Michael Dummett's argument for a global, anti-realist theory of meaning

To start off, it is important on such a complicated subject to bring out into the open some of the basic principles that will be discussed in the analysis of Anti Realism.

Realist Truth (henceforth R)

'Realism is the belief that statements of the disputed class* possess an objective truth value, independently of our means of knowing it: they are true or false in virtue of a reality existing independently of us' (Dummett, Truth and Other Enigmas pg 146)

So for Dummett that mark of Realism or Semantic Realism as it is also known is a commitment to knowledge independent states of affairs and therefore recognition transcendent truth conditions with a necessary commitment also to bivalence.

*Statements about the physical world, statements about mental events (i.e. processes or states), mathematical statements, statements in the past and future tense.

Anti-Realism (henceforth AR)

A statement has to meet the condition that its truth-value has to be specified in terms of provability or verification, so it is not a claim that a statement is true but a claim that the statement is provable. AR is directed at statements in the disputed class, as detailed above.

Metaphysical Realism

The naive version being the common sense view that things in the world exist independently to perceivers.

Global Anti-Realism (henceforth GAR)

To apply the principle of AR across all statements (not just the disputed class), necessitating the invalidation of the law of the excluded middle for statements about the present and past, reverting instead to intuitionist logic*

*To assert that 'a' holds, is to claim that 'a' can be proved, if 'a' can't be proved, it can't be asserted. Intuitionism is an approach where mathematics is considered to be purely the result of the constructive mental activity of humans rather than the discovery of fundamental principles claimed to exist in an objective reality.

Bivalence

Two-valued Aristotelian 'either or' classical logic, 'a or not a', tied to the principle of the excluded middle. An R notion of truth making things determinately true or false.

Truth-value link

Used to explain how individuals grasp the truth conditions of evidence transcendent statements (i.e. tensed statements, statements about others mental states). So to understand such as statement, is to see it as true (or false), the truth-value shifts in tense shift, in other words it links back as well as forward in time in a seemingly

unproblematic way (for a R). It provides access to inaccessible states of affairs (SOA's), like the past and other minds, without explanation of how this is possible. This effectively gives someone more than they can possibly receive in the training of acquiring an understanding of a language. In respect of tensed sentences the AR stays immersed in time, so takes some SOA's as they appear now, the R conversely wants a viewpoint from outside of time, so via thought can get up and down the timeline as a time travelling observer.

Dummett, as an analytic philosopher was influenced by Wittgenstein and Frege, although he was critical of Frege's theory of sense, because it didn't provide an explanation about how what is known or believed is known and why it is believed. This failure he believed was because Frege had constructed a theory within the R theory of meaning in terms of truth conditions. For a theory that is supposed to be public and objective, it didn't account for how the speaker manifests his grasp and use of the language in the communication of information. It is not just about making judgements of truth and falsity, it is about general principles and practical abilities that help us further our own ends, in gaining knowledge and influencing actions in others.

So he felt that a theory of meaning in terms of truth conditions didn't give an intelligible account of a speaker's mastery of language. Hence his proposal for a theory of meaning had at the centre, notions of verification and falsification, utilising intuitionistic logic as basis that ensured the property of decidability was stable. Truth still plays a part, because a statement that is asserted can be verified providing conclusive evidence for its being true by making use of effective rather than transcendental notions. Dummett theory of meaning henceforth has it that the theories of reference and sense merge accompanied by a theory of force (which establishes the connection between the meanings of sentences (as assigned by reference and sense) and the actual practice of speaking the language.

'Speaker will directly manifest his knowledge of the condition for its application by his actual use of the language.' (Dummett, what is a theory of meaning (11) pg 127)

For Dummett a dispute about R is a linguistic one (along with truth and logic) as opposed to being about what actually exists, initially he focuses on a disputed class of statements whilst appearing hopeful that GAR can be adopted with some resolution of certain issues that need flushing out (Dummett, Truth and Other Enigmas pg 367). He however felt that to apply intuitionist logic to the whole of discourse would represent a hurdle specifically in consideration to the meaning of tensed statements.

If we start off with language, when someone makes an assertion, they are aiming at the truth, to state something that they believe to be the case and can be taken as being the case by another. As language is a human tool of communication, It could be said that we construct or clothe reality as we take it to be, in the absence of a gods-eye view, but we are just doing the best we can, without the impartiality of a 3rd party witness. Our language is vague and general and that is a frustrating fact for Dummett, Frege and Quine to wrestle with. Dummett's point is that commitment to realism is an over-commitment in as much it is admitting too much without the necessary evidence to support certain claims.

To use Dummett's comments on statements about a person's character as an example, i.e. 'he was (brave = x)' reduces to the counterfactual conditional 'if he had been in a situation of danger then he would have acted (x'ly) or $\neg$ (x'ly)'. But if this person had never experienced danger (as an example of an undecidable sentence), therefore the statement 'he was brave' is neither true nor false. So there are two issues here, one with respect to character, there is no way (other than inferring from someone's behaviour) that we can directly determine if what we are asserting is the case, it is verification transcendent. Two, for Dummett, if a statement is verification transcendent, it lacks a truth value, I cannot asset that 'he was brave' because I do not have the necessary proof

(using intuitionist logic).

Dummett's proposal of GAR is underpinned by two main arguments (that have been extracted from his work) or challenges which he lays down for supporters of R to provide an answer to viz, the acquisition argument and the manifestation argument.

The acquisition argument

We understand sentences of x
Some sentences of x, have unverifiable (undecidable sentences) truth conditions
Since to understand a sentence is to know its truth conditions
It therefore follows we know the truth conditions of the sentences of x
If we know the truth conditions of the sentences of x then it is possible for us to <u>acquire</u> that knowledge
It therefore follows that it was possible for us to <u>acquire</u> knowledge of the truth conditions of the sentences of x
Since some of the truth conditions are unverifiable, it is possible to <u>acquire</u> knowledge of unverifiable truth conditions
But it is not possible to <u>acquire</u> such knowledge in that way, this is a contradiction

The question Dummett is asking, is, if understanding a sentence is constituted by a grasp of recognition transcendent truth conditions, how could we have acquired that understanding? That is given that our training in language has enabled us to recognise when things obtain or not.

The process by which we came to grasp the sense of a statement, and the subsequent use we make of that statement, leads us to be unable to derive any notion as to how can that statement be true independently to what we have learned to recognise as establishing the truth of that statement. (Dummett, TOE pg 362)

Dummett also ascribes to R the notion that the aforementioned 'truth-value link' is a fundamental feature of their understanding of problematic sentences.

Note; McDowell rejects both truth link realism and AR and adopts an M-Realsit response, but his discussion is not within the scope of this essay to cover.

The R response is that we come to understand and grasp R truth conditions such as past tense statements and ascriptions of mental states through acquisition of skills in our day to day language (by understanding the constituent words and how they are combined).

The manifestation argument

We understand sentences of x
Some sentences of x, have unverifiable truth conditions
Since to understand a sentence is to know its truth conditions
It therefore follows we know the truth conditions of the sentences of x
If we know the truth conditions of the sentences of x then this knowledge is <u>manifest</u> in our use of the sentences of x
It therefore follows that our knowledge of the truth conditions of the sentences of x is <u>manifest</u> in our use of the sentences of x
Since some of the truth conditions are unverifiable, our knowledge of unverifiable truth conditions is <u>manifest</u> in our use of the sentences of x

But knowledge of unverifiable truth conditions is not <u>manifest</u> in our sentences of x, this is a contradiction

Dummett believes R has failed to take account of the connection between knowledge and use.

Accepting the Wittgenstein (W) slogan 'meaning is use, and the role that plays in language games, post W, practical ability as displayed in linguistic practice is that skill that is manifested in use, to recognise when verification conditions obtain or not. Those skills to recognise verification conditions cannot transcend human capacities as language users. Dummett used the analogy of a chess piece and the role that plays according to the rules of the game, to make that point.

Questions of meaning are best interpreted as questions about understanding, so to know the meaning of a sentence is to know the conditions for it to be true. Mastery of a given practice, demands that someone has an implicit knowledge of that thing and that mastery is manifested in practice, to know how to ride a bike is manifested in actually riding a bike (acquirable in public contexts and publicly observable).

If your first principle or starting point is R and that appears the common sense or majority view, then you can work around and turn a blind eye to the lack of evidence, verification and knowledge transcendence to make your theory fit. As GAR is revisionary, to adopt it would mean throwing the baby out with the bath water, the baby in this case being Realist truth along with classical logic. Dummett felt any revision to customary linguistic practice is implausible particularly if it was too extensive and that change if it happened would have to be all or nothing. I don't think Dummett succeeded in selling GAR, basically he didn't back it fully himself, there are too many instances in his work where he doubts it validity, specifically stating it would be difficult to maintain AR in the species of behaviourism and phenomenalism simultaneously.

Dummett's exploration or test for a global semantic theory takes us to the ultimate constituents of reality, stating or asserting what exists has to rely on evidence and verification, not blind faith or luck or indeed speculative metaphysics. Dummett believes that debates about metaphysics can be resolved by appeal to theories of meaning, but if it is presupposed that knowledge independent states of affairs exist and that is the first principle or starting point, what we are left with is a purely epistemological debate.