

Realism and Anti-Realism I

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1. Metaphysical realism. It seems reasonable to suppose that realism is a claim about what there is. It is a metaphysical view. Metaphysical realism claims that things exist, and exist entirely independently of the beliefs we have about them, of any methods we may have of finding out about them, of the concepts we have of them, or of our experience of them. In brief, things exist regardless of whether we come to know them or not. One way of denying metaphysical realism would be to deny the existence of the things in question. For example, error-theories in meta-ethics claim that the moral facts our moral beliefs purport to be about don't exist, and concluded that all moral beliefs are false. Such theories often are a philosophical last resort.

2. Specific domains. But what about accepting the existence of things, and denying that they exist (mind-)independently instead? Denying independence is more plausible for some domains than others: (a) Beauty, for example, clearly in part depends on our experience or judgments; (b) The idea that moral facts are relative to our affective responses or conceptual schemes is at least respectable; (c) To claim that the material or physical world is mind-dependent is, however, radical. These differences bring out that realism is best treated as a theory about a specific domain.

3. Idealism. Philosophers such as Berkeley (1685–1753), Bradley (1846–1924), and Bosanquet (1848–1923) deny independence for any domain. They claim that there are no entities we come across whose existence is independent of the mind and its cognitive activities. Their idealist assumption is that the act of knowing and what is known are not independent but interdependent. Hence, the very idea of something existing entirely independently of our knowledge of it, they think, is incoherent. Traditional arguments here take the form of Berkeley's Master Argument. Berkeley suggested that we cannot even conceive of a thing that is independent of its being known by us, because no matter how hard we try, we end up conceiving an object perceived, i.e. an object that is known.

4. Epistemological realism responds to the idealist charge. Its main thesis is that the knower doesn't affect what is known. Oxford and Cambridge realism emerged in the early twentieth century, with slogans like "You can no more act upon the object by knowing it than you can 'please the Dean and Chapter by stroking the dome of St. Paul's'" (Cook Wilson, 1904). If knowing doesn't modify the known, then our acquaintance with things is an awareness of them just as they are, regardless of our awareness of them. Hence, we can know the world as it is independent of our knowledge of it, even if having such knowledge (trivially) depends on our knowing the object. There no longer is a problem with taking our beliefs, experiences, and theories to be about mind-independent objects. If that is right, then the epistemological realist has removed the idealist obstacle to metaphysical realism.

5. Semantic realism has become the target of a more sophisticated set of criticisms of metaphysical realism. The semantic realist claims that our statements or theories (about a specific domain) are true or false entirely independently of our understanding of those statements or ability to recognise their truth value. For example, take Goldbach's

conjecture: 'Every even integer greater than 2 can be expressed as the sum of two primes'. We may understand the sentence, but have (as of yet) no way of determining the truth-value of the statement. The semantic realist can say that it nonetheless has one, because its truth or falsity depends just on some mind-independent fact, e.g. some properties of numbers.

6. A good target. Notice, metaphysical realism is only tenable if semantic realism is tenable, at least if we accept Tarski's simple T-schema: 'Snow is white' is true iff snow is white. If the truth of 'Snow is white' is not independent from our understanding or recognition (i.e. if semantic realism is false), then the fact that snow is white itself is not independent of our understanding or recognition (i.e. metaphysical realism is false). Another reason for considering semantic realism as the most interesting gloss of what the realist is committed to, is that not all controversial classes of statements require the realist to commit to the existence of some disputed entities, i.e. to make a metaphysical pronouncement about what there is (e.g. realism about the future, realism about ethics).

7. Bivalence. One of Michael Dummett's central claims is that the semantic realist must accept *bivalence*. Why is this? The semantic realist maintains that what makes a statement of a disputed class true or false does not depend on our ability to understand the meaning of the statement or our ability to recognise its truth value, but depends on whether some mind-independent fact the statement describes obtains. Either that fact obtains, or it doesn't obtain. Hence, either the statement is true or the statement is false. So understood, it follows that the statements of the disputed class have *verification-transcendent truth conditions*. As we'll see next week, Dummett's case for resisting bivalence builds on this implication.

8. External realism. Another influential way of criticising metaphysical realism through semantics is developed by Hilary Putnam. Tim Button, in his book *The Limits of Realism*, devoted to this criticism, presents Putnam as characterising external realism with three principles: Independence, Correspondence, Cartesianism. Together, these principles combine metaphysical, epistemological, and semantic claims. Putnam calls this 'external realism', and many have followed him.

9. Independence. We saw this claim in formulating Metaphysical Realism. The world or some specific domain is made up of objects that are mind-, language-, and theory-independent. This principle is generally accepted as necessary for external realism. Some, such as Michael Devitt, also claim that it is sufficient.

10. Correspondence. Truth involves some sort of correspondence relation between words or ideas and external things and structures of things. If the realist accepts the principle of Independence, it is very natural to also accept Correspondence.

11. Cartesianism. Even an ideal theory might be radically false. If truth consists in correspondence, and falsity in failure of correspondence, then we have no guarantee that our best scientific theory is true. This could be for mundane reasons like our limitations, or because we are brains in vats (Putnam's thought experiment). To think that our best scientific theory *must* be true entails a rejection of realism, because it would make truth no longer turn simply on mind- and language-independent fact.