Anti-Realism Untouched

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There is an argument which purports to show that verificationism and its modern descendant, anti-realism, collapse into a form of radical idealism. For it is widely held that these positions entail that it is possible to know any truth, that is: (1) $(\forall P)(P \to \Diamond KP)$. Yet it is surely true that there are some truths which, as a matter of contingent fact, are never known. In other words: (2) $(\exists P)(P \ \& \ \neg KP)$. Yet from (1) and (2), and very weak assumptions about epistemic and modal logic, it is possible to derive a contradiction.[1] It thus follows that (1) entails the negation of (2), i.e. that (1) entails that every truth is known. But this proposition is unacceptable and would be anathema to modern day anti-realists such as Dummett and Wright.

I wish to argue that the anti-realist need not accept (1). At first sight this contention may seem absurd. For at the heart of anti-realism is the thought that truth cannot transcend our cognitive capabilities, that a statement cannot possess a truth value and yet be undiscoverably true or false. And this conception seems to entail that every truth is knowable: for if P is true, and we can discover P's truth value, then it seems that we must be able to discover that P is true, and hence to know that P.

This argument presupposes that we can always discover a statement's truth value without affecting that statement's truth value. But this is not so: there exist statements which are true, yet which would have been false had we performed the procedures necessary to discover that statement's truth value.

Consider the statement "There were three flashes in room A at time t". Call this statement P. Suppose that this statement is true, but that no one actually comes to know this statement's truth value. Nevertheless, this statement clearly does not transcend our cognitive capabilities, and had we performed certain procedures, we would have known that P. Let us also suppose that there is only one procedure which it is necessary to perform in order to discover whether or not P, namely the procedure of counting the number of flashes in room A at time t. It follows that it is impossible that there should be someone who knows that P, and that no one has counted the number of flashes in Room A at time t.

Now let Q be the statement: "The number of flashes in room A at time t is never counted". Let us suppose that $P \ \& \ Q$ is true. Then $P \ \& \ Q$ is not knowable,

[1] Briefly, the argument is this: By (2), there is some truth of the form $Q \ \& \ \neg KQ$. By substituting this for P in (1) and applying modus ponens, we derive $\Diamond K(Q \ \& \ \neg KQ)$. Since knowledge of a conjunction implies knowledge of its conjuncts, this entails $\Diamond(KQ \ \& \ K \neg KQ)$. As knowledge of a proposition entails that proposition's truth, we can derive the absurdity $\Diamond(KQ \ \& \ \neg KQ)$. See Williamson (1982) for details.

for in order to discover the truth value of the conjunction we must discover the truth value of the conjuncts. But in order to discover whether or not P it is necessary to falsify Q, so any successful attempt to discover the truth value of P would make P & Q false. Since a false statement cannot be known, P & Q cannot be known.

Yet its truth value is discoverable! Had we carried out the procedures sufficient to discover whether or not P we would have found that P was true, and had we then reflected on the procedures just performed we would have gone on to see that Q was false. Thus we would have discovered its truth value. P & Q is therefore an example of a true statement which is not knowable, yet whose truth value is discoverable.

It is clear that we cannot discover the truth value of P & Q without falsifying it. Does this fact pose any problems for the anti-realist? I think not. For the anti-realist can surely distinguish between (i) statements whose truth value changes whenever we try to verify them, and (ii) statements whose truth value cannot be discovered no matter how we try to verify them. The anti-realist takes exception to statements belonging to class (ii), but I see no reason why that should make him reject statements in class (i). The anti-realist can acknowledge that P & Q behaves pathologically in that we cannot discover its truth value without falsifying it. But this feature in no way entails that the statement is a member of class (ii). It is therefore possible for an anti-realist to hold coherently that not all truths are knowable.[2]

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