

Realism and Antirealism

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Philosophical Concept

The basic idea of realism is that the kinds of thing which exist, and what they are like, are independent of us and the way in which we find out about them; antirealism denies this. Most people find it natural to be realists with respect to physical facts: how many planets there are in the solar system does not depend on how many we think there are, or would like there to be, or how we investigate them; likewise, whether electrons exist or not depends on the facts, not on which theory we favour. However, it seems natural to be antirealist about humour: something's being funny is very much a matter of whether we find it funny, and the idea that something might really be funny even though nobody ever felt any inclination to laugh at it seems barely comprehensible. The saying that 'beauty is in the eye of the beholder' is a popular expression of antirealism in aesthetics. An obviously controversial example is that of moral values; some maintain that they are real (or 'objective'), others that they have no existence apart from human feelings and attitudes.

This traditional form of the distinction between realism and its opposite underwent changes during the 1970s and 1980s, largely due to Michael Dummett's proposal that realism and antirealism (the latter term being his own coinage) were more productively understood in terms of two opposed theories of meaning. Thus, a realist is one who would have us understand the meanings of sentences in terms of their truth-conditions (the situations that must obtain if they are to be true); an antirealist holds that those meanings are to be understood by reference to assertability-conditions (the circumstances under which we would be justified in asserting them).

1. Facets of the debate

Realism became a prominent topic in medieval times, when it was opposed to nominalism in the debate concerning whether universals were independent properties of things or if classification was just a matter of how people spoke or thought (see Nominalism). The impetus for the debate in modern times comes from Kant's doctrine that the familiar world is 'empirically real' but 'transcendentally ideal', that is to say a product of our ways of experiencing things, not a collection of things as they are 'in themselves' or independently of us. Kant's 'empirical realism', confusingly, is thus a form of antirealism (see Kant, I. §5).

Closely related is 'internal realism', as represented by Hilary Putnam, according to which something may be real from the standpoint marked out by a particular theoretical framework,

while the attempt to ask whether it is real *tout court* without reference to any such framework is dismissed as nonsensical (see Putnam, H. §§7–8). This re-affirms the thesis propounded earlier by Rudolf Carnap, that there are ‘internal’ and ‘external’ questions about existence or reality (see Carnap, R. §5). An internal question is asked by someone who has adopted a language of a certain structure and asks the question on that basis. Only philosophers attempt to ask external questions (are there really – independently of the way we speak – physical objects?). But this is either nonsense or a misleading way of asking whether our linguistic framework is well suited to our practical purposes. ‘Internal realism’, it should be noted, is certainly not a form of realism, since it admits only language- or theory-relative assertions of existence.

By the mid-1980s, largely as a result of the work of Putnam and Dummett, it had become common to formulate the distinction between realism and antirealism in a variety of what are *prima facie* quite different ways. A realist, it was said, thinks of truth in terms of correspondence with fact, whereas an antirealist defines truth ‘in epistemic terms’, for instance as ‘what a well-conducted investigation under ideal circumstances would lead us to believe’. A realist holds that there are, or could be, ‘recognition-transcendent facts’, whereas an antirealist denies this. Also present was the idea that an antirealist believes that there can be a ‘reductive analysis’ (see §2 below) of whatever subject matter their antirealism relates to, whereas a realist holds such analysis to be impossible. Seemingly still further from the origins of the distinction, it was said to be characteristic of realism to accept, and of antirealism to deny, the general validity of the law of excluded middle. Yet another version located the basic difference in the respective theories of meaning: a realist gave the meaning of a sentence by specifying its truth-conditions, an antirealist by specifying the conditions under which it could properly be asserted.

To come to terms with this debate, the reader therefore needs an awareness of the interrelations of the many definitions of the realism–antirealism distinction, and of the inexactness of fit between some of them and others.

2. Ontological realism/antirealism

The primary form of the definition deals directly in terms of what really exists. A realist about Xs, for example, maintains that Xs (or facts or states of affairs involving them) exist independently of how anyone thinks or feels about them; whereas an antirealist holds that they are so dependent. We are not speaking here of causal (in)dependence: the fact that there would be no houses if people had not had certain thoughts should not force us into antirealism about houses. So the point of the definition is better brought out by saying that *what it is for an X to exist* does not involve any such factors (whatever their causal role in the production of Xs may be). Nor does the definition entail an antirealist stance towards the mental. Realism about mental states is a *prima facie* plausible option, holding that our mental states are what they are whatever we think they are, or whatever we would come to think they were if we investigated.

Where philosophers have argued for realism about some particular subject matter (for example, universals, ethical value, the entities of scientific theory), one particular argument is repeatedly found. For the subject matter in question, it is claimed, we find that everyone's opinion is the same, or tends to become the same if they investigate, or that (in science) theory seems to 'converge', later theories appearing to account for the partial success of their predecessors. Why should this be, unless it is the effect of a reality independent of us, our opinions and our theorizing? (See Universals; Scientific realism and antirealism.)

In consequence, there are two broad antirealist strategies, both common. One is to argue that the supposed conformity of opinion, actual or potential, does not exist – so we hear of the diversity of ethical or aesthetic judgements, for instance, or the extent to which judgements of colour depend on viewing conditions and the state of the observer. The other is to accept the conformity, but explain it as arising from a uniformity of *our* nature rather than the independent nature of things. Thus it is argued that moral 'objectivity' is really 'inter-subjectivity' – that is, a result of shared human psychological responses rather than of independent moral properties in the world – or that the similarity between different languages' schemes of classification is a product of shared basic human interests, not something forced on us by 'real' universals.

In modern times nobody has made a more radical use of this method of explaining conformity of judgement in terms of intersubjectivity than Kant. He argued that even the experience of our environment as extended in space and time was a human reaction to things that were in themselves not of a spatiotemporal nature, and to which other beings might just as legitimately react altogether differently. In the face of this it may be felt that the argument from conformity is better used to establish a very abstract realism, namely that there must be *something* independent of us, rather than that any specific property or type of thing must be so.

Two other objections have been used against certain forms of realism. One is that the realist provides no account of how the supposed real things or properties can actually have an effect on our experience. What sense do we have, it is asked, that is affected by the ethical properties of the moral realist, or by the real properties of necessity and possibility that the modal realist posits? The common realist practice of speaking of 'intuition' in these contexts is rejected as providing only a word, not an answer. The second type of objection (christened the 'argument from queerness' by John Mackie (1977), who used it in the moral context) claims that the things or properties in which the realist believes would need to be too strange to be credible (see Moral realism; Modal logic, philosophical issues in).

A closely related definition of the realism–antirealism distinction focuses not on the independence of things but on the truth of judgements about them: realism takes truth to be correspondence with fact and our knowledge of truth to be a separate matter, whereas antirealism defines truth 'in epistemic terms', that is to say as what human beings would believe after the

best possible application of their cognitive faculties. This is much more a change of perspective than of substance. It is natural to think that if some object exists independently of us, then judging truly must consist in getting our judgement to match the way the object is; while if the object is determined by (perhaps a projection of) our cognitive and/or affective faculties, judging truly can only mean judging as those very faculties lead us to judge.

Harder to assess is the position of *reductive analysis* in the debate. A reductive analysis exists where what makes statements about one kind of thing, *A*, true or false are the facts about another kind *B*. (*As* are then said to be reducible to *Bs*.) Classically, phenomenalism claims that statements about physical objects are thus reducible to statements about sensory experiences; behaviourism holds that propositions about mental states are reducible to ones about dispositions to physical behaviour. Does accepting such a reduction mean accepting antirealism about the *As*, while rejecting reduction of *A*-statements mean accepting realism? Some philosophers speak in this way, and there is a clear point to doing so: if a reduction is possible, then a complete statement of everything there 'really is' would not need to mention *As* – it could speak of *Bs* instead. Besides, reductive analyses have usually been offered in opposition to a different conception of what *As* are, and in relation to *that* (rejected) conception of an *A* the reducer is certainly saying that there are no *As*. But it is not thereby said that *As* and facts about them are dependent upon us – only that they are really certain sorts of fact about *Bs*; our attitude to their independence is therefore a question of whatever we think about the latter (see Reduction, problems of).

3. Epistemological versions

It is common to hear realism characterized in terms of the limits of knowledge as the belief that there are, or could be, 'recognition-transcendent facts' (meaning thereby facts which lie beyond *our* cognitive powers – there is no intention to saddle the realist with the view that there may be facts which simply could not be recognized at all). Antirealism then becomes the view that no such facts are possible.

The motivation for this epistemic version of the realism–antirealism divide is not hard to see. If the way something is is independent of the way we are, what could rule out the possibility that there should be facts about it beyond our powers of knowledge? Conversely, if its whole nature is due to the way we 'construct' it through our style of experience and investigation, how could there be anything about it that our cognitive faculties cannot recover? Although understandable, this is quick and imprecise. Consider someone who holds that the nature of the physical world is utterly independent of what human beings may believe it to be, but also has such anthropocentric theological inclinations as to hold that God must have given us cognitive powers equal, in principle, to discovering every fact about it. If we call this philosopher an antirealist on these grounds, we have surely changed the original subject, not just drawn it from another perspective.

This brings out the significance of formulating the epistemic criterion in terms of mere possibility (there *could be* recognition-transcendent facts) rather than actuality, thus allowing the philosopher who thinks, for whatever reason, that our cognitive powers are in fact a match for reality, still to be a realist by virtue of accepting that our powers might have been more limited without reality being any different.

It is one thing to suggest that there may be facts beyond our powers of recognition, quite another to hold that this is true of certain specific facts; the former is just modesty about our cognitive capacities, the latter a positive scepticism. So to imply an intrinsic connection between realism and scepticism, as some do, is very different from identifying realism with a belief in the possibility of recognition-transcendent facts.

Again, there is a plausible line of thought linking realism closely to scepticism. If a certain type of fact is as it is quite independently of us, then our knowledge of it must depend on an intermediary, namely the effect that it has upon us. But then we encounter the sceptical argument of which Descartes' fiction of a malicious demon represents the classic formulation: how are we ever to know that this intermediary effect is produced by the sort of thing we think it is produced by, and not rather by something completely different? Hence, starting with realism, we arrive at scepticism.

However, it seems undesirable to use scepticism (and the absence of it) to characterize the realism–antirealism distinction. The classic argument from realism (as independence of the subject) to scepticism may be a formidable one, but it nevertheless involves substantial assumptions which can be challenged; to adopt terminology which makes it sound as if its conclusion were true by definition invites confusion. Besides, scepticism is not itself a precise notion, and there may be forms of it which apply even under certain antirealist conceptions. For instance, one who thinks that truth is to be understood as the opinion that would be reached under ideal conditions may still be a sceptic, because they remain sceptical of our ability to recognize ideal conditions or know how closely we have approximated to them.

4. Logical and semantic versions

It is often said that realism and antirealism can be distinguished by their attitude towards the law of excluded middle (the logical principle that, given two propositions one of which is the negation of the other, one of them must be true): the realist accepts it, the antirealist does not. Again, we can understand this if we think back to the original characterization of the distinction in terms of what is independently there and what we 'construct', what is the case 'in itself' and what is so because of our ways of experiencing (see Intuitionistic logic and antirealism).

For explanatory purposes we may consider the world of literary fiction. Most people will be happy enough with the idea that, in so far as anything can be said to be true of the world of

Macbeth, just those things are true which Shakespeare wrote into it. But in that case neither 'Lady Macbeth had two children' nor its negation 'Lady Macbeth did not have two children' is true, since Shakespeare's text (we may suppose) does not touch on that question; the law of excluded middle fails in this 'constructed' world.

Passing now to a genuinely disputed case, there are those who think that whether a mathematical statement is true is one thing, whether it can be proved quite another; and there are those who think that truth in mathematics can only mean provability. For the latter the law of excluded middle is unsafe. From the fact that not- p cannot be proved, it does not follow that p can be proved; perhaps neither is provable and hence, on this view of mathematical truth, perhaps neither is true. And anyone who equates truth, in whatever sphere, with verifiability-in-principle by us will be liable to the parallel conclusion: only for those propositions p where failure to refute p is *ipso facto* to verify p may we rely on the law of excluded middle. Where verifying p and verifying not- p are distinct procedures, excluded middle fails. (It is because they are characteristically distinct when the proposition in question makes some claim about an infinite totality that we hear so much about infinite totalities and the rejection of excluded middle.) This explains why some writers (in particular Dummett) often say that the difference between realist and antirealist lies in the difference between their conceptions of truth (see Antirealism in the philosophy of mathematics; Realism in the philosophy of mathematics).

It can also be seen why it should have become common to express the realism–antirealism opposition as an opposition between theories of meaning, and why philosophers should be found speaking of realist and antirealist semantics. Any theory which ties meaning to verification, which equates the understanding of a sentence with a knowledge of those conditions that would verify it or would justify us in asserting it, promotes the view that we have no other idea of what it is for it to be true than for these conditions to be satisfied. Hence the realism–antirealism debate often exhibits neo-verificationist features; sometimes (especially by Dummett) antirealism is presented as the outcome of Wittgensteinian ideas about meaning, sometimes (especially by Putnam) of the alleged impossibility of explaining how our language could ever come to refer to the mind-independent items that realism posits (see Meaning and verification).

References and further reading

Carnap, R. (1956) 'Empiricism, Semantics and Ontology', in *Meaning and Necessity*, 2nd edn, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 205–221.

(Carnap expounds his distinction between 'external' and 'internal' questions, as mentioned above in §1.)

Dummett, M.A.E. (1963) 'Realism', in *Truth and Other Enigmas*, London: Duckworth, 145–165.

(Seminal – and fairly difficult – paper, shifting the debate from the perspectives of §2 above to those of §4.)

Goodman, N. (1978) *Ways of Worldmaking*, Hassocks: Harvester Press.

(Chapters I, VI and VII are especially relevant. Entertainingly written presentation of an all-inclusive antirealist position. Grows a little harder and more technical in chapter VII; full understanding of some points calls for knowledge of other works by Goodman.)

James, W. (1907) 'Pragmatism's Conception of Truth', Lecture VI of *Pragmatism in Pragmatism and the Meaning of Truth*, Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1978.

(Popular, polemical presentation of the doctrine that 'truth is made'.)

Mackie, J. (1977) *Ethics – Inventing Right and Wrong*, London: Penguin.

(Chapter 1.9 is especially relevant. Contains the 'argument from queerness' against realism over moral value, referred to in §2 above.)

Putnam, H. (1981) 'Two Philosophical Perspectives', in *Reason, Truth and History*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

(Putnam links the traditional form of the debate to the question of the rival accounts of truth and problems about linguistic reference. For the most part not difficult reading; full understanding of some points calls for acquaintance with the two preceding chapters.)

Wright, C.J.G. (1987) *Realism, Meaning and Truth*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1–43.

(The Introduction provides a wide-ranging survey of the issues, with antirealist slant; at times quite intricate. Useful bibliography.)

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