Was George Orwell a Metaphysical Realist?

Peter van Inwagen

The University of Notre Dame/Notre Dame, Indiana (USA)

Résumé : Le coeur de la nouvelle de George Orwell, *1984*, est le débat entre Winston Smith et O'Brien dans les cellules du Ministère de l'Amour. Il est naturel de lire ce débat comme un débat entre un réaliste (concernant la nature de la vérité) et un anti-réaliste. Je présente quelques passages représentatifs du livre qui démontrent, je crois, que si ce n'est pas la seule manière possible de comprendre le débat, c'est une manière très naturelle de le faire.

Abstract: The core of George Orwell's novel *1984* is the debate between Winston Smith and O'Brien in the cells of the Ministry of Love. It is natural to read this debate as a debate between a realist (as regards the nature of truth) and an anti-realist. I offer a few representative passages from the book that demonstrate, I believe, that if this is not the only possible way to understand the debate, it is one very natural way.

The core of George Orwell's novel *1984* is a debate—if the verbal and intellectual component of an extended episode of brainwashing can properly be said to constitute a debate—, the debate between Winston Smith and O'Brien in the cells of the Ministry of Love. It is natural to read this debate as a debate between a realist (as regards the nature of truth) and an anti-realist. I offer a few representative passages from the book that demonstrate, I believe, that if this is not the only possible way to understand the debate, it is one very natural way. I begin with some thoughts that passed through Winston's mind as he was writing in his diary long before his arrest:

> . . . the very notion of external reality was tacitly denied by [the Party's] philosophy. . . . His heart sank as he thought of . . . the ease with which any Party intellectual would overthrow him in debate, the subtle arguments which he would not be able to understand, much less answer. And yet he

Philosophia Scientiæ, 12 (1), 2008, 161–185.

> was in the right! They were wrong and he was right! The obvious, the silly, and the true had got to be defended. Truisms are true, hold on to that! The solid world exists, its laws do not change. Stones are hard, water is wet, objects unsupported fall toward the earth's centre. With the feeling that . . . he was setting forth an important axiom, Winston wrote:
>
> Freedom is the freedom to say that two plus two make four. If that is granted, all else follows.[1]

Let us now look at the debate. Here is an exchange between O'Brien and Winston.

> "Is it your opinion, Winston, that the past has real existence? . . . You are no metaphysician, Winston . . . Until this moment you had never considered what is meant by existence. I will put it more precisely. Does the past exist concretely in space? Is there somewhere or other a place, a world of solid objects, where the past is still happening?"
>
> > "No"
> >
> > "In records. It is written down."
> >
> > "In records. And—?"
> >
> > "In the mind. In human memories."
> >
> > "In memory. Very well, then. We, the Party, control
>
> all records, and we control all memories. Then we control the past, do we not?"[2]

And here is a second exchange:

> "But the world itself is only a speck of dust. . . the whole universe is outside us. Look at the stars! Some of them are a million light-years away. They are out of our reach for ever."
>
> "What are the stars ? . . . They are bits of fire a few kilometres away. We could reach them if we wanted to. Or we could blot

[1] Part 1, Ch. vii. (Since there are many editions and printings of *1984*, I will cite passages from the book only by part and chapter.) As early as 1939, ten years before the publication of *1984*, in a review of Russell's *Power: A Social Analysis*, Orwell had written, "It is quite possible that we are descending into an age in which two and two will make five when the Leader says so." [Orwell 1939, vol. I, 376]

[2] Part 3, Ch.ii.

> them out. The earth is the centre of the universe. The sun and stars go round it. . . . For certain purposes, of course, that is not true. When we navigate the ocean or when we predict an eclipse, we often find it convenient to assume that the earth goes round the sun and that the stars are millions upon millions of kilometres away. But what of it? Do you suppose it is beyond us to produce a dual system of astronomy? The stars can be near or distant, according as we need them . . . ."
>
> . . . a faint smile twitched the corners of O'Brien's mouth as he looked down at [Winston].
>
> "I told you, Winston," he said, "that metaphysics is not your strong point. The word you are trying to think of is solipsism. But you are mistaken. This is not solipsism. Collective solipsism, if you like. But that is a different thing; in fact, the opposite thing . . . ."[3]

These passages, I think, show that it is natural (which is not to say that it is right) to read *1984* as a defense of realism. I have myself read the book this way. (And, of course, as part and parcel of reading it that way, I regarded Winston as representing the author's point of view.) In my book *Metaphysics*—a book whose intended audience was readers who came to the book with no clear idea of the meaning of the word 'metaphysics'—I wrote,

> Before we leave the topic of Realism and anti-Realism, however, I should like to direct the reader's attention to the greatest of all attacks on anti-Realism, George Orwell's novel *1984*. Anyone who is interested in Realism and anti-Realism should be steeped in the message of this book. The reader is particularly directed to the climax of the novel, the debate between the Realist Winston Smith and the anti-Realist O'Brien. In the end, there is only one question that can be addressed to the anti-Realist: How does your position differ from O'Brien's? [Van Inwagen 2002,84–85]

There is one thing about this passage that I must apologize for. When I posed the question "How does your position differ from O'Brien's?," I thought (I must confess this) that no answer to it would be forthcoming—or no honest answer, no answer that was not a transparent evasion. But when I re-read *1984* in preparation for writing this paper, I discovered

[3]Part 3, Ch. iii.

something that I ought not to have had to discover—something that I ought to have remembered: that there is an obvious way for the anti-realist to answer this question. This obvious answer, though I think it *would* in the end be an evasion, turns on a very interesting point that went right past me when I was writing the above passage: that in whatever sense O'Brien may be an anti-realist, he is in the same sense a realist. To see why this is so, let us consider O'Brien's belief that the Party invented the airplane. (The Party's claim to have invented the airplane is mentioned repeatedly in *1984*; Winston thinks of it frequently, since he can remember very clearly having seen airplanes before the Revolution.) O'Brien believes that the Party invented the airplane because the Party says it invented the airplane and because all the records of the past (which are under the Party's control) say the Party invented the airplane—as do the memories of everyone whom O'Brien regards as sane. And this "because" is the "because" of formal, and not of merely efficient, causation: in O'Brien's mind, it is a fact that the Party says it invented the airplane and it is a fact that the Party invented the airplane and they are the *same* fact. "The Party says it invented the airplane but the Party did not invent the airplane" is not, for O'Brien, a thinkable thought. (That is, it is not a thought he is capable of *entertaining*. He is, nevertheless, perfectly capable of *understanding* what Winston is thinking when the thought "The Party says it invented the airplane but the Party did not invent the airplane" is present in *his* mind.)

O'Brien, then, certainly *appears* to accept a form of anti-realism. After all, solidarity, an appeal to what his peers will let him get away with, has replaced truth in O'Brien's conceptual scheme, as it has (so he claims, and if he says so, I suppose we must believe him) in Richard Rorty's—not the same sort of solidarity (or the same peers), I grant, but *a* sort of solidarity, nevertheless, and a very well defined class of peers indeed.

But all this, while it is accurate as far as it goes, is not a complete account of what O'Brien believes about truth, for he *also* believes in objective truth, just as Winston does, and he believes in it in the same sense. Just as Winston believes that the pre-Revolutionary existence of airplanes is something that is, so to speak, sitting there in the past, so O'Brien believes that the Party's post-Revolutionary invention of the airplane is sitting there in the slightly-less-recent past. He believes that the Party is an infallible reporter of a truth that exists independently of it and all its decrees. (After all, is its propaganda ministry not called the Ministry of Truth?) The Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party called its official organ *Pravda*, and the Committee did not

mean that title to be understood as implying that the paper published a truth created in its editorial offices; they meant it to be understood as stating, emblematically, that the statements and descriptions that were published in its pages were the objective truth (unlike what was to be found in capitalist or fascist or Trotskyist papers). And what was true under Soviet Communism was true under English Socialism: an Ingsoc goodthinker like O'Brien *must* believe in objective truth; how can there be no such thing as objective truth when the Party claims to be an infallible (and the only reliable) source of it?

How is O'Brien's belief in objective truth to be reconciled with his anti-realism? If by 'reconcile' is meant 'demonstrate the logical consistency of', it isn't. If by 'reconcile' is meant 'be able to hold both propositions in one's mind simultaneously and without intellectual discomfort' the answer is doublethink—"The power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them." (*Why* do O'Brien and the rest of the Party's inner circle retain their allegiance to the existence of objective truth? Why do they not achieve logical consistency—doublethink requires effort; *gratuitously* embracing contradictions is a waste of effort—by simply eliminating the idea of truth and replacing it with English-socialist solidarity? This is a very interesting question; I will return to it.)

I now see (I am finally getting to the end of my parenthetical confession) that I made a tactical mistake when I confronted the anti-realist with the question "How does your position differ from O'Brien's?". This was a mistake because the anti-realist has an obvious answer to my question that obscures the real difficulty it was meant to raise—that answer being, "O'Brien believes in objective truth, in a kind of truth that's independent of what our peers will let us get away with—and I don't." The question I ought to have asked is, How does your position differ from the position that *would* be O'Brien's if one, as it were, subtracted from his actual position the thesis that there is a status, truth, that beliefs can have that is logically independent of the Party's approval of them. That question allows no such evasion.

Enough of my apologetical digression. Let us return to the question of Orwell and metaphysical realism. If I did not say, in the passage I have quoted (which is the only thing I have even written that pertains to Orwell and realism), that Orwell was a metaphysical realist, I certainly strongly suggested that I regarded him as one, and I will now explicitly say that I do regard Orwell as a metaphysical realist. In a much more nuanced way, Richard Rorty has also drawn a connection between Orwell and realism[4]. At any rate, Rorty does not approve of the vocab-

[4]In "The Last Intellectual in Europe: Orwell on Cruelty," [Rorty 1989, ch. 8,

ulary that Orwell uses when he defends what he, Orwell, calls "objective truth"—that phrase itself being one of Rorty's least favorite items in anyone's vocabulary. It is not my purpose in this paper to examine Rorty's way of reading *1984*—that is, his attempt to rescue what he regards as valuable in the book (its depiction of a social order dedicated to the infliction of pain as an end in itself) from its entanglement with Orwell's unfortunate conviction that the idea of "objective truth" needed to be defended and was worth defending. (At one point Rorty compares the way he approaches *1984* to the way he would, as an atheist, approach *Pilgrim's Progress*—another book he thinks can be read with profit by those who do not share its presuppositions.) I simply call attention to the fact that both Rorty and I see some connection between Orwell and realism.

In a very long essay in the volume *Rorty and His Critics* [Conant 2000], James Conant has contended that it is wrong to read *1984* as an attack on anti-realism and wrong to read the debate between O'Brien and Winston Smith as a debate about the nature of truth[5]. According to Conant, Rorty and I are both obsessed with the realism/anti-realism debate, and our common obsession has led us to ignore the fact that Orwell's purposes in defending "objective truth" were political and in no way philosophical[6]. Orwell (Conant maintains) had been repelled by the kind of thought-control that British left-intellectuals of the 1930s had applied to one another with respect to the history of their time—for example, with respect to the events of the Spanish Civil War and the arrests and trials in the Soviet Union during the Yagoda and Yezhov eras. Orwell's purpose in writing *1984*—Conant tells us—was to depict a society in which this thought-control had been taken to its logical conclusion. (I will remark that I agree with Conant's judgment that Or-

---

169-188].

[5]I should point out that Conant did not miss the point about O'Brien that I missed. He is aware that anyone who says that O'Brien is a consistent defender of anti-realism must ignore several passages in which he seems to presuppose realism.

[6]I wonder why Conant thinks that I am obsessed with anti-realism. I know of no evidence of this (other than my interpretation of *1984*). I don't know whether the fact that Rorty's contribution to the literature on anti-realism comprises many hundreds of thousands of words should be taken as evidence that *he* is obsessed with anti-realism. But if it does, there is certainly no corresponding evidence in my case. Not counting collections of my essays, I have published four books. One chapter of one of the four—an introductory textbook—is devoted to anti-realism, and the topic is not mentioned, even in passing, in the others. I have published about 130 essays, of which only one ["On Always Being Wrong," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 12 (1987) pp. 95–111] is about anti-realism. The topic is not mentioned in any of the others—with the *possible* exception of "The Number of Things," *Philosophical Issues, Vol. 12: Realism and Relativism*, 2002, pp. 176–96.

well wanted to depict a state in which certain intellectual habits current among the British intelligentsia at the time of writing were demanded, on pain of torture and death, of everyone but the Lumpenproletariat. It is entirely possible that the title *1984* is an allusion to the year of the novel's composition—1948.) There is nothing philosophical, nothing metaphysical in this purpose, Conant says. But because van Inwagen (a realist) is obsessed with the realism/anti-realism debate, he is led to read the novel as a defense of a metaphysical thesis—and to see it as a stick with which he can beat anti-realists. Because Rorty (an anti-realist) is obsessed with the realism/anti-realism debate, he misreads Orwell's purely political use of vocabulary like 'objective truth' and 'the solid world' as something that calls for a philosophical response from anti-realists—not a refutation, of course, but a reading of the novel that de-emphasizes or re-interprets such phrases and thereby makes what is valuable in the novel accessible to anti-realists.

> I'll let Rorty defend himself against Conant's charge. (He has, in [Rorty 2000].)

Rorty, I may say, wrote a long essay on *1984*. My own remarks were confined to a single paragraph (quoted above). I suspect that Conant would not have mentioned my passing remark about *1984* if it had not suited his dialectical purposes to have at his disposal a metaphysician whom he could present to Rorty as his mirror image: "Don't you see, Rorty? You and that metaphysician are equally obsessed with realism and your common obsession makes it impossible for either of you to understand the novel—and *you*, Rorty, are the philosopher who claims to offer us a way of doing philosophy that will free us from our obsessions with philosophical doctrines!" (Conant's strategy resembles that of someone who, in debate with a Marxist, persistently characterizes Marxism as a religion.) Still, whatever Conant's motives for mentioning my paragraph may have been, I want to defend what I said in it.

Conant says that Orwell is not interested in the realism/anti-realism debate. But what does Conant mean by realism and anti-realism? He has not neglected this question. Far from it. His answer is both lengthy and subtle. He lays out eight "realist theses," and declares that anyone who accepts even one of them is a realist of some sort. 'Realism', according to Conant, is as much *genre*-term in philosophy as it is in art or literature. Realism is not a philosophical doctrine or thesis, but rather a *genre* to which certain philosophical doctrines and theses belong. Some among his eight realist theses are in fact inconsistent with some of the others (a fact that Conant lays some stress on), and that implies that two

philosophical doctrines that contradict each other can be equally good examples of the *genre* "realism."

I certainly agree with Conant's contention that *1984* is not a polemic against theses like the eight theses that (he says) define the philosophical *genre* realism. At any rate, I agree with it as a judgment about certain words Conant has written, the words that he has used to formulate the eight realist theses. (I agree that if Orwell were had opened a book that started with words like those, he would have very quickly proceeded to close it.) I can't agree with it as a judgment about *theses*, however, because there are no such theses. That is to say, the words Conant has written formulate no theses at all. They are *mere* words—although, since they consist of syntactically correct declarative sentences, they have the *appearance* of words that express theses. I am sorry if I have begun to sound like a logical positivist talking about Hegel or Heidegger. I do not, like Carnap and Neurath and the rest, have a *theory* according to which all philosophy but my own and that of a few like-minded colleagues is meaningless. Nor do I have a theory according to which everything that has been said by the practitioners of some major division of philosophy—metaphysics, for example—is meaningless. I repudiate any general theory that classifies some large part of philosophy as nonsense, and I shrink from sounding as if I were offering one. Nevertheless, I insist that philosophers do sometimes say meaningless things, things that (to borrow the words that Wolfgang Pauli applied to a conjecture presented by a fellow physicist) are not even false. For example: "Being is; not-Being is not" (Parmenides); "The world is a progressively realized community of interpretation" (Royce); "A self is a logical construct out of sense experiences" (Ayer). Since I have no general theory of meaninglessness in philosophy—since I repudiate the possibility of such a theory—, if I wish to show that some piece of philosophical text is meaningless, there is nothing I can do but examine it sentence by sentence (even clause by clause) and try to show that there's just nothing *there*, nothing but words: that in that piece of text there are no theses and no questions, that what might appear to be theses and questions are only words.

I cannot go through Conant's eight "realist" theses sentence by sentence, examining the meaning of each sentence and enquiring as to its meaning. I will illustrate my point by examining just one piece of text, his statement of the first of the eight theses:

> *The thesis that the Thing-in-Itself is a condition of the possibility of knowledge.* All our experiences of the world are of

> appearances, views of it from some particular point of view. The only sorts of truths we are able to formulate are truths about the world under some description. But we should not mistake the limitations of our knowledge, imposed on us by our finite cognitive capacities, for limitations that are inherent in the nature of reality as such. The idea that our experience is *of* the world (that appearances are *appearances* and not mere illusions)—that is that there is something which our descriptions are *about*—presupposes the further idea that there is a way which is *the way the world is in itself*. For the world to be a possible object of knowledge, there must be such a way that it is, apart from any description of it—a way the world is when "viewed from nowhere", that is from no particular point of view (or, alternatively, from a God's-eye point of view). Moreover, though such knowledge of the world (as it is in itself) is in principle unobtainable for us, we are able to *think* what we cannot know: we are able to grasp in thought that there is such a way the world is, apart from the conditions under which we know it. It is only by postulating the existence of such a noumenal reality that we render coherent the supposition that all our apparent knowledge of reality is indeed *knowledge* of a genuinely mind-independent external reality [Conant 2000, 271–272].

These words simply bewilder me. They should bewilder anyone. How shall I (in Quine's fine phrase) evoke the appropriate sense of bewilderment? I can do nothing to that end but provide a clause-by-clause commentary on this passage, and I have no time for that. I'll content myself with an examination of the clauses comprised in a single sentence from this passage: "For the world to be a possible object of knowledge, there must be [a way that the world is in itself], apart from any description of it."

"For the world to be a possible object of knowledge." Presumably this means, "for *anything* to be a possible object of knowledge" (or "anything except the contents of the knower's own mind"?; I don't know: one's mind is certainly a part of "the world"). The modern science of cosmology treats the physical world—if not "the world"—as a single, unified object and attempts to gain knowledge of it (something that Kant said couldn't be done). But I don't think that Conant means this phrase to bring to the reader's mind the issue of treating the world as a whole as an object of knowledge. I think that the phrase should be understood as introducing a general thesis about possible objects of knowledge. Let's

pick a particular object—the Arc de Triomphe will do. What does the following sentence mean?

> For the Arc de Triomphe to be a possible object of knowledge, there must be a way that it is in itself, apart from any description of it.

I suppose that 'the way the Arc de Triomphe is' is an oblique way of referring to the properties (attributes, characteristics, features, qualities, choose what word you will) of that monument. If so, our task is to understand *this* sentence:

> For the Arc de Triomphe to be a possible object of knowledge, there must be properties that it has in itself, apart from any description of it.

In this sentence, there are two puzzling adverbial phrases: 'in itself', and 'apart from any description of it'. I do not understand these adverbial phrases. Let's take them in their turn. What does *this* mean

> The Arc de Triomphe has, in itself, the property of being in the center of the Place de l'Étoile?

How does saying this differ from saying that the Arc de Triomphe has (without qualification) the property of being in the center of the Place de l'Étoile? There are all sorts of adverbs and adverbial phrases that can meaningfully be used to qualify 'has' when its object is a property: 'apparently', 'essentially', and 'according to popular belief', for example, but 'in itself' is not one of them. If something has a property, it is of course *it* that has that property—I just said so. The only use of 'in itself' that I know of in the history of philosophy that brings anything at all to my mind has to do with secondary qualities. Thus: 'The Arc de Triomphe is said to be white, but, really, it doesn't have that property in itself; whiteness is simply a quality that exists in the minds of its observers'. I consider that statement to be a boring sophistry, long exposed. But suppose I'm wrong. Suppose it's the sober truth. Then there's *no* sense in which the Arc de Triomphe has the property of being white. It just *isn't* white. Things in our minds are white (or perhaps whiteness is a free-floating quality that exists in our minds but is not a quality of anything), but the Arc de Triomphe isn't white, and there's an end on't. But if it isn't white, it nevertheless has other properties: it has at least such properties as *not* being white and being colorless. Does it have *those* properties "in itself"? The question makes no sense.

> Let us turn to 'apart from any description of it'. What does this sentence mean?
>
> The Arc de Triomphe has, apart from any description of it, the property of being in the center of the Place de l'Étoile.

An adverb or adverbial phrase is supposed to answer a question of some sort. In this case, the question, whatever it may be, would pertain to the Arc de Triomphe's possession of a certain property. Here is a straightforward example of an adverbial phrase in this position:

> The Arc de Triomphe has, all the guidebooks tell us, the property of being in the center of the Place de l'Étoile.

In this case, the question the adverbial phrase answers is "According to whom (does it have that property)?" But what question does 'apart from any description of it' answer? None is apparent. None is apparent because there is none. The adverbial phrase, although it violates no rule of syntax, has no semantical connection with the words that surround it. I might compare this sentence with these two sentences (also syntactically unobjectionable):

> James Conant has, apart from any visits he has made to San Francisco, the property of being the editor of *The Cambridge Companion to John Dewey*
>
> The Earth has, apart from any Serbian traffic regulations, the property of orbiting the sun.

I suppose I could imagine outré conversational circumstances in which there would be a point to uttering sentences like these, but, apart from some vastly improbable context of utterance, they are simply puzzling. They are puzzling because, owing to the lack of any discoverable connection between the adverbial phrases 'apart from any visits he has made to San Francisco' and 'apart from any Serbian traffic regulations' and the other parts of the sentences in which they occur, one can discern no question about Conant's editorship or the orbit of the earth for them to supply answers to.

The role of 'apart from any description of it' in the sentence 'The Arc de Triomphe has, apart from any description of it, the property of being in the center of the Place de l'Étoile' is therefore a puzzle. It is, in fact, a puzzle without a solution. Anyone who thinks that this sentence means anything is under an illusion. What is the source of this illusion? Could it be some argument along these lines?

> To say that the Arc de Triomphe has the property of being in the center of the Place de l'Étoile is to describe it; therefore, it does not have that property apart from any description of it. More generally, for no property that we ascribe to any object does that object have that property apart from any description of it.

Anyone who finds this argument persuasive will no doubt go on to contend that it is only those properties that are *never* ascribed to the object x that x has apart from any description of it. Perhaps, indeed, that person will want to say that 'apart from any description of it' means 'apart from any *possible* description of it', and will go on to say that it is only those properties of x that are inexpressible in principle, inexpressible in any possible language, that x has apart from any description of it.

Is the thesis that objects have some their properties apart from any description of them then the thesis that some properties of each object are inexpressible in any possible language? That is an interesting thesis. I have no idea whether it's true, but, true or not, it does not seem to be the thesis that Conant means to be putting forth as one example of the *genre* realism. *That* thesis, after all, is supposed to have some connection with the idea of the thing-in-itself, and the thesis that there are things-in-themselves is simply not the thesis that things have properties that cannot be expressed in any language. I have no real understanding of the words 'the doctrine of the thing-in-itself' but I have a certain negative grasp of the phrase, and that is sufficient for me to be sure that no one who claims to understand it would say that the thesis that things had inexpressible properties entailed (much less was identical with) the thesis that there were things-in-themselves.

To say that the Arc de Triomphe has properties that it is impossible in principle to ascribe to it (and if that were true, how could anyone possibly know that it was true?) tells us nothing about what it might mean to say that it has those (or any) properties 'apart from any description of it'—not in any sense that is relevant to understanding the beliefs of realists, at any rate. It is of course true that *ex hypothesi* no reference to any linguistically inexpressible property will figure in any description any possible speaker applies to the Arc de Triomphe, but, supposing there to be realists who say that the Arc de Triomphe has those (or any) properties apart from any description of it, that fact does not tell us what they mean by 'apart from any description of it'. What then do these (perhaps fictional) realists mean by this phrase? The answer is the obvious one: they don't mean anything by it. It is just words. "Words, words, words," as Hamlet says.

In the end I have to say that I feel not the slightest temptation to believe that language like 'If our experience of the world constitutes knowledge, then there must be a way the world is in itself, apart from any description of it' makes any sense at all. And I feel the same about most of the sentences that make up Conant's other "realist" theses. (I understand bits and pieces of some of them, but the bits I understand all pertain to two rather special topics, morals and history. I don't think that the bits of his eight theses that I understand, taken individually or taken together, can be said to provide a statement of a general doctrine, a doctrine that applies to human thought and discourse in general, a doctrine that could be called "realism full stop" and not simply "realism concerning *X*". I should say, too, that, although I call myself a realist, I don't find the bits I understand particularly plausible.)

Nevertheless, I say, I call myself a realist. But what do I mean by calling myself a realist if I understand almost none of the sentences that comprise Conant's characterization of realism—if I suppose, as I do, that this characterization is without sense? Well, I mean just what I said I meant in the early bits of the chapter on realism in my book *Metaphysics*, the chapter that ends with my challenge to the anti-realist to say how his position differs from O'Brien's. I'll briefly repeat what I said—but in different words, and with some additions.

Speakers often make assertive utterances. That is to say, speakers utter declarative sentences of languages they understand in the standard or central circumstances for the uttering of declarative sentences. (Some non-standard or non-central circumstances: a phonetician asks you to read the written sentence 'Mary wants to marry a merry man' aloud; playing a minor character in *Macbeth*, you utter the sentence, 'The queen, my Lord, is dead'.)

When we make assertive utterances we often say things. When, a moment ago, I uttered the sentence 'I call myself a realist' I thereby said that I called myself a realist. (But we do not always say things when we make assertive utterances. When Royce uttered—or inscribed—the sentence 'The world is a progressively realized community of interpretation' he said—or wrote—nothing. If what I have been saying up to this point is true, philosophers discussing realism and anti-realism often make assertive utterances without saying anything.)

When we say things, when we say *something*, what we say is often true or false. (But not always. Sometimes what we say falls between the two stools of truth and falsity. If you say that Alfred is tall, and if Alfred's height is 181.5 cm, then what you say is neither true nor false—since Alfred is a borderline case of a tall man.) If I told you this

morning that I had not come to Nancy directly from the US but rather from Italy, what I told you is true—since I came to Nancy from Italy and not directly from the US. If I told you this morning that I came to Nancy from Latvia, then what I told you was false, since I have never been in Latvia.

And what is it that I say of a thing someone has said when I say that it is true (or false)? Let us say that the things people "say" ("assert," "affirm") are propositions. But the things that people say, actually say, are only some among the things I am calling propositions, for not everything that someone can say is something that actually is said. No one—I am fairly confident of this—has ever said that Richard Rorty has lectured on anti-realism at San Francisco State University and the College of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary on the same day. Nevertheless, that is something that *could* be said; that is something that it's perfectly possible to assert; that is to say, there is such a proposition as the proposition that Richard Rorty has lectured on anti-realism at San Francisco State University and the College of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary on the same day. I expect it's a false proposition (if it's true no doubt someone *has* asserted it), but then lots of propositions are false—roughly half of them, in fact.

Am I then a platonist—a "small-'*p*' platonist" at any rate? Well, yes, but I think everyone is. I don't see how to avoid being a platonist. Everyone says things that imply the existence of things like numbers and possibilities and attributes—and propositions. You have yourself asserted the existence of propositions if you have ever said, "Some things are better left unsaid." Now someone may want to tell me that such everyday assertions do not commit those who make them to platonism. This is not the place to enter into a discussion of that issue. I will say only that if such everyday assertions as "Some things are better left unsaid" do not commit those who make them to platonism, then neither does my assertion (in a philosophical lecture, to be sure, but I don't see what difference that makes) that some of the things people assert are true commit me to platonism. If you don't like platonism, therefore, you have as much reason to excuse me from allegiance to the doctrine you don't like as you have to excuse the utterer of "Some things are better left unsaid" from allegiance to it. Make nothing of the fact that I call the things that are true or false (or the things that are better left unsaid) *propositions*. That's only a word. Obviously, if the things can be referred to as "things that are true or false" or "things that are better left unsaid," one is not going to commit oneself to any substantive philosophical thesis by calling them by *any* name. "But," the reply

comes, "the word 'proposition' is loaded with all sorts of metaphysical baggage." I doubt that. But if it is true, I hereby unload it: in this lecture, 'proposition' means only 'thing that is either true or false (or indeterminate as between truth and falsity)'.

All right. There are all these propositions. Some are true and some are false. (From now on, I'll ignore the *tertium datur*, indeterminacy.) Are truth and falsity *properties* of propositions? I would say so, and I would say that this is a harmless thing to say. If a proposition is a thing that is true or false, a property is a thing that is true or false *of* something. If a proposition is something one can assert, a property is something one can assert *of* something. The proposition that Paris is the capital of France is something that one can assert. "That it is in France" is something that one can assert *of* things: it can be asserted truly of Paris and Nancy and the Arc de Triomphe, and falsely (only falsely) of Rome and Bergamo and the Arch of Janus. "That it is in France" is therefore a property, or at least it is what I am calling a property. And truth and falsity are certainly properties in that sense, for "that it is true" is something that can be said of propositions—truly of the proposition that Paris is the capital of France and falsely of the proposition that Nancy is the capital of France.

What properties are truth and falsity? I would restate the question this way: can the open sentences 'x is true' and 'x is false' be given useful definitions? (If they can, the definitions will in effect be statements of what it is that we are saying of a thing when we say that it is true or say that it is false.) I think that the answer to this question is No. Truth and falsity are indefinable properties of propositions. I say this because I have a certain view of quantifiers and variables—essentially Quine's view of quantifiers and variables. According to this view, the *only* variables are nominal variables, variables that occupy nominal positions. If this is so, then what Dorothy Grover and others have called propositional quantification (I prefer "quantification into sentential positions") does not exist. That is to say, expressions like

$$\forall p \exists q (p \rightarrow q)$$

make no sense. If Quine is right about the nature of quantification—as I suppose him to be—the meaningful sentence that comes closest to saying the thing this meaningless sentence is trying to say (I hope you understand that) must contain nominal variables whose range is the bearers of truth-value (sentences Quine would say; propositions I say) and a truth-predicate. The meaningful sentence that comes closest to

saying the thing this meaningless sentence is trying to say is this one:

$\forall x \exists y$(the conditional with antecedent x and consequent y is true)

Now why is this thesis of Quine's about the nature of quantification relevant to the issues we are discussing? Why should it be of interest to philosophers whose concern is the realism/anti-realism debate? The answer is not far to seek. If there were such a thing as quantification into sentential positions, then, every schoolboy knows, it would be possible to define truth and falsity. Here's the definition of truth (assuming that the bearers of truth-value are propositions; let those who say that the bearers of truth value are sentences modify this definition in such a way that it exhibits truth as a property of sentences).

$$x \text{ is true } =_{df} \exists p(p \& x = \text{the proposition that } p).$$

But this definition is not available to anyone who (like Quine and me) finds no sense in the idea of variables that occupy sentential—or any non-nominal—positions. The definiens, we say, is a meaningless sentence. And what do we say is the meaningful sentence that comes closest to saying the thing this meaningless sentence is trying to say? We say it's this sentence

$$\exists y(y \text{ is a proposition } \& \ y \text{ is true } \& \ x = y).$$

And to say that a proposition is true if it is identical with some true proposition is hardly to provide an adequate definition of truth! It is for just this reason that I say that no definition of truth is possible. I have, of course, examined only the sort of definition of truth that is in some sense a generalization of sentences like 'The proposition that Paris is the capital of France is true if and only if Paris is the capital of France'. I concede that there are other possibilities[7] . For present purposes I will say only that I doubt whether truth can be defined and that I certainly don't want to accept any position that depends on the assumption that truth can be defined.

Truth and falsity, then, are properties, indefinable properties of many of the things we say and write and of many things that have never been said or written. (Consider the grammatical sentences of English that contain twenty or fewer words. The linguists tell us that there are

[7]For a detailed discussion of issues related to those my brief remarks on this subject have raised, see my essay "Generalizations of Homophonic Truth-sentences" in Richard Schantz (ed.) *What is Truth?*, (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 2002), pp. 205–222.

about10^{80} of them, a number comparable to the number of electrons in the observable universe. Most of these sentences, obviously, have never been spoken or written and never will be.) Though these properties are indefinable, we have a perfect grasp of them. That is, we understand perfectly the predicates that express them. If you understand what someone is saying when he utters the English sentence, "Some of the things Dean said about Nixon were true and some weren't," then you understand the predicate '. . . is true'. If you understand the predicate '. . . is true', you know what someone speaking English is saying about something when he says that it's true. And if you know that, you grasp the property truth, for the property truth is just that thing that someone says about something when he says that it's true. Just as being in the center of the Place de l'Étoile is a property of the Arc de Triomphe, truth is a property of the proposition that the Arc de Triomphe is in the center of the Place de l'Étoile. And in these two statements, 'is a property of' has exactly the same sense.

If truth and falsity are properties of propositions, it seems reasonable to classify them as *relational* properties of propositions (at least in the case in which they are properties of contingent propositions). But I hesitate so to classify them because there are problems about how to define 'relational property'. I do regard the analogy with the accuracy and inaccuracy of maps as having some power to convince me that truth and falsity are relational properties. Accuracy and inaccuracy are properties of maps (among other things). That is, "That it is accurate" and "That it is inaccurate" are things that you can say about maps. And it seems that a map that was accurate can become inaccurate (a river changes its course; the coastlines change because the polar caps are melting) and that its becoming inaccurate is normally a "mere-Cambridge" change in the map. Similarly—the analogy suggests—, the proposition that Paris is the capital of France may one day become false, and if it does, that will be a mere-Cambridge change in that proposition, a change that is due entirely to a *real* change in France and her political structure. If one is not altogether happy with this way of talking (as I am not), this will be because one regards oneself as pretty much ignorant in the matter of the nature of propositions and thus as not in a position to make judgments about which changes in them are mere-Cambridge changes and which aren't. (I know what propositions do but not what they are.)

Nevertheless, one of the things you can say truly about the proposition that Paris is the capital of France is that it's a contingent proposition and another is that it's a true proposition. And there's an important difference between these two things: even God can't do anything about

the first, and the second is something that even human beings have the power to change. And, if they wished to change it, they would change it by altering matters in France and not by somehow working directly on the proposition—words that are either meaningless or express a metaphysical impossibility. Whether you describe this difference by saying that contingency is an intrinsic and truth a relational property of the proposition that Paris is the capital of France or describe it in some other way, the difference is there to be described. And this difference from contingency in this way is an important feature of truth. Despite the fact that no conceptual confusion is involved in the statement that someone has caused a certain proposition to be true (I remind you that one causes the proposition that one smokes to be false by stopping smoking, not by somehow operating directly on the proposition that one smokes), the truth of many true propositions (and the falsity of many false ones) is causally independent of any human activity. We may cite the proposition that Mt Everest is 8849.87 meters high, the proposition that somewhere on Mars there are the ruins of an advanced civilization that flourished millions of years ago, and the proposition that the dinosaurs were mammals. The first is true and the second false; the third is one or the other (unless borderline cases are involved), although I don't know which. As to my contention that the first is true independently of all human activity, I *hope* no one is going to tell me that the proposition that Mt Everest is 8849.87 meters high would not be true if the metric system of linear measure had never been devised or if Mt Everest had been named after Colonel Lambton instead of Colonel Everest.

And I hope no one is going to tell me that the height of Mt Everest is inherently and inescapably a matter of convention—owing to the fact that geographers have agreed that the *height* of a mountain is to be the distance from the center of the earth of its highest point minus the average distance of the surface of the sea at the latitude of the mountain from the center of the earth. If anyone does tell me this thing I hope no one is going to tell me, I shall reply as follows. There is indeed such a convention. And it does indeed have something to do with what it is that English-speakers say (and say truly) when they utter the sentence 'Mt Everest is 8849.87 meters high'. For that matter, it has something, and exactly the same thing, to do with what they would say if for some bizarre reason they uttered the sentence 'Mt Everest is five meters high'. But consider the thing that English-speakers *in fact* say when they utter the former sentence—and not what they *would* say when they uttered that sentence if some possible alternative convention concerning the heights of mountains were in force. That thing is true, and its truth has every-

thing to do with the topography of the Earth's crust and nothing to do with anything else—and, most emphatically, it has nothing to do with human beings and their conventions. I call that thing by the name 'the proposition that Mt Everest is 8849.87 meters high'. (At any rate, that's the name I call it by when I'm speaking to an audience of philosophers.) If different conventions about the use of 'height' were in force, that name might well be a name for a different proposition. But they aren't and it isn't. And the thing the name in fact names is true no matter what anyone calls it. And it would be true in any counterfactual circumstance in which the topography of the Earth's surface was as it in fact is, even if that counterfactual circumstance were so remote as not to include the existence of human beings.

And that's what I call realism: the thesis there are true propositions—contingently true propositions—that would be true no matter what human beings had ever done and even if human beings had never existed. (And, of course, this point about truth applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to falsity.) And I expect Orwell would agree with me on that point—although he might think it a matter of some importance that I should add to what I have said a clause that said explicitly that a *certain class* of propositions belonged to this category, *viz.* propositions about the past. Although it is a nice philosophical question what it is for a proposition to be about the past (see any philosophical debate about divine foreknowledge and freedom), it is certainly true that there are many, many propositions that are *uncontroversially* about the past. For example, that Elizabeth I died in 1603 or that Trotsky was murdered by an NKVD agent in 1940. Orwell would say, and I would agree, that any proposition of this sort—any proposition that is what I have called "uncontroversially about the past"—is either true or false (unless it is indeterminate; the proposition about Trotsky's murder would be neither true nor false if, e.g., Ramón Mercader's relation to the NKVD was ambiguous and he could not be said without qualification to have been an agent of the NKVD or not to have been an agent of the NKVD). And if it is now true that Elizabeth I died in 1603, it will continue to be true even if everyone should somehow come to believe that she died in 1605 or that she was immortal and still lived or that she had never lived at all.

I do not see how anyone could disagree with me about this, could dispute either my general thesis or the codicil I have imagined that Orwell might want to add to it. I do not see how anyone could maintain that there is no such property as truth, and I do not see how anyone could maintain that there is such a property but whether something has it is in every case causally dependent on the actions of human beings. I do

not see how anyone could think that "Elizabeth I died in 1603" might have been true in 1955 and have become false at some point in the tumultuous 1960s. I do not think anyone does disagree with me about these things. At any rate, I do not think that Conant disagrees with me. (O'Brien would disagree—but he would also agree. Doublethink makes that possible.)

Suppose someone—I do not say "Conant," just "someone"—were to reply as follows. "Yes, no one would disagree with you about any of that stuff (or no one but an Ingsoc doublethinker who also agreed with you). And, yes, those are just the theses Orwell wanted to defend, even if his vocabulary was not quite the same as yours. But they're not metaphysical theses."

I suppose I'd have to ask that person what he thought a metaphysical thesis was. Some at least of the theses I have put forward are certainly not empirical theses. (Small-p platonism, for example.) When I advance these theses, what I say cannot be refuted by observation or experiment. They thus have the feature that the logical positivists used as the touchstone of metaphysics. They are, moreover, theses about a concept, truth, that is as general a concept as there could be. If I tell you that everything Professor X says in his new book is true, that will give you no clue whatever as to what the book is about. Is it about number theory, epistemology, geology, tax law, the history of public finance in Tuscany . . . ? The word 'true' is like the words 'and' and 'whether' and 'is'; it is what the Oxford philosophers of the fifties called a topic-neutral word. (If someone blots out all the words in a treatise but the topic-neutral words, a reader who examines the defaced text will have no way of knowing what the subject of the treatise is.) A predicate that is formed from a topic-neutral adjective like 'true' is as general a predicate as a predicate can be. A property that is, like truth, expressed by a predicate of this sort seems to be at least a good candidate for the office "property of interest to metaphysicians."

Does this mean, then, that Orwell was interested in metaphysics? Well, certainly not as a discipline, not as an area of theoretical enquiry. But he was interested in and accepted certain theses that I, at any rate, insist are metaphysical theses, and he thought that what people believed about these theses was tremendously important—which is not to say that he would have been at all interested in the arguments metaphysicians have used to attack or defend them. (If you summarized a page of Rorty to him, he would very likely have said something along the lines of, "One has to belong to the intelligentsia to believe things like that: no ordinary

man could be such a fool."[8]) Here is something that Orwell once said that illustrates how a person with no theoretical interest in metaphysics can have beliefs about matters that metaphysicians dispute about—and can find reason to appeal to these beliefs in an essay on politics. This is from Orwell's "The Lion and the Unicorn;" his topic is the historical continuity of England:

> What can the England of 1940 have in common with the England of 1840? But then, what have you in common with the child of five whose photograph your mother keeps on the mantelpiece? Nothing, except that you happen to be the same person [Orwell 1940, 57].

The last sentence presupposes a view of personal identity that has been disputed by great philosophers. Many metaphysicians would follow Hume and say that the adult reader of "The Lion and the Unicorn" and the child of five were simply *not* identical with one another; a modern, scientific philosopher like Reichenbach who took more or less the Humean line would say that the adult reader and the child were two distinct temporal segments of an four-dimensional "space-time worm." (I am sure that Orwell knew, in a purely intellectual sort of way, as a matter of obscure historical fact, that Hume and other philosophers had had various things to say about personal identity across time, but I don't suppose that any thoughts about Hume or philosophy were in his mind when he wrote the words I have quoted.) Other metaphysicians would agree with Orwell in his contention that the adult and the child were the same person—but these metaphysicians fall into several camps and, when they can spare time from arguing with the Humeans, argue endlessly with one another about what it *is* to for a person who exists at one time to be identical with a person who exists at another time. Orwell would certainly not have been interested in their interminable debate. ("The subtle arguments which he would not be able to understand, much less answer"? Despite what some have said, I'm sure he was *able* to understand them, insofar as there is anything in them susceptible of being understood. It's just that he would have considered it a waste of his time to try to understand them.) But although he would not have been interested in the debate, he did in fact accept at least one of the theses the debate was about.

[8] I concede that that famous remark (usually misquoted) was actually directed at a straightforwardly political thesis—that "American troops had been brought to Europe not to fight the Germans but to crush an English revolution." [Orwell 1945, 379].

Or so I say. Other philosophers will insist that none of the theses that would figure in a four-way dispute about personal identity among Derek Parfit, Roderick Chisholm, David Lewis, and myself were theses that Orwell either accepted or rejected or had so much as entertained. They will say that when Orwell said "you happen to be the same person," what he was saying was something that the four metaphysicians were in agreement about. And someone—I do not say "Conant," just "someone"—might say the corresponding thing about what Orwell was saying when he said, "Facts exist independently of us and are more or less discoverable": that this statement is something that all the parties to the realism/anti-realism debate agree on, and that the points on which they disagree would have been of no interest to Orwell.

Well, perhaps so. All I can say is, if realism is not the thesis that facts (some facts, at any rate) exist independently of us, I do not know what realism is. (I take "Facts exist independently of us" to be another way of saying that truth exists independently of us. In other words, words a philosopher might use, "Truth is radically non-epistemic.") And if anti-realism is not the denial of the thesis that facts exist independently of us, I do not know what anti-realism is. And if the question whether facts exist independently of us is not a metaphysical question, I do not know what a metaphysical question is.

I wish to end with a discussion of a question I raised earlier: Why does O'Brien retain his allegiance to the existence of objective truth? Why does he not achieve logical consistency by simply eliminating the idea of truth and replacing it with Party solidarity? Or, if you like, why does Orwell not represent O'Brien as achieving logical consistency by refusing to affirm the existence of objective truth? The answer to both questions, I believe, lies in this fact: it is not possible consistently to reject the existence of objective truth. It is indeed possible to *deny* the existence of objective truth—I've seen it done—, but it is not possible *not to affirm* the existence of objective truth. And, therefore, anyone who denies the existence of objective truth will also affirm its existence. And why do I say that it is not possible not to affirm the existence of objective truth? Because, I say, it is not possible to go through life without asserting things, and everyone who asserts anything thereby affirms the existence of objective truth. Consider this sentence, which could certainly be used to make an assertion:

The Arc de Triomphe is in the center of the Place de l'Étoile.

I'll call this sentence the "core sentence." Each of the following four sentences is a logical consequence of the core sentence:

> It is true that the Arc de Triomphe is in the center of the Place de l'Étoile
>
> It is objectively true that the Arc de Triomphe is in the center of the Place de l'Étoile
>
> The proposition that the Arc de Triomphe is in the center of the Place de l'Étoile corresponds to reality
>
> The Arc de Triomphe is in the center of the Place de l'Étoile even if everyone believes that the Arc de Triomphe is somewhere else.

If anyone doubts whether the second of these sentences is a logical consequence of the core sentence, I would ask him whether he thinks that there is or could be something that is true but not objectively true—and I hope that if he says there is, he will provide me with an example. To explain the distinction between "true" and "objectively true" is a problem for rhetoric or pragmatics, not for logic or semantics. (If anyone is interested in discussing Kierkegaard's "Truth is subjectivity," I'd be happy to do so. For the present, I'll record my conviction that this interesting thesis has nothing to do with the realism/anti-realism debate.) If anyone doubts whether the third sentences is a logical consequence of the core sentence, I would ask him how he would define 'The proposition that p corresponds to reality'. I would offer him either of two definientia for this schema: he may choose between 'The proposition that p is true' and, simply, 'p'. If "corresponds to reality" is not be understood in either of these ways, I don't know how it is to be understood. As for the fourth and final sentence, note that

> If the Arc de Triomphe is in the center of the Place de l'Étoile, then the Arc de Triomphe is in the center of the Place de l'Étoile even if everyone believes that the Arc de Triomphe is somewhere else

is equivalent to

> If the Arc de Triomphe is in the center of the Place de l'Étoile, then, if everyone believes that the Arc de Triomphe is somewhere else, the Arc de Triomphe is in the center of the Place de l'Étoile,

which is an instance of a theorem of sentential logic (If p, then if q then p). If one asserts something, one commits oneself to the truth of its logical consequences—or at any rate one does if one knows that they are logical consequences of what one has asserted. Logical consequences of the sort I have set out are, I think, sufficiently obvious that if someone makes an assertion, any assertion whatever, he commits himself to the *truth* of that assertion, to the *objective* truth of that assertion, to that assertion's corresponding to reality, and to its being true (and objectively true and in correspondence with reality) *no matter what anyone else may believe*. It is for this reason that even the Party cannot dispense with the idea of a truth that exists independently of its decrees. The Party must make assertions (that it invented the airplane; that Oceana is at war with Eastasia and has always been at war with Eastasia) and cannot forbid its servants to make assertions (it must insist that they make the same political assertions it does; and, in any case, it is not possible for people to conduct the simplest affairs of everyday life without making assertions). And making assertions commits one to realism: to say that the Party invented the airplane is to say that it is the objective truth that the Party invented the airplane and would be the objective truth even if everyone believed that the Party had not invented the airplane.

References

Brandom, Robert B., (ed.)

2000 *Rorty and His Critics*, Oxford: Blackwell.

Conant, James

2000 Freedom, Cruelty, and Truth: Rorty versus Orwell, in [Brandom 2000, 268–342].

Orwell, George

1939 Review of Bertrand Russell, *Power: A Social Analysis*, cited according to [Orwell & Angus 1968, vol. I, 375–376].

1940 The Lion and the Unicorn, cited according to [Orwell & Angus 1968, vol. II, 56–109].

1945 Notes on Nationalism, cited according to [Orwell & Angus 1968, vol. III, 361–380].

Orwell, Sonia & Angus, Ian (eds.)

1968 *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, 4 volumes; New York: Harcourt, Brace & World.

Rorty, Richard

1989 *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

2000 Response to James Conant, in [Brandom 2000, 342–350].

Van Inwagen, Peter

2002 *Metaphysics*, 2nd ed. Boulder CO and London: Westview Press and Oxford University Press.