

WISSENSCHAFTLICHER REALISMUS

Was ist (wissenschaftlicher) Realismus? (4.4.2006)

1 Crispin Wright, Realism, Meaning and Truth

1. Kinds of Realism. Philosophy in the Western tradition is an essentially critical discipline, so it is unsurprising that its historical record is one of sustained self-criticism. Philosophers of every period have selectively dismissed the methods and objectives of their predecessors, Hence none of us can prophesy with confidence how future philosophers will appraise the preoccupations and accomplishments of the analytical tradition in the middle-to-late twentieth century. Yet there is reason to anticipate that some at least of our preoccupations will find favour, (whether or not our accomplishments are found wanting). A safe example is surely provided by the recent and contemporary debate about philosophical realism. If anything is distinctive of philosophical enquiry, it is the attempt to understand the relation between human thought and the world. The project is constitutive of metaphysics. While undergoing shifts of interpretation, it nevertheless supplies a dominant motif in the writings of all the great philosophers of the past. Realism simply supplies by far the most natural, pre-philosophically agreeable conclusion which this project could have. If our successors come to reject not the details but the very issue of the contemporary debate concerning realism, it will be because they have rejected philosophy itself.

Realism is a mixture of modesty and presumption. It modestly allows that human-kind confronts an objective world, something almost entirely not of our making, possessing a host of occasional features which may pass altogether unnoticed by human consciousness and whose innermost nomological secrets may remain forever hidden from us. However, it presumes that we are, by and large and in favourable circumstances, capable of acquiring knowledge of the world and of understanding it. Two sorts of ability are thereby credited to us: the ability to form the right concepts for the classification of genuine, objective features of the world; and the ability to come to know, or at least reasonably to believe, true statements about the world whose expression those concepts make possible. Even this much presumption tends, indeed, to be qualified. It is not a common theme in the writings of modern philosophical realists that the world can transcend our concept-forming powers, may exemplify features which human thought is essentially incapable of comprehending – though it is of course a prominent theme in theology. What is a common thought is that the range of states of affairs for whose description our concept-forming powers are adequate at best contingently coincides with, and may very well be more inclusive than the range which is the subject to our knowledge-acquiring powers: in short, that some true statements which are fully intelligible to us may nevertheless be, as the point is widely expressed, evidence-transcending.

The natural antagonists of realism, sketchily thus characterized, are scepticism and idealism. Scepticism represents a slide towards the pole of modesty. The sceptic agrees with the realist that our investigative efforts confront an autonomous world, that there are truths not of our making. But he disputes that there is ultimately any adequate

warrant for regarding our routine investigative practices as apt to issue in knowledge of, or reasonable belief about the world. In more radical moments, indeed, the sceptic disputes that we have any reasonable basis for our confidence that we can so much as conceptualize the world as it really is. The distinguishing mark of the idealist, by contrast, is a more thoroughgoing presumption. In his view realism is founded on a misunderstanding of the nature of truth. It is an error to think of our investigations as confronting an objective array of states of affairs which are altogether independent of our modes of conceiving and investigative enterprises. No truth is altogether 'not of our making'. Rather reality is – on one version – a reification of our own conceptual and cognitive nature, with no more claim to autonomy than a mirror image. There is, accordingly, no possibility of states of affairs which outstrip our capacities for knowledge, still less transcend our understanding.

Anti-realism is simply opposition to realism. The foregoing suggests that any standpoint of appropriately sceptical or idealist persuasion could deserve the label 'anti-realist'. The fact that there is no tradition of so describing scepticism is owing entirely to Professor Dummett's introduction of 'anti-realism' into philosophical currency as denoting a kind of reservation about realism which would seem to belong, at least when viewed superficially, on the idealist wing. However, the depiction of Dummett's anti-realist as a kind of latter-day idealist oversimplifies in at least two important respects. First, the modern dispute is *many* disputes, each conducted with respect to a specific, restricted region of discourse. True, the best of the anti-realist arguments have a generality which makes it hard to see how they could succeed anywhere unless successful everywhere. But if it were decided that the anti-realist arguments were wanting in cogency when taken absolutely globally, that would not absolve the realist from the need to make the case for his preferred interpretation piecemeal. And it has to be anticipated that various regions of discourse may afford varying degrees of success to the attempt to do so. The traditional opposition between realism and idealism, on the other hand, is one, global dispute. [...]

Second and more important, however, it is open to question whether modern anti-realism actually takes issues with realism on any point which marks a realist/idealist watershed. For the focal point of the debate, over the past 25 years or so, has been the realist's ideas that our depictive powers may outstrip our cognitive capacities, that truth may intelligibly transcend evidence. [...]

Any attempt to lay down what is essential to realism is liable to provoke opposition from at least some self-supposed realists. The fact is that realism, as implicitly characterized by the opinions of writers, in whatever area of philosophy, who regard themselves as realists, is a syndrome, a loose weave of separable presuppositions and attitudes. What have the mathematical platonist, the moral objectivist, and the scientific realist in common?

(zweite Auflage Blackwell, Oxford 1993). Introduction

2 Alexander Miller, Realism

The nature and plausibility of realism is one of the most hotly debated issues in contemporary metaphysics, perhaps even the most hotly debated issue in contemporary philosophy. The question of the nature and plausibility of realism arises with respect to a large number of subject matters, including ethics, aesthetics, causation, modality, science, mathematics, semantics, and the everyday world of macroscopic material objects and their properties. Although it would be possible to accept (or reject) realism across the board, it is more common for philosophers to be selectively realist or non-

realist about various topics: thus it would be perfectly possible to be a realist about the everyday world of macroscopic objects and their properties, but a non-realist about aesthetic and moral value. In addition, it is misleading to think that there is a straightforward and clear-cut choice between being a realist and a non-realist about a particular subject matter. It is rather the case that one can be more-or-less realist about a particular subject matter. Also, there are many different forms that realism and non-realism can take.

The question of the nature and plausibility of realism is so controversial that no brief account of it will satisfy all those with a stake in the debates between realists and non-realists. This article offers a broad brush characterisation of realism, and then fills out some of the detail by looking at a few canonical examples of opposition to realism. The discussion of forms of opposition to realism is far from exhaustive and is designed only to illustrate a few paradigm examples of the form such opposition can take.

There are two general aspects to realism, illustrated by looking at realism about the everyday world of macroscopic objects and their properties. First, there is a claim about existence. Tables, rocks, the moon, and so on, all exist, as do the following facts: the table's being square, the rock's being made of granite, and the moon's being spherical and yellow. The second aspect of realism about the everyday world of macroscopic objects and their properties concerns independence. The fact that the moon exists and is spherical is independent of anything anyone happens to say or think about the matter. Likewise, although there is a clear sense in which the table's being square is dependent on us (it was designed and constructed by human beings after all), this is not the type of dependence that the realist wishes to deny. The realist wishes to claim that apart from the mundane sort of empirical dependence of objects and their properties familiar to us from everyday life, there is no further sense in which everyday objects and their properties can be said to be dependent on anyone's linguistic practices, conceptual schemes, or whatever.

In general, where the distinctive objects of a subject-matter are a, b, c, \dots , and the distinctive properties are ... is F , ... is G , ...is H and so on, realism about that subject matter will typically take the form of a claim like the following:

Generic Realism: $a, b,$ and c and so on exist, and the fact that they exist and have properties such as F -ness, G -ness, and H -ness is (apart from mundane empirical dependencies of the sort sometimes encountered in everyday life) independent of anyone's beliefs, linguistic practices, conceptual schemes, and so on.

Non-realism can take many forms, depending on whether or not it is the existence or independence dimension of realism that is questioned or rejected. The forms of non-realism can vary dramatically from subject-matter to subject-matter, but error-theories, non-cognitivism, instrumentalism, nominalism, certain styles of reductionism, and eliminativism typically reject realism by rejecting the existence dimension, while idealism, subjectivism, and anti-realism typically concede the existence dimension but reject the independence dimension. Philosophers who subscribe to quietism deny that there can be such a thing as substantial metaphysical debate between realists and their non-realist opponents.

(aus <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/realism/>)