wittgenstein Trustees. Oxford University Press, University of Bergen.