TRIVIALIZING COGNITIVE COMMAND

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I criticize Wright's claim that Cognitive Command is a significant test for discerning realist from antirealist discourses. The antirealist semantics explicitly advocated by Wright, entails that every discourse whose truth predicate is superassertibility exerts Cognitive Command, and so that every assertoric discourse deserves a realistic treatment. Whenever two disputants disagree as to the truth value of a sentence expressible within the discourse, provided that they master the relevant vocabulary, they must have committed a cognitive mistake. For they disagree as to the warranted assertibility of the sentence in the light of the available evidence: hence either one of them (or both) misrepresents it, or one of them (or both) fails to to take into account its evidential status.

Key words: Cognitive Command, Truth, Crispin Wright, Realism/Antirealism

Introduction

Crispin Wright has recently defended a *minimal* conception of truth, according to which the concept of truth is identified by the satisfaction of conditions which are neutral between semantic realism and antirealism. These conditions require that the predicate 'true' be coincident in normative force with, and potentially divergent in extension from the predicate 'warrantedly assertible'. Wright thinks that an evidentially unconstrained truth-predicate and an evidentially constrained truth-predicate (superassertibility) both satisfy the conditions. So he thinks that whenever a dispute arises as to whether an area of discourse deserves a realist or an antirealist interpretation, this dispute must be adjudicated by inquiring into the nature of the truth-predicate finding application in the discourse. If the predicate is demonstrably an evidentially unconstrained predicate, then realism concerning the discourse is vindicated. If the predicate is evidentially constrained, though, anti-realism concerning the discourse is not automatically vindicated.

The reason is that a discourse may be such that every statement which is expressible within it is knowable (so informed by an evidentially constrained truth-predicate) and nonetheless possess further features which give the notion of truth operative within it a definite realist connotation. Among such features, Wright identifies what he calls Cognitive Command (CC). A discourse exerts CC if it holds *a priori* that every disagreement which might arise about the truth value of any statement expressible within it can be traced back either to ignorance or error (at least) of one of the disputants; whenever it is so, Wright argues, the epistemically constrained nature of a truth-predicate does not prevent a realistic interpretation of the statements it ranges over. For the satisfaction of CC licenses the attribution to these statements of a 'representational function'; that is to say, it licenses the thought that, whenever we engage into the practice of asserting these statements, we aim "to produce mirrors, in thought or language, of the state of affairs with which the discourse distinctively deals" (Wright 1992, p. 92).

In this paper I will argue that CC does not provide the resources necessary to tell apart, among the discourses whose truth predicate is epistemically constrained, those which deserve an anti-realistic interpretation from those which do not. The argument runs as follows: if the standards of assertibility internal to a discourse are given the function of providing content to the statements expressible within it, every *competent* speaker must agree as to the degree to which any statement, expressible in the discourse, is assertible. Cases in which two competent speakers disagree must be cases where ignorance or mistake is in place. I will consider two possible reactions against this argument.

The first strategy is to argue that, given certain conditions, the assertibility conditions which provide the statements expressible in a discourse with content may license an *intractable* disagreement between two competent subjects. S*ubjectivist* conditions of assertion cannot do the job, because they arguably fail to determine the intersubjective sentential content needed for there to be a genuine disagreement. However, *subjectivist* assertion conditions are not necessary for a belief to be *irreproachable* in a sense which allows for blameless disagreements about its truth-value. The needed irreproachability of belief, Wright claims, is guaranteed also by standards which constrain the assertibility of a statement – say, '*a* is amusing' – to the irreproachable reactions of a communal sensibility – its finding *a* amusing – encompassing the subjective sensibilities of all the speakers. However, I will try to show that Wright's proposed standards of assertion are still hostage of an alternative – consequent upon the admission of conditions of defeat – whose distinct horns either entail the denial of the assertoric nature of the discourse they inform, or imply that such discourse still exerts CC.

As a consequence, I will consider a second line of response. One may reply that the thesis that meaning is determined by assertibility conditions does not entail that every competent speaker must agree about *all* the standards of warranted assertibility operative in the discourse. Suppose one presented a principled distinction between conditions of assertion whose acceptance is constitutive of the competence in a certain

discourse, and conditions whose acceptance is not. Disagreements attributable to a different attitudes toward the second kind of conditions would not call anymore for either of the following explanations: (a) that one of the disputants is not competent (the considered conditions do not perform a meaning-constituting function); (b) at least one of them is either mistaken or ignorant.

In order to substantiate the proposal I will take into account a distinction introduced by Wright in *Realism, Meaning, and Truth*, between *symptoms* – to which it is plausible not to attribute a meaning constituting function – and (Wittgensteinean) *criteria* – to which it is necessary to attribute a meaning-constituting function. While characteristic C – say the visual appearance of a red thing – is criterial in that it is *a priori* that, if C obtains, the sentence 'that thing is red' is justified, another characteristic C* – say, a certain feeling with I happen to associate to the visual appearance of red things – is symptomatic in that it is only *a posteriori*, i.e. *contingent* on my associating the feeling to the appearance, that, if C* obtains, the sentence 'that thing is red' is justified. If there is no alternative way to tell apart meaning-constituting assertibility conditions from assertibility conditions which are not, however, every disagreement is likely either to fail condition (a) or to fail condition (b). Whenever two speakers disagree about *p*, because one regards C, which both recognize as occurring, as symptomatic and the other does not, it is a priori that one of them is mistaken, in particular about the status of C. In fact, whether C is symptomatic – i.e. co-instantiated with some other criterial characteristic – is a cognitive matter, decidable a posteriori.

1. Minimalism, superassertibility and realism

In *Truth and Objectivity,* Crispin Wright defines the predicate 'true' as follows.

> A predicate is a *truth* predicate iff
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> (1) it coincides in normative force with the predicate 'warrantedly assertible',
>
> and
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> (2) it potentially diverges in extension from the predicate 'warrantedly assertible'.
> (Wright 1992, p. 24)

Condition (1) identifies two distinct norms, regulating *assertive practice*: according to the first, the move of asserting *p* is and must be selected whenever *p* is true; the second is that the move of asserting *p* is and must be selected whenever *p* is warrantedly assertible. It adds that every reason to suppose that a move in the practice – the assertion of *p* – is recommended by the first norm (every reason to suppose that *p* is true), is a reason to suppose that it is recommended by the second norm (a reason to suppose that *p* is warrantedly assertible). In this sense, the norm of truth and the norm of warranted assertion *coincide* in normative force.

Condition (2) adds the further requirement that, despite the fact that every reason to suppose that *p* is true is a reason to suppose that *p* is warrantedly assertible, and vice versa, there are to be cases in which though *p* is true, *p* is not warrantedly assertible, and vice versa. The reasons must be *defeasible* reasons.[1]

According to Wright, it is sufficient that a discourse satisfying all the syntactic trappings of assertoric discourse is semantically regimented for a minimal truth predicate to be applicable. Such a predicate is *superassertibility*. A statement is superassertible iff it is warrantedly assertible and "some warrant for it would survive arbitrary close scrutiny of its pedigree and arbitrary extensive increments to or other forms of improvement of our information" (Wright 1992, p. 48).[2]

Taking for granted that if a statement can be true, then it is assertive, Wright derives the following consequence: every area of discourse which (a) satisfies all the syntactic trappings of assertoric discourse[3] and (b) is semantically regimented,[4] is assertoric. In fact conditions (a) and (b) suffice to ensure that at least superassertibility may find application within the discourse; as a consequence, as long as superassertibility is a truth predicate, every area of discourse which satisfies the conditions is assertoric. Along with this notion of assertoric content Wright rejects traditional forms of antirealism, such as expressivism and error-theory. Consider the case of moral discourse: if moral statements satisfy the syntactic condition and are semantically regimented, then (i) they are truth-apt (at least, either they are or they are not superassertible); (ii) some of them actually are superassertible (insofar as warrantedly assertible). In fact, it is a principle defended by minimalism that every reason to believe a statement is warrantedly assertible, is a reason to believe it superassertible: it is just consequent upon superassertibility's being a truth-predicate that it sustains the aforementioned principle, which in fact exploits condition (1) on truth.[5]

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[1]   The disquotational schema (DS), according to which 'p' is true iff p, guarantees that every reason to assert a statement is a reason to believe it true, and vice versa. The following deduction, in turn, reveals that 'true' and 'warrantedly assertible' must diverge in extension: (1) 'it is not the case that p' is true iff it is not the case that p; (2) it is not the case that p iff it is not the case that 'p' is true; (3) 'it is not the case that p' is true iff it is not the case that 'p' is true. (3), which logically follows from (1) and (2), is false when both occurrences of 'true' are substituted for by 'warrantedly assertible'. For (3) fails from right to left whenever it is neither the case that 'p' is warrantedly assertible, nor it is the case that non-p is warrantedly assertible. Hence the conclusion that every candidate truth-predicate must diverge in extension from warranted assertibility, Wright 1992, pp. 14-20.

[2]   See also Wright 1987, pp. 295-302.

[3]   A statement *p* exhibits all the syntactical resources for assertoric content, provided that it is syntactically correct to say things like 'if *p*, then *q*', 'not *p*', 'I believe that *p*' etc. See Wright 1992, p. 29. The exclamation 'augh', for instance, does not satisfy the conditions. The following, in fact, are clearly ill-formed formulas: 'I believe that augh', 'maybe not augh'.

[4]   In order to be semantically regimented, a discourse must be informed by 'firmly acknowledged standards of proper and improper use'. There has to be a clear distinction, about the statements which are expressible in the discourse, between the circumstances which allow for their warranted assertion, the circumstances that do not, and the circumstances that allow for the assertion of their negation. See Wright 1992, p. 29.

[5]   Every theorist who acknowledges that a discourse satisfies conditions (a) and (b), and accepts that at least some of the statements expressible within it may be warrantedly asserted in the light of the standards of proper use mentioned in (b) – call her the W-theorist – is therefore committed to acknowledge, by her acceptance of the principle,

According to Wright, then, realists and antirealists should agree about the fact that the disputed statements are truth-apt and sometimes true. What is left for them to disagree about concerns the presence or the absence in an assertive discourse of further features which give the truth-predicate a realist connotation. Wright has it that, given the assertoric nature of a discourse, the default position about the truth predicate is its identification with superassertibility, and the default position about the discourse anti-realism. However, if it can be shown either that, contrary to superassertibility, the truth predicate is not epistemically constrained, or that, even if it is epistemically constrained, that the features it possesses license a stronger interpretation of the notions of correspondence and representation which are conceptually linked to the notion of truth, then realism about the discourse is *vindicated*.

Among the features a given area of discourse should exhibit for its (evidentially constrained) truth-predicate to deserve a realistic interpretation, Wright attaches much importance to CC. There are several formulations of such criterion. In *Inventing Logical Necessity* Wrights formulates it in the following terms:

(CC$_1$) a discourse exerts Cognitive Command iff two rationally ideal subjects cannot but agree, on the basis of whichever available evidence, as to degree to which every statement, expressible in the discourse, is assertible. (Wright 1984, p. 191)

In *Truth and Objectivity*, the criterion is stated differently:

(CC$_2$) a discourse exerts Cognitive Command iff it is a priori certain that every disagreement about any given statement expressible in the discourse, unless excusable as a result of vagueness in a disputed statement, or in the standard of acceptability, or variation in personal evidence thresholds, can be explained by something which can be properly regarded as a cognitive shortcoming. (Wright 1992, p. 144)

I think that (CC$_1$) implies (CC$_2$), and vice versa, if what is meant by saying that two subjects are rationally ideal, as required by the first criterion, is that neither of them is guilty of any cognitive shortcoming. It is a consequence of the second formulation that, if the qualifications are met, two subjects innocent of any cognitive failures cannot but agree, for every evidence they may happen to share, as to the degree to which the statement is assertible. It is a consequence of the former formulation that if two subjects disagree as to the degree to which a statement is assertible, then they must be less than rationally ideal, i.e. guilty of cognitive shortcomings. If a discourse exerts CC, as we have seen, Wright thinks that it deserves a realist interpretation. The reason is as follows:

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that they are superassertible. Notice that a distinction must be drawn between the claim that the W-theorist is committed to maintain that the statements she regards as assertible are superassertible, and the claim that, since they are assertible, they are superassertible. While the latter is arguably false, the former is all that is needed in order to ban the W-theorist from rationally endorsing error theoretic forms of antirealism about the discourse. For the formulation and a defence of the principle, see Wright 1992, pp. 54-57 and pp. 66-70.

> [s]howing that a discourse exerts Cognitive Command thus has the effect of 'beefing up' the Correspondence Platitude in just the realism-relevant way I advertised. One shows precisely that the idea of representation featured therein has a characteristic which minimal truth aptitude does not impose, but which it had better have if there is to be real substance in the idea that, in using the discourse in ways which respect the standards of assertoric warrant by which it is informed, we function as representational systems, responsive to states of affair which, when we are successful, our beliefs and statements serve to map. (Wright 1992, p. 147)

However, it is my opinion that Wright's suggestion that the satisfaction of CC is a realism-relevant trait is not in good standing. To show this, I will present an informal argument to the effect that being informed by a superassertibility predicate trivially entails satisfaction of CC. Since the distinction between epistemically constrained and epistemically unconstrained truth predicates is exhaustive of the logical space, the argument's conclusion entails that every discourse deserves a realistic interpretation; for either a discourse is informed by superassertibility, and so by the argument deserves a realist interpretation because it exerts CC; or it is informed by an epistemically unconstrained truth-predicate, and so straightforwardly deserves a realist interpretation. Since no criterion can contribute to the discrimination between realistic and anti-realistic discourses, if it licenses the conditional according to which every assertoric discourse deserves a realistic interpretation, I finally argue that CC must be rejected as a test to adjudicate (R/AR) disputes.

2. Cognitive command trivialized: the case of moral discourse

Let us consider moral language as an example of a discourse where the truth-predicate is 'superassertibility'. Suppose that A and B are two *competent* users of moral language: this entails that they both know, for every statement p which is expressible in the discourse, what p means. Since what a statement means is determined by the standards of assertoric warrant by which the discourse to which they belong is informed, both subjects are supposed to know, for every p, under what conditions the assertion of p is warranted and under what conditions it is not.[6] Now remember that, according to our assumption, the truth predicate finding application within the moral discourse is superassertibility. Accordingly, when A and B disagree as to the moral worth of an action, or of a person, they disagree as to the fact that the statement which says that that

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[6]   It is arguable that the standards of assertibility which inform moral discourse are to be identified with moral principles, as distinguished from moral judgments. As a consequence, I do not agree with Tersman's proposal, according to which, since every disagreement about a moral judgment presupposes a disagreement about a moral principle, moral discourse should be seen to exert CC. The main question, in fact, is about whether the acceptance of a principle is something that could be the object of a cognitive disagreement. Tersman just helps himself to the assumption that it could, but says nothing to support it. My position, on the contrary, is that every disagreement about the validity of a principle should be regarded as signalling a semantic, rather than an epistemic, divergence. See Tersman 1998, pp. 359-361.

action, or that person, possesses a determinate degree of moral worth is superassertible. Now consider the principle according to which having a warrant for the assertion of a statement entails having a warrant for regarding the statement as superassertible. This principle, by itself, just exploits superassertibility's satisfaction of the aforementioned condition (1), according to which every truth-predicate coincides in *normative force* with the predicate of warranted assertibility.[7] So, this principle falls or stands with the supposition that superassertibility is indeed a truth-predicate. By contraposing the principle, we yield that not having a warrant to regard a statement as superassertible entails the lack of warrant to assert the statement. As a consequence, if A and B disagree about *p*'s superassertibility, they must ultimately disagree as to the fact that *p* is warrantedly assertible. Is this consistent with the hypothesis that both subjects are innocent of 'something which can be properly regarded as a cognitive shortcoming'? The answer is clearly negative. For the assumption that both subjects are *competent* users of moral language, given the way the assertoric content of moral statements is determined, entails the following conditional: for every available piece of evidence, if A and B correctly represent it, they do not disagree as to the degree to which *p* is assertible in the light of that evidence. Any disagreement between competent speakers can be explained by attributing to either thinker a cognitive shortcoming. Contrary to what the hypothesis of a failure of CC would require, there is no way of reconciling the claim that A and B, who disagree as to *p*, be at the same time competent users of moral language and innocent of cognitive shortcoming. Either supposition must go in the presence of the other.[8]

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7   Condition (1) requires that every reason to suppose that the assertion of a statement is permitted be a reason to suppose that the statement is true (superassertible), and vice versa.

8   The argument bears some interesting similarity to an argument defended in Shapiro & Taschek 1996. There the authors argue for the claim that an epistemically constrained discourse cannot fail to exert CC. Their argument roughly runs as follows: consider a discourse A which is epistemically constrained; (1) since it is epistemically constrained, every true proposition p expressible in A is knowable; (2) suppose that S believes that p, S1 believes that non-p and that p is true; (3) then, either S or S1 believes the negation of a knowable proposition; (4) in that case, however, either S or S1 must have made some mistake; so, (5) A exerts CC. In *On Being in a Quandary* Wright has replied to Shapiro and Taschek's argument. Given the similarity with mine, it is worth pausing to note that Wright's criticism does not seem to apply to it. Wright reconstructs Shapiro and Taschek's argument as a reductio of the negated disjunction needed to vindicate an epistemically constrained discourse's failure of CC, i.e. (1) ¬ (A is guilty of a cognitive shortcoming ∨ B is guilty of a cognitive shortcoming). The reductio's conclusion is a doubly negated statement, i.e. (2) ¬¬ (A is guilty of a cognitive shortcoming ∨ B is guilty of a cognitive shortcoming), which is equivalent to (3) (A is guilty of a cognitive shortcoming ∨ B is guilty of a cognitive shortcoming) only under double negation elimination (DNE). Wright's point is that, in the context at issue, (2) is not equivalent to (3); for in the presence of undetectable cognitive shortcomings on the part either of A or B, bivalence concerning the disjunction is in turn unjustified, and so is (DNE). My contention is that my argument is not liable to the same retort: true, it arguably takes the form of a reductio. Yet it is a reductio of a (n affirmed) conjunction, i.e. (1*) (A is innocent of a cognitive shortcoming ∧ B is innocent of a cognitive shortcoming). Its conclusion is that, in the case at issue, (3*) ¬ (A is innocent of cognitive shortcoming ∨ B is innocent of a cognitive shortcoming). (3*) (intuitionistically) entails the disjunction: ¬(A is innocent of cognitive shortcoming) ∨ ¬(B is innocent of a cognitive shortcoming), which seems to be inconsistent which A and B's disagreement being epistemically blameless.

Since the argument makes no use of distinctive features allegedly exhibited by moral discourse,[9] its conclusion can be easily generalised to every discourse whose truth-predicate is superassertibility. So, CC seems to fail as a significant test between realism and antirealism concerning any disputed area of discourse.

3. Wright's stance towards subjectivism. communitarian versus subjective irreproachability of belief

The argument could be resisted if a theorist, sympathetic to Wright, succeeded in making a case of a disagreement which exhibited all the following features: (a) the discourse to which the disputed statement p belongs is informed by firmly acknowledged standards of proper and improper use; (b) two subjects, A and B, successfully comply with such standards; (c) they correctly represent the same bulk of evidence regarding p; (d) they disagree as to the truth value of p (they disagree about whether p is superassertible). The conclusion of the foregoing argument is that, whenever (d) is true, either (b) or (c) must be false. The replier, in order to avoid the conclusion, must show that (b), (c) and (d) can be jointly satisfied by a disagreement about a statement expressible in a discourse meeting condition (a). Is there any possibility for substantiating the foregoing proposal? Consider the following line of thought, which seemingly suggests an affirmative answer.

As an instance of a discourse informed by a superassertibility predicate, take again moral discourse. Suppose that the firmly acknowledged standards of proper and improper use by which the moral discourse is informed reduce to the single methodological prescription according to which the utterance of any statement of the form 'x is good', no matter what is substituted for x, is warranted whenever the person who utters it finds herself willing to act in a way which is conducive to the instantiation of x.

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9   It might be objected that the choice of moral language is unfortunate, for the following reason: suppose that pluralism about value is a tenable position. In this case divergence in opinion between two different moral agents, both competent users of moral language, would not call anymore for an explanation involving the attribution of cognitive failures. For, given pluralism, both subjects might be right in putting forward their incompatible moral verdicts. I really don't know whether pluralism is indeed a tenable position. However, the problem at issue is not whether pluralism is tenable or not; rather it is whether the attribution of a minimal truth-aptness to the statements expressible within moral language is consistent with the existence of blameless divergence in opinion upon moral matters, as failure of CC on the part of moral language actually requires. If sound, my argument shows that the aforementioned question deserves a negative answer, as long as the semantic of moral language is conceived without any qualification in terms of conditions of assertion. Unless one straightforwardly rejects Wright's minimalism, then, the suggestion that pluralism constitutes a possibility is immaterial as to the question whether CC provides an effective test for realism: as a matter of fact, pluralism is ruled out by moral language's satisfaction of CC. However, one might try to evade my reply by pointing out that the real lesson of pluralism is that the conditions of assertion which fix the content of moral statements must be distinguished from other standards of appraisal operative within moral language. In this way, one would propose a qualified form of assertibility-condition semantic for moral language which would arguably allow moral language's failure of CC. For an extended treatment and a critical assessment of this proposal, see below, section 5. I thank Carla Bagnoli for calling my attention to matters concerning moral pluralism.

Suppose, further, that competence in moral language is constituted by the acceptance of such a rule. In this scenario, it is a sufficient condition for A and B both to count as competent moral speakers that they are disposed to utter sentences like 'giving to charity is good' whenever they find their selves willing to give to charity, and that they are not disposed if different evidential conditions obtain. Is it possible, in the described situation, that A and B share the same evidence, that they both represent it correctly, that they share the same standard to discriminate between the circumstances where the assertion of a statement is warrantedly assertible, and that they nonetheless disagree as to the truth value of a statement *p*? At a first glance, this question seems to deserve an affirmative answer. For suppose that A and B face the question whether helping other people is good. And suppose that the body of evidence they share and correctly represent is constituted by the fact that A is, while B is not, willing to help other people. The same evidence, correctly represented, and the same standard of warranted assertibility still allow, in such a case, for a disagreement as to the truth value – the superassertibility – of 'helping other people is good'.

However intuitively appealing, I think this reply does not supply a satisfactory way out. For it is arguable that subjectivist conditions of assertion fail to constitute intersubjective sentential contents: the sentence '*x* is good', when uttered by different speakers, could not express the *same* proposition.

In fact, Wright expressly denies that a discourse which, like the talk about comedy, fails CC can intelligibly be taken to be informed by *subjectivist* standards of proper assertion. He is aware of the fact that, by *so* conceiving of the standards regimenting the assertoric practice of ascribing comic (or moral) properties, one would not be anymore in a position to construct a truth predicate informing an *intersubjective* assertoric practice:

> [i]n claiming that something was funny, I would be claiming the irreproachability of that opinion relative to *my* sense of humour; and that notion of irreproachability would then function as a truth predicate for *my* claims about the comic. (Wright 1992, p. 104)

More importantly, it should be noted that if the talk about the comic is construed as talk about one's subjective reactions, it should be regarded as a wittgensteinean form of *private* language. It would turn out to be a discourse whose statements are answerable to conditions of assertion only *privately* accessible. However,

> […] Wittgenstein's point – if you believe him – may be represented as being that even minimal notions of truth and assertoric content cannot grip in circumstances of Cartesian privacy; and hence that since they do characterise our everyday discourse of sensations, a misunderstanding of the meaning of such talk is involved in the conception that its subject matter is epistemically private. (Wright 1992, p. 141)

Wright agrees with Wittgenstein;[10] therefore, he is prepared to draw the conclusion that discourses which are informed by *subjectivist* standards of proper assertion are to be seen as masquerading, but not as actually possessing, the sort of discipline which is required for assertoric content. Since his main contention is that the paradigmatically antirealist discourses which fail CC (about comedy and about moral properties) are assertoric, and hence truth-apt, he cannot concede a *subjectivist* construal of their semantic discipline.

However, if this is Wright's stance towards subjectivism, his position still faces the tension described in the preceding section: what it is still difficult to understand is precisely how the standards of proper assertion of a discourse which fails CC should be conceived, if the discourse is simultaneously to meet the condition of being informed by *intersubjectively acknowledged* standards of proper assertion (that is to say, standards *mandating* highly converging reactions vis-à-vis shared bodies of evidence[11]), and the condition of allowing two subjects, correctly representing the same evidence, blamelessly to disagree about the opinions expressible in the discourse.

Wright is aware of the tension. However, he is of the opinion that it is possible to retain some notion of irreproachability of belief – the idea that, to some extent, the acquisition of belief is answerable to *idiosyncratic* criteria – while avoiding the endorsement of a *subjectivist* conception of assertion conditions. Consider his proposal concerning the discourse about comedy, which he takes to be assertoric and to fail CC: he thinks that by linking a notion of an irreproachable semantic regimentation of such discourse to the existence of a community of comic sensibility which is itself irreproachable, the measure of convergence in opinion which is required by the supposition that the discourse is assertoric can be preserved without engendering any tension with the supposition that it fails CC.

Wright thinks that the standards of proper use which inform the discourse about the comic, mandate the opinion that x is comic whenever one, by finding himself amused by x, has reasons to suppose that x has the resources to affect in the same way the community of comic sensibility to which individual ones belong.[12] That much is implicit in the practice of asking one's peers whether a movie or a TV show is amusing, when one is still undecided whether to see it. When asking such questions, one is interested to

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[10]   See note 1, Wright 1992, p. 141.

[11]   By commenting D. Wiggins' suggestion that the convergence of opinions under favourable circumstances constitutes a mark of truth, Wright maintains that "[…] convergence about the applicability of the truth predicate will, via the DS, be elicitable in all cases where there is convergence concerning the acceptability of statements featuring in its right-hand side. So since it is merely a consequence of the discipline to which any genuine range of assertoric content will be intrinsically subject that, at least in favourable circumstances, there will be a tendency to convergence of the second sort, any minimally truth-apt discourse will satisfy Wiggins' convergence mark", see note 2, Wright 1992, p. 73, my italics. See Also Wiggins 1980.

[12]   "[…] comic discourse is disciplined by the objective of irreproachability in the light of a community of comic sensibility. And warrant for comic claims is warrant to think that they can meet that objective", Wright 1992, p. 106.

learn, from the amusement of the others, whether she too would find it amusing. So, opinions about the comic are still irreproachable, but are based on a *communitarian* notion of irreproachability. This explains why the objective form, in contraposition to the subjective, is needed to express one's opinions about the comic, even if they are tied to irreproachable senses of humour. When I find something amusing, I think, as it were, that it is the community of comic sensibility to which I happen to belong that is affected in the moment that mine is. Therefore I have every reason to assert that it *is* amusing, rather than simply claim that *I* find it so. This is why, according to Wright, despite its overt irreproachability, "there is an impropriety in persisting with an intrinsically irreproachable comic claim against the current of irreproachable lack of sympathy with it. So a lack of convergence is *some* sort of defeating consideration for such claims" (Wright 1992, p. 105). In the light of the foregoing considerations, according to Wright, the apparent tension between the irreproachability of the comic responses and the obtaining of conditions of withdrawal ensuring some degree of convergence disappears.

However, consider two subjects, A and B, who disagree as to the comic of a situation. Apparently, their disagreement entails a conflict between either A's or B's sense of humour with that of the community to which both belong. Given their opposite verdicts, denying the occurrence of this conflict is just consistent with the denial of the existence of a communitarian sense of humour which is implicitly taken into account when uttering statements concerning the comedy of situations. If we consider the latter hypothesis, by Wright's own lights, we should be prepared to regard as idle the practice of asserting our opinions about the comedy in an objectified form: we would be pushed back to the supposition that the assertion conditions which inform the discourse about the comic are *subjective*, and to the conclusion that there is not an *intersubjective* discourse about comedy over which a minimally truth predicate may non-problematically be shown to range. Suppose then, that either A, or B, unsatisfactorily takes into account, i.e. misrepresent, some characteristic which, when properly considered, would call for withdrawal either of A's or of B's opinion. This case too hardly makes room for the possibility of a blameless disagreement. Divergence in opinion, on that possibility, always implies the supposition that both parties should better look for some characteristic, undetected by one of them, which – when properly taken into account – would prompt a re-alignment of beliefs.

To sum up: either the reactions, grounding the formation of opinions about the comedy are actually *irreproachable*, and then there is no room left for something being properly regarded as a defeating consideration, or if divergence actually supplies such considerations, opinions about the comedy cannot be properly regarded as based on the kind of irreproachable sense of humour which is required if the notion of a blameless disagreement has to make sense at all.

4. *Semantic rules* **versus** *standards of appraisal*

A theorist sympathetic to Wright, however, could to try to insist that there is a more interesting strategy that could be pursued. The foregoing reply was based on the pre-supposition that the standards of proper assertion by which a discourse is informed perform a meaning constituting function. If A and B are *competent* users of the central predicates of a discourse, under that assumption, the circumstance that they blameless-ly disagree about some *p*, featuring such predicates, could only be explained by some characteristic enjoyed by the standards of proper assertion whose status they both ac-cept. Hence the suggestion that such standards could be conceived of *subjectively*.

However, a theorist might try to reject the very presupposition informing the preced-ing response. She might insist, that is to say, that a blameless disagreement just signals the fact that a discourse is informed by standards of proper assertion about which a dis-agreement is possible, which neither entails that (at least) one disputant is not compe-tent, nor that she is mistaken. A theorist, that is to say, might try to argue for a distinc-tion between the semantic rules, whose acceptance is constitutive of the competence in an area of discourse, and the standards of warranted assertibility for the statements expressible in the discourse.

To highlight the difference, let me present two apparently different cases of moral dis-agreement. In the first scenario, A and B disagree about the evaluation of an action that they both think dutiful. A holds that one *ought* to pursue action *x* but claims that the action is bad; B also thinks that one *ought* to do *x* but denies that *x* is bad. In the second scenario, A and B disagree about the issue whether giving to charity is good. On the assumption that 'bad' correctly applies only to things that one has an obligation *not* to do, we are inclined to treat A in the first scenario as falling short of being a competent user of the moral vocabulary. In the second scenario, instead, we are inclined to treat A linguistically competent if only defending moral standards of evaluation different than ours. In the first case, we suppose that A does not understand what she is saying when she utters the sentence according to which something she thinks people ought to do is bad. In the second case, we think that A perfectly understands what she is saying, and just do not endorse that view.

Accordingly, the general proposal could be that every area of assertoric discourse which fails CC must allow for a distinction between semantic rules and rules of appraisal, like the distinction between the rules which fix competence with the moral vocabulary and different rules of moral evaluation. The possibility of a moral disagreement not in-volving cognitive shortcomings can be secured just by showing that differences in the standards of moral evaluation (viz. standards of warranted assertibility) are innocent of cognitive malfunctioning. So the general suggestion would be that failure of CC must be accountable in terms of a distinction between different kinds of assertibility condi-tions. In particular, this distinction must be invoked to make room for disagreements among competent speakers innocent of cognitive shortcoming.

In what follows I will try to substantiate this reply by proposing as a criterion of demarcation between meaning-constituting assertibility conditions and assertibility conditions which are not, the distinction Wright introduces in *Realism, Meaning, and Truth* between *criteria* and *symptoms*.

In the essay *Anti-realist Semantics: The Role of Criteria*,[13] Wright claims that a satisfactory account of meaning in terms of assertibility conditions must end up postulating a distinction between *symptomatic* assertibility conditions and *criterial* assertibility conditions, and with identifying meaning understanding with knowledge of assertibility-conditions of the latter type. By accepting the claim, then, we could try to substantiate the proposal by identifying semantic rules with criterial assertibility conditions and standards of appraisal with symptomatic assertibility conditions. Wright's claim is that, given the distinction, an assertibility-conditions theorist must identify meaning with criterial, in contraposition to symptomatic, assertability conditions. It is therefore sensible to expect that symptomatic assertibility conditions, whatever they are, constitute the kind of conditions which (i) do not perform a meaning-constituting function and that, (ii), as a consequence, can be the object of different attitudes – respectively, of endorsement and of rejection – without entailing either (a) that one (or more) of the disputants falls short of being a competent speaker or (b) that she commits some sort of cognitive mistake. Whenever A and B disagree as to a statement expressible in the discourse, say because A accepts and B rejects that opinion, failure of CC can be explained by the fact that B, contrary to A, does not accept the rule of appraisal that, in the light of the evidence correctly represented by both A and B, licenses that opinion.

Unfortunately, I think that a divergence of attitudes upon a set of symptomatic assertibility conditions ultimately calls for the truth either of (a) or (b). To see why, let us see how the distinction between a criterial and a symptomatic set of assertibility conditions is introduced. Given the following schema,

> (AC) If an agent has verified each of $\{D_1,..., D_n,\}$ and possesses no information telling against S and no information which would explain, without the need to suppose S, why $\{D_1,..., D_n,\}$ are true, then it is reasonable for him to believe S. (Wright 1993, p. 363)

a set of statements $\{C_1,..., C_n,\}$ is criterial for S iff it gives rise to a non-contingent truth when substituted for $\{D_1,..., D_n,\}$ in (AC); on the other hand, a set of statements $\{S_1,..., S_n,\}$ is symptomatic for S iff it gives rise to a contingent truth when substituted for $\{D_1,..., D_n,\}$ in (AC). To say that $\{S_1,..., S_n,\}$ is symptomatic is to say that it is *contingent* that the truth of $\{S_1,..., S_n,\}$ constitutes a reliable indication of the truth of S. Since it is contingent that they supply evidential support to S, it might have been that they did not. So the assertion that they do needs empirical defence. The only plausible way to defend the claim, however, involves offering some ground to suppose that, whenever

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[13]   Wright 1993.

S is true, $\{S_1,..., S_n\}$ are true as well. Obviously enough, if the explanation is not to be circular, the truth of S, in all the cases where $\{S_1,..., S_n\}$ are recognized as true, must not be established by using, as an indication of its truth, the truth of $\{S_1,..., S_n\}$. That S is true in the indicated cases must be recognized by means of independent, previously acquired grounds. For instance, an alternative set of sentences, say $\{F_1,..., F_n\}$, may specify circumstances – independent of those described by $\{S_1,..., S_n\}$ – whose obtaining is a reliable indication of the truth of S. However, how are we to know that $\{F_1,..., F_n\}$, when true, supply a reliable indication of the truth of S? Again, it might be suggested, we know it for we possess independent grounds, specified by a set $\{C_1,..., C_n\}$, to recognize S's truth. However, such model of explanation cannot be *generally* applicable, on pain of infinite regress. The need of explanation has to stop somewhere, precisely at the point where some set $\{C_1,..., C_n\}$ is such that we can know a priori – by convention – that when they are true, S also is. This is how Wright introduces the distinction and argues for the claim that meaning-constituting assertability conditions must be criterial. What mainly interests us in the present context, however, is how exactly, in the light of such argument, a disagreement about whether a set of statements $\{S_1,..., S_n\}$ specify assertion conditions for S can be explained. Remember that unless it can be explained without denying that either of two subjects who disagree about the status of $\{S_1,..., S_n\}$ (a) falls short of being a competent user of the discourse to which S belongs, and (b) must be responsible of a cognitive mistake, the reply we are considering is not effective.

As a matter of fact, the situation seems to be that every such disagreement must either imply that one of the disputants is not competent or that she is not innocent of cognitive shortcoming. Suppose that $\{S_1,..., S_n\}$ do not specify *criterial* assertibility conditions and that, as a consequence, both A and B, who disagree about whether $\{S_1,..., S_n\}$ specify conditions of assertion for S, may still be competent speakers. If they disagree about the fact that $\{S_1,..., S_n\}$ specify conditions of assertion for S, they arguably disagree about the fact that, whenever S was true, $\{S_1,..., S_n\}$ were also satisfied. However, it seems clear that either $\{S_1,..., S_n\}$ were true, when S was, or they were not; and it is no less clear, as a consequence, that either A, who claims that they were, or B, who denies it, must be either *mistaken* or *ignorant*. Suppose however that both A and B are innocent of cognitive mistake: they correctly keep track of every characteristic of the situation which, were $\{S_1,..., S_n\}$ to be regarded as specifying conditions of assertion, would lend support for the assertion of S. From such assumption, it follows that if $\{S_1,..., S_n\}$ are true whenever $\{C_1,..., C_n\}$ are, both A and B must have noticed it. Suppose that indeed $\{S_1,..., S_n\}$ are true whenever $\{C_1,..., C_n\}$ are, that A and B noticed it, and that, nonetheless, they do not agree about the fact that $\{S_1,..., S_n\}$ are symptomatic for S. The only plausible explanation must be that, in the case at issue, A, who denies that they are, does not acknowledge the criterial status to $\{C_1,..., C_n\}$. This fact, however, entails that A is not a competent speaker, for $\{C_1,..., C_n\}$ do perform a meaning-constituting function. So, it would seem, the distinction between criterial and symptomatic assertibility conditions does not help. No blameless disagreements about whether the satisfaction of

certain conditions $\{S_1,..., S_n,\}$ lend support to S may obtain between two *competent* user of the vocabulary used to express S.

Conclusion

I have presented an argument against the claim that CC is a relevant test to tell apart, among epistemically constrained discourses, those which deserve a realist interpretation from those that do not. The argument, if successful, shows that if the truth-predicate which finds application within a discourse is superassertibility, then the discourse is bound to exert CC; for either of two subjects in disagreement as to an opinion expressible within the discourse, unless actually falling short of being a competent user of the relevant vocabulary, must have made a mistake in registering, or must be ignoring, the available evidence: in fact it is consequent upon the way the sentential meaning is determined within the discourse that two competent speakers must have highly converging opinions vis-à-vis shared body of evidence. I have taken into account two possible replies. Both ultimately stem from Wright's writings. The first is that discourses, like the one about comedy, which supposedly fail to exert CC, have sentential meaning fixed by assertibility conditions which make reference to an *irreproachable* communal sensibility about the comedy, and therefore successfully constitute *objective* meaning and allow for epistemically innocent disagreements. The second is that failure to exert CC can be explained by distinguishing between assertibility conditions which perform a meaning constituting function, and assertibility conditions that do not. Against the first strategy I have argued that the proposed qualification of assertibility conditions is hostage of an intractable alternative: either they are not constitutive of a genuinely assertoric practice, or they admit of conditions of defeat, and in that case hardly make room for innocent divergences in opinion. Against the second strategy I have argued that the distinction between *symptomatic* and *criterial* assertibility conditions is of no help. For every disagreement attributable to the fact that either of two disputants does not accept the symptomatic status of the available evidence, calls in turn for the hypothesis, if her semantic competence is not disputed, that she is culpable of disregarding or of mistakenly taking into account some state of affair which, when properly recognized, would prompt realignment in belief.

If CC is in place, then, Wright's minimalism does not seem to make room for assertoric practices which are not genuinely in the business of representing an independent reality, even in cases in which such construal flies in the face of our intuitions. This does not seem to be a minor drawback in itself. Much more it constitutes a problem for minimalism, since its expressed purpose is to set a new arena for the debate between realists and antirealists. Accordingly, Wright seemingly has to face an alternative: either drop CC or drop the minimalist notion of assertoric discourse which, when CC is in place, handles paradigmatically antirealist discourses, like that about comedy or matters of taste, over a realistic, and highly counterintuitive interpretation.

65

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