

**Minimalism versus Quasi-Realism:
Why The Minimalist Has A Dialectical Advantage**

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Abstract

Minimalist and quasi-realist approaches to problematic discourses such as the causal, moral and modal are compared and contrasted. The problem of unasserted contexts demonstrates that while quasi-realism can meet the challenge of reconstructing a logic of "commitment" to cover both "projected" and "detected" discourses, it can only do so at an unacceptable cost. The theory must globally revise logic, in spite of its implicit commitment to a substantial notion of truth for "detected" discourses. Thus, quasi-realism fails to meet its own standards for theory acceptance. By contrast, minimalism does not face the problem of unasserted contexts, can give a global account of the truth predicate and can explain the univocity of the logical connectives. This demonstrates the dialectical superiority of the minimalist's approach.

The aim of this paper is to compare and contrast two research programmes, minimalism and quasi-realism, in their approaches to such problematic areas of discourse as the modal, the moral and the causal.¹ The two theories are in many ways very similar. They are both opposed to "quietistic" stances towards realism which advocate reiterating the standards of objectivity immanent in discourses from an "internal" perspective. As Blackburn neatly puts it, "loss of a global issues is not a global loss of issues".² Both views are similarly opposed to a completely

"external" approach which classifies discourses in the light of a prior standard of objectivity, perhaps drawn from physical science. Both views, in a Wittgensteinian manner, want to "place" discourses on a scale from the more to the less objective. However, they differ over the role of the concept of truth in this exercise, and I will argue that one ought to prefer the minimalist approach since the projectivist/quasi-realist alternative fails on its own terms.

I will first describe these two alternative approaches in more detail. Minimalism about truth is the view that an examination of the surface syntax and the internal norms of a discourse will suffice to reveal whether that discourse sustains a truth predicate. However, this point is compatible with attributions of the truth predicate being supported by a range of different considerations relevant to the objectivity of the discourse. Thus, to take Crispin Wright's example, even if a discourse shows all the internal discipline and syntactic marks of truth bearing discourse, there remain further issues as to whether the discourse is representational, whether the properties it cites have a "wide cosmocentric role", and whether these cited properties can be characterised independently of human response. Wright looks to Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* as a paradigm of minimalism and expresses his own form of minimalism in a paragraph worth quoting in full:

A proposal is being made in a spirit close to what I take to be that of Wittgenstein's insistence in the *Tractatus* that *object* and *proposition* are formal concepts. The proposal is simply that any predicate that exhibits certain very general features qualifies, just on that account, as a

truth predicate. This is quite consistent with acknowledging that there may, perhaps must be more to say about the content of any predicate that does have these features. But it is also consistent with acknowledging that there is a prospect of pluralism - that the more there is to say may well vary from discourse to discourse - and that whatever may remain to be said, it will not concern any essential features of truth.³

I would amend some elements of Wright's proposal: if the aim is to give a nominalist interpretation of Wittgenstein's later conception of form, then it is important that the proper form of the contrast is between the "very general" and the particular properties of truth rather than the essential and the accidental, as the closing sentence of this quotation misleadingly suggests.⁴ But Wright's passage well expresses the essence of minimalism about truth.

Quasi-realism, by contrast, is not a self-sufficient view: understanding its rationale involves grasping the point of a narrower programme to which it is a supplement, projectivism. Projectivism is an essentially local claim about specific areas of thought and language whose claims to realism appear, on reflection, problematic. Examples would be those aspects of moral thought which seem to invite a realist treatment and our talk of both modal and causal "facts". In each of these cases, prima facie claims to a realist status come to seem problematic from within a wider, naturalistic world view. The projectivist response is to see these areas of thought and language as projections of attitudes, rather than as expressions of truth evaluable contents as standardly conceived. However, the projectivist also wants to urge that such a

diagnosis need not be motivated by any sceptical impulse and can instead form part of a proper appreciation of the status of these discourses, which does not downgrade their objectivity. For this reason, projectivism is embedded in a wider project of demonstrating how a projected discourse can nevertheless be characterised using many of the terms of critical appraisal applied to fully realist discourses.

This wider project is quasi-realism. It is inherently more general than the projectivism it supports, as it reflects a general stance towards realism. If that stance could be worked out satisfactorily, it would respect the status of areas of thought and language which seem paradigms of realism (such as mature physical science) while eliciting criteria for realism which can in principle be extended to some degree to the causal, the moral and the modal. This all takes place within the ambit of a wider commitment to naturalism. If the delicate balancing act that the quasi-realist aims to achieve is successful, the result would be an intellectually satisfying means of respecting both the realist status of, say, physics, while correctly placing the status of more problematic areas of thought and language relative to such paradigms of objectivity.

I have described both theories as "research programmes" and one response to the task of evaluating their respective merits would be to adopt a "wait and see" strategy. The extent to which the two theories meet their respective criteria of success will emerge from continuing debate and the evidence is not, as yet, complete. However, the aim of my argument is to suggest that we can decide,

now, that minimalism is superior to quasi-realism because the latter theory can now be judged to have failed in its own terms. The emergence of minimalism as a viable theoretical option in its own right has transformed a minor anomaly within the quasi-realist programme into a fatal defect.

Thus, it is important to my argument to establish clearly the rationale for quasi-realism, a rationale which is internal to the theory. As I have noted, the quasi-realist package contains two components: a "projectivist" analysis of problematic discourses, and a meta-level defence of this projective analysis, "quasi-realism". The specific projectivist analyses offered of problematic areas of thought and language are defended by "re-earning" for these analyses all the marks of fully objective discourse. This latter task is the distinctive aim of "quasi-realism". The background motivation for the overall theory is a general commitment to naturalistic explanations and for ontological parsimony. In evaluating theoretical commitments at any level, the balance sheet is to be drawn up in terms of cost and benefit. The "benefits" of smoothness and economy of theory are to be balanced against "costs" in terms of ontological commitment.

The central point of dispute between this quasi-realist project and minimalism concerns the availability of the truth predicate. The minimalist thinks that it does not take much to "re-earn" the truth predicate. It comes so cheaply that this enterprise is trivial. Any discourse with a sufficient degree of internal discipline to sustain a robust syntax for its assertoric sentences sustains minimal truth. Even the problematic discourses of the causal, moral and

modal, the objects of projectivist re-interpretation, sustain a minimal truth predicate. For the minimalist, the matters that concern the projectivist are better addressed as issues concerning the "matter" of the truth predicate as opposed to its "form". Its form is captured entirely by its syntax - if one can give "syntax" a strong enough reading.⁵

I would argue that very general considerations about the overall strategy of each of the two programmes determines the superiority of minimalism. Consider, as a representative test case, the much discussed Frege/Geach objection to projectivism about moral discourse.⁶ This essentially turned on the fact that the surface syntax of moral utterances forces the classification of this area of discourse as assertoric. People speak of moral truth and moral knowledge, and Geach generalised a Fregean point to argue that the surface grammar of moral utterances posed a problem for an account which denied moral sentences a truth value. Projective theories seem unable to explain unasserted contexts, or, in a revised version of the Frege/Geach criticism, the claim is that they can only do so by *ad hoc* explanations tailored to individual types of context. Blackburn's response to this challenge is to introduce a revised logic.⁷ The standard conception that truth evaluable propositions, expressed by indicative sentences, are embedded in logical contexts is replaced by the generic notion of a "commitment" to embedded "attitudes"/"beliefs". This concept covers both beliefs and attitudes and permits the replacement of the theoretical role of truth with a new concept of "acceptance". Thus, in the case of conditional sentences about moral matters,

Blackburn's suggestion is that one would use them to trace out the relations between beliefs and attitudes as part of our general interest in evaluating and analysing the moral sensibilities of others.⁸

This is, in my view, a surprising strategy. It avoids Geach's "*ad hoc*" charge by offering a principled solution to the problem, but the way it does so leads directly to an inconsistency within the quasi-realist project. My argument for this claim runs as follows.

First, projectivism must be a *local* as opposed to a *global* thesis about discourse: it can only be developed as a claim specific to discourses such as the modal, the causal and the moral. Global formulations of the theory, which Blackburn quite correctly avoids, would leave obscure what element of thought was being "projected" and what it was projected "on to". Thus, to grasp the fact/projection contrast we need an explanation of what it is for a discourse to be robustly factual. Projectivism is essentially a *contrastive* and *local* thesis.

Secondly, how is one to explain the status of non-projected areas of thought or language? The obvious candidate is the claim that they truly represent the facts. However, if this idea of "truth to the facts" is to contrast with projected discourses, it must go beyond the globally applicable minimal truth predicate, or there is no point to the contrast. This concept of truth must be substantial. With a substantial concept of truth available, more than enough resources are in place to define a classical logic with standard connectives and a standard model theory.

Thirdly, the logical connectives are *univocal*. The surface grammar of language seems to draw no distinction between "projected" and "detected" discourses. This is the intuition driving the Frege/Geach objection. The meanings of ordinary language counterparts of logical connectives seem univocal across, for example, talk of physical facts and causal contexts. The minimalist response to this point is to accept it. If the internal discipline of discourse concerning modal, moral and causal facts sustains a minimal truth predicate, then so be it. This, in turn, sustains a classical interpretation of logic and hence the univocality of logical connectives across all discourse.⁹

With these assumptions in place, one can address to the projectivist the following *ad hominem* question: why should one adopt a quasi-realist rather than minimalist framework for the overall strategic aim of "placing" the relatively objective status of discourses given the relative "costs" and "benefits" of their respective solutions to the Frege/Geach problem? This is *not* the claim that projectivism cannot solve that problem. My challenge arises when projectivism has already solved the Frege/Geach problem. The point is that it can only do so at too high a cost. The minimalist, by contrast, simply has no problem at all.

The point is that given the "local" nature of his or her subsidiary projectivist account of problematic discourses, the quasi-realist must have available a substantive notion of truth and a classical logic for the other "non-problematic" discourses. But he or she cannot, perforce, offer such a classical interpretation of modal, moral or causal discourse. The norm governing assertion in

these discourses cannot, by projectivist lights, be truth. The availability of truth has been suspended until the right to use the predicate is "re-earned" by detailing the governing norms of the discourse concerned. The unpalatable dilemma facing the quasi-realist is thus either the abandonment of the univocality of logical vocabulary across discourse as a whole, or retaining univocality and offering a global re-interpretation of logic. Classical logic will have to be replaced for all areas of discourse and replaced with a generic logic of commitment of which truth conditional commitment is a species. The *ad hominem* point is that for a view motivated by a naturalistic aspiration to a streamlined explanatory account of thought and language, quasi-realism is driven by its central commitment to a projectivist account of problematic discourses globally to revise logic *in spite of the fact that a robust concept of truth is already available to the overall theory*.

His or her conception of philosophical methodology commits the projectivist to viewing the adoption or rejection of theoretical options as a matter of balancing costs and benefits. We may be driven globally to revise logic for strong theoretical reasons, such as the paradoxes of physical theory. However, this is not a case of this kind. The quasi-realist proposal for global revision is motivated solely by requirements internal to the theory. It seems paradoxical that the grounds for such revision should be a logic that abstains from truth, when the internal structure of quasi-realism commits it to a non-minimal concept of truth.¹⁰ Contrast the happier position of the minimalist, untroubled by the Frege/Geach objection and able to offer an account of the

univocality of logical vocabulary via a standard classical interpretation of logic.

This objection is compounded by doubts about the feasibility of Blackburn's logic of the attitudes.¹¹ Blackburn chooses what he considers the lesser of two evils when he formulates a logic which will cover all discourses, including “projected” discourses. The resultant challenges are how to elucidate acceptance independently of truth and how to reconstruct the idea of deductive validity. It is not mere realist prejudice that leads me to argue that a logic of acceptance, like a logic of provability, must ultimately be explained via truth. The alternative is a return to a psychologistic account of logic whose norms arise from psychological transitions we are disposed to make. Not only is this inexplicable as a logic, it is a curiously unmotivated position to take if a robust concept of truth must be available, as the strategy of Blackburn's quasi-realism dictates.

However, these points can remain moot. My argument is that even if we concede to the quasi-realist his or her most promising solution to the Frege/Geach problem, he or she is still hoist by their own petard. The final irony is that this point emerges when we adopt the quasi-realist's preferred philosophical methodology. Evaluation of a theory may be contextually sensitive to the plausibility of available competitors: just as in the case of scientific enquiry, the internal anomalies of a theory can be judged to be fatally disabling only when a competitor theory emerges which beats the predecessor theory on its own terms. In the overall dispute over the superiority of minimalist or quasi-realist accounts

of these problematic discourses, I believe it is clear that we can judge, now, that the minimalist has a dialectical advantage.¹²

¹ The minimalist programme is most comprehensively presented in Crispin Wright, *Truth and Objectivity*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U.P. 1992); 'Realism, Anti-Realism, Irrealism, Quasi-Realism', in French, P., Uehling, T. and Wettstein, H., (eds.) *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, (1987), pp. 25-49; the quasi-realist programme is set out in Simon Blackburn, *Spreading the Word*, (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1984); *Essays On Quasi-Realism*, (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1993).

² Simon Blackburn, 'Options for the World', unpublished ms., n.d., p. 1.

³ Crispin Wright, *Truth and Objectivity*, pp. 37-8.

⁴ An interesting foil to the position Wright develops from Wittgenstein's work is that presented by Peter Winch, in 'Im Anfang War Die Tat', in Block, I. (ed.) *Perspectives on the Philosophy of Wittgenstein*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981)

⁵ Crispin Wright, 'Reply to Jackson', *Philosophical Books*, 35, (1994), pp. 169-175.

⁶ Geach, 'Ascriptivism', *Philosophical Review*, 69, (1960), pp. 221-225; 'Assertion', *Philosophical Review*, 74, (1965), pp. 449-465.

⁷ Blackburn, 'Attitudes and Contents', in *Essays on Quasi-Realism*.

⁸ This account is presented by Blackburn in *Spreading the Word*, pp. 218-220.

⁹ Strictly speaking, the minimalist framework is neutral between realism and anti-realism. However, if it is so neutral, it is available for me to express my commitment to both realism and to classical logic.

¹⁰ Note that it is no response to my argument that the minimalist framework, too, is compatible with a project which seeks globally to revise logic, such as global anti-realism. For my argument claims to be solely an *ad hominem* argument, addressed to the internal consistency of the quasi-realist/projectivist programme. I have argued that a substantial conception of truth must be entrenched in that programme if we are to understand its fundamental motivation.

¹¹ For a searching discussion, see Bob Hale's 'Can there be a Logic of Attitudes', in Haldane, J. and Wright, C., (eds.), *Reality, Representation and Projection*, (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1993) pp. 337-364.

¹² Thanks to Kathryn Brown and to Keith Hossack for their help with this paper.