

METAPHYSICAL REALISM

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Given the fastidious nature of much of the literature concerning realism and antirealism, one would think that there is, at least, a clear picture of what *the* doctrine of realism is. Alas, this is not so. Various realisms have emerged in opposition to just about any thesis that has been proffered as a species of anti-realism, relativism, idealism, conventionalism, instrumentalism, etc. Oddly enough, “realists” are often pigeonholed by virtue of their opposition to one or another strand of anti-realism, even though the nature of anti-realism would seem to be parasitic upon that of its opponent - realism. John Heil has noted this peculiar role reversal:

There are at the outset taxonomic hurdles to be leapt. The labels, realism and anti-realism, for instance, are potentially misleading. They suggest that realism is a particular creed, anti-realism a collection of reactions to it. To be sure, there are philosophers who proclaim themselves realists, but these have in common mostly doubts about one or another version of anti-realism. Anti-realists are the system builders, realists the reactionaries. (1989: p. 65)

Anti-realists have been fairly successful in setting the terms for debate; of course, we thereby end up not with one well-defined dispute, but rather a multiplicity of sketchy squabbles relativized to this or that interest. The plasticity of the debate often results in philosophers talking past each other in misdirected attacks and countermeasures. Paul Horwich has made some attempt to map out a portion of the battleground between realists and anti-realists, and, in the opening paragraph of “Three Forms of Realism” presents his motivation for making the attempt:

The debate surrounding realism is hampered by an aversion to explicit formulation of the doctrine. The literature is certainly replete with resounding one-liners: ‘There are objective facts’, ‘Truth is correspondence

with reality', 'Reality is mind-independent', 'Statements are determinately either true or false', 'Truth may transcend our capacity to recognize it'. But such slogans are rarely elaborated upon. All too often the arguments, for or against, will proceed as though the nature of realism were so well-understood that no careful statement of the position is required. Consequently, several distinct and independent positions have at various times been identified with realism, and the debate is marked by confusion, equivocation and arguments at cross-purposes to one another. (1982: p. 181)

As anyone who has spent any time going through the literature can attest, however, Professor Horwich's title is at least a partial concession to the enormity of the taxonomic task at hand. There are many more than *three* forms of "realism". Susan Haack, writing "Realism" only five years after the publication of Horwich's paper, found nine; some of which are theses about the status of scientific theories and some of which are theses about the nature of truth. Surely, six *new* realisms could not have sprouted in only five years. Geoffrey Hellman's "Realist Principles" is another admirable attempt to sort through some of the many different issues at stake between various types of realist and their antagonists. In that paper, he distinguishes purely ontological formulations of realism from versions involving a variety of semantic and/or epistemological commitments, and notes that opposition to different opponents (e.g. instrumentalists, constructive empiricists, etc.) tends to generate different kinds of realism - each with its own set of "realist principles" designed to set it apart from the opposing viewpoint.

I do not intend any attempt at corralling all the various uses of "realism" and separating their referents off into species and sub-species, mutations and spin-offs. I intend rather to isolate the central tenets of the doctrine of realism *about the nature of the world*, and I intend to dub that doctrine *metaphysical realism* despite prior uses of that term to designate different theories (Hilary Putnam and Horwich, for example, have each co-opted "metaphysical realism" for their own devices).

Once metaphysical realism is carefully distinguished from a number of other doctrines with which it is often conflated, it should be clearer that it is, at least initially, a very compelling doctrine. In fact, I hope that it is seen to be so initially compelling as to be boring. Perhaps it is this very feature of realism that has allowed anti-realists to secure their position as builders of intricate and interesting systems in opposition to their more quotidian rivals. Establishing that metaphysical realism is a fairly

mundane matter will, I suspect, prove to be no trivial task given popular tendencies toward conflation and confusion involving the term “metaphysical realism”; enough to cause a fairly simple and intuitive thesis to have grown infamously enigmatic. Therefore, let me reiterate that my purpose here is to clarify and explicate the doctrine that I have labeled *metaphysical realism* (while taking care that it not be confounded with other doctrines which have too long now caused its good name to be dragged through the dialectical mud).

Realism: The General Idea

Almost any type of anti-realism demands at least a bit of corrective surgery on our intuitions about the nature of reality or of our relationship, as cognizers, to the external world. Facts become slippery. We find ourselves bogged down and entangled in representations, conceptual schemes, and background assumptions. Inquiries cannot be conducted simply by investigating *the world itself* (if that phrase is permitted). One must also investigate the nature of the mind, or of linguistic practice (or something else) to determine how such things influence the results of one’s inquiry. The cultural relativist, one species of the anti-realist genus, tells us that we must not ask simply what the world is like, but instead we can, at best, discover what it is like for “us” or *for* members of a particular culture or linguistic community. What holds for one community may or may not hold for another. It is difficult, given an anti-realistic framework, to get at the world itself apart from this or that *representation* of the world. None of the foregoing will bother most antirealists; in fact, it is precisely the elusiveness of the world as it is “in itself” that anti-realists typically cite as motivation for their position. Before we discover philosophy, however, many (if not most) of us would find the average anti-realist’s conception of reality to be at least a little jarring. Consider, for example, the following passage from Nelson Goodman’s “On Star-making” :

Scheffler contends that we cannot have made the stars. I ask him which features of the stars we did not make, and challenge him to state how these differ from features clearly dependent on discourse. Does he ask how we can have made anything older than we are? Plainly, by making a space and time that contains those stars. By means of science, that world (indeed many others) was made with great difficulty and is, like the several worlds of phenomena that also contain stars, a more or less right or real world. We can make the sun stand still, not in the manner

of Joshua but in the manner of Bruno. We make a star as we make a constellation, by putting its parts together and marking off its boundaries. (1980: 213)

Realism, on the other hand, is not a great deal more (at root) than the expression of fairly standard, prephilosophical assumptions about the world and our place in it. There are a few very common intuitions at the heart of what might be called the “general idea” underlying metaphysical realism:

- 1) The world and its features are as they are irrespective of any of our beliefs, attitudes, perceptions, etc. (leaving aside our trivial and obvious influences on the world - e.g. intentional relations, creation of artifacts, manipulation of physical objects, etc.).
- 2) The world’s existence preceded the existence of minds (except, perhaps, for God).
- 3) The world will (probably) exist after the extinction of minds (except, perhaps, for God).
- 4) Minds are not ontologically constructive (i.e. minds do not *make* the world, its parts, or facts about it - save trivial, obvious exceptions).

The world is one thing, and our representations of it are quite another. Each of the above four claims about the nature of the external world speaks, in one way or another, to one (or both) of what Michael Devitt refers to as realism’s two fundamental dimensions: 1) existence and 2) independence (1984: pp. 13-25). By existence, he means that there *is*, in fact, an external (to the mental or phenomenal realm of cognizers) world. By independence, he means that the world does not need to be related to anything at all in order that (nonintentional) facts about it obtain. If philosophical doctrines came with slogans on their boxcovers, metaphysical realism’s would read: *The world exists independently of the mental.*

Most of our intuitions about reality seem to comport very well with the metaphysical realist’s slogan. Similarly, standard formulations of the general thesis of realism from the philosophical literature line up with most of our prephilosophical intuitions. R. J. Hirst’s account of realism in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* adds little more than the presumption of physicalism and opposition to idealism to the realist’s slogan:

The view that material objects exist externally to us and independently of our sense experience. Realism is thus opposed to idealism, which holds that no such material objects or external realities exist apart from our knowledge or consciousness of them, the whole universe thus being dependent on the mind or in some sense mental. (1967: p. 77)

William R. Carter tells us in *The Elements of Metaphysics* that:

If we are *realists*, we will allow that the world is one thing and our representation of the world--our system of beliefs about it--is quite another. (1990: p. 167)

and later:

To be a *realist* is to hold that the world is in some sense independent of even the most credible worldly representations. If we take "the world" to be the totality of all *the facts*, realism is the view that facts are in theory independent not only of what we believe is and is not the case but independent also of our means of verifying our beliefs. (p. 173)

It is important to note that a person can be a realist with respect to the existence and/or independence of some things (or types of things) while being an anti-realist about others. Generally speaking, the realist about any α claims that α *exists independently* of any facts about cognizers and that α 's nature does not, in any non-trivial sense, require or depend on relatedness to cognizers or minds (save, of course, realism about minds or things that minds uncontroversially "make", such as language, culture, etc.). The realist about propositions, for example, takes propositions to be entities that exist and have their individual natures independently of beliefs, attitudes, utterances, or tokenings by cognizers. The realist about universals thinks that (for example) *squareness* exists and that objects are, or are not, square regardless of their having been perceived or categorized by cognizers. Similarly, the *metaphysical* realist takes *the world*, and its non-intentional (or non-mental) features and parts, to exist and to have complete, fully-formed natures irrespective of anything having peculiarly to do with cognition. Facts about the world, its parts, their number, size, shape, relatedness, etc., are all part of the objective, mind-independent "furniture of reality" and are all "out there" waiting to be discovered; they are in no need of *construction* or *conceptual organization* or anything else that smacks of intentionality (or "mentalness").

The notion of objective reality, as understood by most metaphysical realists, is laid bare by their suggestion that certain things just are the

case, where the force of “just” is to indicate the aforementioned independence from the mental. As in, “That *is just* the way it is whether you believe it - or like it - or not”. Peter van Inwagen offers the following as a simple, intuitive example of the sort of thing that metaphysical realists have in mind with talk of independence:

Here is an example of a fact that most people would say was in no way dependent upon the existence of the human mind or any activity of or fact about the human mind:

Mount Everest is 8,847.7 meters high.

Let us call this fact ‘F’. F would seem to be a pretty good example of a fact that most people would take to be in any reasonable sense independent of human mental activity. (1993: p. 60)

He then goes on to articulate the thesis that Mount Everest would have been exactly the size and shape that it in fact is, even had no human beings or other cognizers evolved - or come to be (for those who distrust evolutionary theory). This seems to be right in line with prereflective intuitions about such cases. Did not Mount Everest, in fact, exist long before there were any people around to know, believe, conceptualize, or do anything else about it? If one is a metaphysical realist, the answer is “Of course!” accompanied, perhaps, with a raising of the eyebrow. Given the guiding principle of reflective equilibrium, realists can claim, at least, that their version of the nature of reality does less violence to the worldview with which we all came to philosophy than does that of competing relativistic or otherwise anti-realistic models. Berkeley’s insistence to the contrary notwithstanding, the metaphysical realist is (for the most part) just defending the naive ontological outlook.

At heart, metaphysical realism is not much more than the thesis that the lesson of examples like van Inwagen’s is generalizable to any part or section of the whole world (leaving aside the domain of the intentional). One might think that such a seemingly straightforward theory would admit of fairly little malleability in interpretation. Surprisingly, however, not everyone has the same understanding of what exactly the metaphysical realist claims or even what domain the theory is intended to cover. A number of semantic and epistemological theses have been assumed to be either direct entailments of the doctrine, or actual part and parcel of it. In fact, finding any consensus regarding exactly what the thesis of metaphysical realism is, remains one of the first challenges facing anyone wishing to weigh in on one side or the other. There has been substantial

disagreement over what the metaphysical realist is committed to in her defense of both the objective *existence* and of the *independence* of the world and its parts.

One understanding of metaphysical realism, in particular, has gained a special degree of prominence, and a good deal of the debate between realists and anti-realists has focused on it and its theoretical entailments. In the next section, I will lay out this version of realism, and will argue that the metaphysical realist need not (in fact, should not) accept it. This particular understanding (or, perhaps, family of understandings) of realism has had a number of names appended to it, but for our purposes, the term *classical metaphysical realism* (or *classical realism* for short) will do as nicely as any.

Classical Metaphysical Realism

Metaphysical realism has a powerful intuitive appeal when the examples presented involve the actual physical world of particular objects (one may have one's doubts about the objectivity and independence of universals, propositions, etc.). Most of us agree when Devitt tells us:

Realism about the ordinary observable physical world is a compelling doctrine. It is almost universally held outside philosophical circles. From an early age, we come to believe that such objects as stones, trees, and cats exist. Further, we believe that these objects exist even when we are not perceiving *them*, and that they do not depend for their existence on our opinions or on anything mental. (1984: p. 60).

And few that are not wedded to some sophisticated philosophical theory would hesitate to agree with Hugo Meynell when he claims:

There were apparently rocks, birds, and trees, a sun, stars, and planets, with the qualities and relations which we find them to have, before there were human beings; but human beings have been able to get to know about them. (1995: p. 336)

One need not, of course, be a physicalist simply because one is a realist. One may, for example, think that universals or propositions (or whatever) are non-physical but nevertheless exist independently of any facts about cognizers or the mental. Plato was a realist about the forms, but the Platonic heavens are not supposed to exhibit any of the physical magnitudes. Berkeley was a realist about God - so was Descartes. Since physicalism has become, however, the dominant theory regarding the

nature of that which is alleged to be objective and independent of the mental, an investigation into the world view of the physicalistic realist is likely to be most useful to the current debate over the fundamental nature of reality and the proper understanding and evaluation of realism. The presumption of physicalism will underlie the remainder of the current investigation into the doctrine of realism, but at the end I will indicate how the lessons we learn would apply to nonphysicalistic versions of realism.

If the world and its parts *just* are the way they are, it would seem that any theory about the nature of the world, will either *correctly* depict or describe the world or it will fail to do so. One need not worry about any additional argument place or parameter in one's evaluation of claims regarding the nature of the world. That is, one need not concern oneself with the possibility that a theory about the world is correct for one individual (group, culture, conceptual framework, etc.) but, somehow, *not* correct for another. There is one physical world and there is *one way* it is (i.e. it has one set of facts, and some theory either gets those facts right or it does not). Roger Trigg seems to be of the opinion that the metaphysical realist must embrace some such *uniqueness* about the correct theory of nature:

Experience can give rise to alternative theories, but if we realize that theories are about something, then either reality is as the theory says or it is not. It has determinate character, even if we do not know what it is. This is a metaphysical assertion, but it expresses the only alternative to the view that all is in fact indeterminate chaos, a view which would make the practice of science a pointless activity. As a result, alternative conceptual systems cannot be accepted as all resting correctly on the same base in reality. Unless they can be combined in some way, and are not genuine alternatives, they are disagreeing about the actual characteristics of reality. (1980:112)

As far as Trigg is concerned, if there is one world and that world exists independently of any facts about cognizers, then there can be only one correct representation of, or theory about, that world. Two or more theories about the nature of the world either make the same claims about it, or at least one of them must be wrong somehow. This is the *uniqueness hypothesis* characteristic of classical realism which a number of philosophers seem to think must follow from the world's independent existence (the two fundamental principles of realism).

Putnam also takes standard formulations of realism as entailing some similar uniqueness hypothesis concerning theories about the nature of reality. The realist must assert that a hypothesis either “gets it right” or “gets it wrong”, *period*, without concerning herself about whether the theory is right or wrong for so-and-so. Putnam suggests that metaphysical realism should be understood as the conjunction of a number of theses about truth:

In various places I have described metaphysical realism as a bundle of intimately associated philosophical ideas about truth: the ideas that truth is a matter of Correspondence and that it exhibits Independence (of what humans do or could find out), Bivalence, and Uniqueness (there cannot be more than one complete and true description of Reality)...(1988: p. 107)

Some of his attacks on metaphysical realism are, in fact, directed solely against semantic theories such as correspondence truth and uniqueness. The model theoretic argument, for example, is designed to uncover the impossibility of ever finding a relation between any consistent theory and the world such that that relation can serve as truth-maker to a unique theory (see Putnam 1981).

Still others have taken the line that realism is, at its core, a semantics thesis which demands uniqueness and bivalence of its assignments of truth values to some class of statements. Dummett, for example, claims that:

The very minimum that realism can be held to involve is that statements in the given class relate to some reality that exists independently of our knowledge of it, in such a way that that reality renders each statement in the class determinably true or false, again independently of whether we know, or are even able to discover, its truth-value. (1982: p. 55).

The following is a brief, armchair diagnosis of the motivation for interpreting realism in the way that these philosophers do.

First, there is something like the argument for uniqueness just mentioned. One world admits of but one correct, complete theory. Any statement about reality either is or is not part of the “one true theory”.

The demand for bivalence, it would seem, is parasitic upon the demand for uniqueness. The general idea seems to be that since there is one world and it is *one way*, any representation of the world, or theory about it, must either get it right in a particular respect or the theory must get it wrong somehow. Thus, there is only one ideal theory that gets eve-

rything right and accurately represents the world as it *just* is. Every well-formed statement of any theory is, therefore, either true or false as each statement makes some claim about the world and the world either is or is not as the statement claims.¹ That is, any statement of any theory is either a part of the ideal theory, and true, or it fails to be a part of the ideal theory and is false.

Hence, Putnam comes by his idea that the theory of correspondence truth is constitutive of the theory of metaphysical realism. Statements in the ideal theory are distinguishable from those not in the ideal theory because the former bear the correspondence relation (however that relation is to be cashed out) to the world, whereas statements not included in the ideal theory are false precisely because they do *not* correspond to the world. The realist can countenance only one true theory about reality, all of the statements of which correspond to the world. The correspondence relation distinguishes the true statements from the untrue ones. Any particular statement either does or does not correspond to reality. So, any statement either is or is not true. Uniqueness, bivalence, and correspondence truth are, according to those philosophers just mentioned (some realists and some anti-realists), supposed to follow from the world's cognition-independent existence (the two fundamental, core principles of realism).

In what follows, I shall argue that any realist who defends a version of realism which involves uniqueness and bivalence as just characterized (e.g. Trigg) is, as opponents such as Putnam and Dummett claim, defending an untenable theory of reality. I will then argue that realism does not entail uniqueness, bivalence, or correspondence truth, and will make the case that arguments against this particular species of realism do not serve as arguments that the world lacks independent existence as characterized by our prephilosophical intuitions about reality. That is, the failure of *classical* realism does *not* entail the failure of metaphysical *realism*.

¹ In fairness to the classical realist who accepts inherently vague (or "fuzzy") facts about the world, one might wish to add that only sufficiently determinate statements are thought by this species of classical realist to exhibit bivalence. So, for example, the statement, "It is now twilight", as uttered at certain times of day is neither true nor false, but only because its meaning is not sufficiently determinate ("twilight" does not pick out a determinately-bounded event). Nothing at all about relativity follows. For such a classical realist, it is objectively the case that there is no determinate line of demarcation between day, twilight, and night.

The Problem With Classical Realism

What is wrong with classical realism? The simple answer is this: It precludes conceptual relativity.

Most of us are willing to accept some kind of relativity in describing at least *some* parts of reality. For example, few believe that the propriety of rules of etiquette are not relative to something like a society or a culture. If we are concerned with describing an act as an exhibition of either good or ill manners, surely, at least in many cases, we must admit that the act is in accordance with the principles of etiquette for one society and not so with those of another. Few of us think that there is anything much “deeper” to say in our evaluation of the details of conduct. If one belches loudly after a dinner as a guest in a home in Boston, one is probably going to be judged to be unmannerly, whereas one might be judged to be unmannerly for *not* doing so within some European cultures. Many of us would agree that the judgment of the relevant group, or the principles of etiquette for the culture in question, *make it the case* that (or are at least *constitutive of the fact* that) the act under consideration exhibits good manners - or not. What is a fact about etiquette in one society may or may not be a fact about etiquette in another. Surely, at least *that much* conceptual relativity (if my reader will permit so loose a use of that term) is not to be denied.

Like some others (e.g. Curt Ducasse), I am impressed by the similarity of the cases of etiquette and aesthetics. It seems to me that whether (for example) the Mona Lisa is beautiful is a type of fact that is fixed only relatively to observers or aesthetic paradigms or some such parameter. That is, the observer’s assessment of the case is *constitutive* of the painting’s being *beautiful for that observer*. I suppose then, that I would defend some version of the common sense thesis that “beauty is in the eye of the beholder” (i.e. facts about beauty obtain only relative to observers - or something like that). The case of aesthetics is, of course, more controversial than the case of etiquette - though I must confess ignorance as to why that should be so.

But none of the business about etiquette or aesthetics need be of much concern to the classical metaphysical realist. Every formulation of the doctrine should be understood as involving some kind of caveat regarding intentional or peculiarly mental facts. Relativity about whether something tastes like chicken need not be at all surprising or troublesome to the classical metaphysical realist. Matters of taste, beauty, eti-

quette, etc., are all commonly accepted to be (in some sense) *inherently* relational and can (for the most part) be accommodated as resting (somehow) upon objective, mind-independent facts underpinning the relevant relations. The sort of relativity appropriate to aesthetic judgment, is eliminable in favor of some “deeper” description of reality and the objective facts underpinning relations between observers of a particular type, state, etc., and physical objects of a particular structure, reflectancy, etc. Relativity (perhaps the primary species of anti-realism) at one level of description is either benign as it stands, or can be “gotten rid of” by resort to ontologically “deeper”, objective facts. For example, the question of whether or not something tastes like chicken is entirely a function of objective facts concerning the relationship between the microstructure of the item being tasted and the neurophysiological make-up of the relevant organs in the body of the organism doing the tasting. It is no more troubling or surprising to the classical realist that such things require relativization than it is that Socrates is taller than Plato while he is shorter than Simmias. *Relative* height *had better* require relativization to some other thing. Of course, Socrates’ height relative to Plato or to Simmias is a function of *objective* facts about how tall each of them is. Who would ever have thought that the question, “Is this too loud?” would admit of anything other than an answer that is relativized to someone’s tastes or interests. So why not allow the same for gustatory tastes, aesthetic tastes, social tastes, etc. All such relativity rests on objective facts about the relationship between the perceiver and the part of the world being perceived.

The classical realist can get away with a good deal of hand-waving about cases of the above sort. Troublesome cases will involve ineliminable relativity about matters which are not typically thought to involve minds or their perceptual judgments at all. Examples where there is ineliminable relativity regarding the existence or the features of physical objects or systems might be particularly troubling to the classical metaphysical realist’s demands for uniqueness and bivalence. If there is need of conceptual relativity for complete descriptions of even the simple, non-presumptively-intentional features of reality (e.g. rocks, trees, cats, etc.), then the classical realist has a problem. If we cannot tell a complete, framework-neutral story of what rocks, trees, and cats are like, where they can be found, how many there are, etc., then classical realism and its demand for uniqueness and bivalence must be scrapped.

Let us take van Inwagen's intuitively plausible example of a fact that is entirely independent of minds or cognition as a test case:

F: Mount Everest is 8,847.7 meters high

What of uniqueness and bivalence with respect to F? The classical realist would appear to be committed to F's being either true or false *simpliciter*, and to F's either belonging to *the* correct description of a particular part of the world or not. Is F part of a uniquely correct description of reality? That is, does every correct description of reality (that part of it that includes Mount Everest) involve F? Furthermore, is F determinately true or false? The answer in each case would appear to be "No". "Mount Everest is 8,847.7 meters high" is *true* relative to "our" frame of reference (i.e. the frame of reference of an observer that is not in motion with respect to Mount Everest) and is *false* relative to an observer flying past the earth at great speed. Relative to the frame of reference of the latter observer, Mount Everest is (what "we" would call) length contracted; it is shorter than 8,847.7 meters for that observer. If the assignment of one height is correct relative to one frame of reference and the assignment of some other height is correct relative to another, and if there is no neutral, underlying, frame-invariant height of Mount Everest (and there isn't), then the demand for *uniqueness* of "the correct" description of the mountain (at least as it pertains to Everest's *height*) must *be* given up. Similarly, the idea that any correct theory of the nature of the world must include F needs to be left by the wayside. We have, in the case described, (at least) two descriptions of the mountain, with different assessments of its height in each case, neither of which seems entitled to claim priority or superiority to the other. If one intends to offer any assessment of Everest's height, it is impossible that one do so without adopting one or another frame of reference. There is no viable predication of height to the mountain that is not relativized.

Similarly, how much shall we say does some particular observer O of Mount Everest weigh? Well, before we can answer that question, we need to know whether that observer is standing at the base of the mountain or at its uppermost summit, or somewhere in between, or on the moon, or in a spacecraft unencumbered by proximity to any particular gravitational field, etc. Is there a unique fact about the weight of O, or is O's weight relative to her location in the universe (itself, a feature of O that is, at least, arguably, an inherently relational one)? Are these the

sorts of results that a classical realist expects of reality, or do they challenge the classical realist's account of the nature of the world?

The first response on behalf of the classical realist is that the relativity of attributes such as height and weight is unproblematic because of frame-invariant transformation laws which enable any observer, regardless of her frame of reference to calculate (for example) the height of Mount Everest from *any particular frame of reference whatever*. It is *determinately* (i.e. objectively) true or false that Mount Everest is 8,847.7 meters high from this or that particular frame of reference. Similarly, it is determinately true or false that observer O weighs (say) 200 lbs. *given* her position within any particular gravitational field. The uniquely correct theory of reality encompasses all the determinate truths about the world from each of the relevant frames of reference, observational perspectives, or descriptive standpoints. These cases are not different in kind from those involving aesthetic or social tastes. "Surface" relativity gives way to underlying objective facts. So classical realism, complete with its uniqueness and bivalence hypotheses, is untouched by such putative counterexamples. The allegedly problematic cases all result from the asking of incomplete or ill-formed questions. Ask about length, weight, etc., where the appropriate parameters are all specified (i.e. frame of reference, location relative to gravitational field, etc.), and the realist has no difficulty in giving a determinately true or false answer.

But this response will not do. The ideal description of reality, envisioned as a description that encompasses all framework-relative descriptions, does not contain a uniquely correct description (for example) *of Mount Everest*. It contains indefinitely many descriptions, all correct "in their own right", of the mountain (or of some section of spacetime which admits of description as a mountain). A slew of correct (relatively speaking) descriptions in conjunction with rules for transforming one into any one of the others does not amount to a single, underlying, framework-neutral description. When one is told that Mount Everest is 8,847.7 meters high from frame of reference f, one is being told as much about the frame of reference as about the mountain. Is information about the one distinguishable from information about the other? Though the realist is right to assert the mind-independent existence of something which may be described as a mountain that is 8,847.7 meters high, the *classical* realist makes the mistake of positing a *unique* description of that something. There are, in fact, a plurality of "correct" descriptions about any proper part of the universe as individuated by any particular

conceptual framework. The world *just* exists - true; but any attempt to describe any piece of that world (such as a mountain, planet, galaxy, rock, stick, bird, etc.) is necessarily a description from within some frame of reference, observational perspective, etc. (i.e. some conceptual framework).

Further problems are raised for the classical realist by attempts to describe causal relationships between physical objects or systems. Such relationships are notoriously difficult to separate from our interests and background assumptions about what does and does not count as a causal explanation for a particular event. What, for example, causes the event of the tearing of the anterior cruciate ligament in some particular athlete's knee? Well, it might be found out that the athlete in question had some peculiar type of imperfection in the tissue comprising the ligament, and thus it might readily (and not incorrectly) be concluded that the imperfection *caused* the tear during normal activities associated with the play of the game (e.g. stopping, turning, jumping, landing, etc. in a basketball game). The athlete was stopping short to put up her trademark jumpshot when the imperfection caused the ligament to rupture. That seems a perfectly respectable causal explanation of the event. Of course, the exact same event might be described such that the stopping short or the attempt to jump *caused* the tear to the ligament. Had there been no stopping or jumping, the imperfection in the ligament would have remained (for all intents and purposes) causally inert. What are we to say if the athlete's father claims that "playing that damned game caused the tear, and subsequently caused his poor daughter to be in agony. Is the father just wrong in such a case, or is he wrong *given* a particular kind of explanation space or explanatory perspective regarding "background" conditions?

Perhaps the incompetence of the team physician in diagnosing such imperfections might be cited as the cause of the unfortunate incident. While we are at it, why not cite the invention of basketball, the establishing of the school team, the athlete's decision to play that day, or any number of other "antecedent conditions" including the athlete's birth, and the big bang (birth of the universe that is) as "causes" of the torn ligament? It is not at all clear that the distinction between *cause* and *background condition* is something to be found "out there" in the world as opposed to its being found internal to the various representations or *theories* of what is "out there" in the world and what sorts of relationships obtain between an event and those that preceded it.

For that matter, it is not at all clear that there is a uniquely correct way of individuating events (indeed, one might go so far as to claim that there clearly *is not* any such thing). If there are indefinitely many ways of parsing the antecedents of any particular event into, on the one hand, causes and, on the other, background conditions, then there would seem to be no uniquely correct account of the causal relationship between any particular antecedent, A, and the subsequent event, E (let alone difficulties attendant upon relativity of ways of individuating events).

Similar arguments about conceptual relativity have been notably made with respect to the attributes of number (Putnam, 1987); motion (Goodman, 1978); spatiotemporal geometry (Hacking, 1975) and just about any other physical magnitude one might like to consider. There is no hope of finding uniquely correct descriptions of anything like the rocks, trees, birds, mountains, etc., that classical realists habitually point to as paradigmatic cases where our intuitions tell us that facts about such things *just* are as they are. Uniqueness must be jettisoned as must bivalence, at least about propositions that lack the appropriate parameters for relativization (e.g. “Mount Everest is 8,847.7 meters high” , “The imperfection caused the ligament to tear” , and even “There are three objects on this table”). If we understand classical metaphysical realism as being incompatible with the idea that alternative conceptual schemes can *correctly* describe reality, then classical metaphysical realism must be rejected. So, classical metaphysical realism is a failed theory of reality. But what has the failure of *classical* metaphysical realism got to do with the success of *metaphysical realism*?

What Metaphysical Realism Need Not Be

One could assert merely the mind-independent existence of *something*, without committing oneself to any theory about *what* it is that exists, or the *nature* of the mind-independent world, and in so doing, proclaim oneself a realist. Such a minimalist theory of reality, while it (strictly speaking) accords with the fundamental principles of realism (as given above), is virtually contentless save its expression of opposition to idealism and radical brands of constructivistic anti-realism.

Minimalistic realism (as I will call it) is, in fact, compatible with theories of reality which many philosophers who count themselves anti-realists would embrace. After all, most constructivists (for example) allow that *something* external to representations and cognition *exists*, but deny

that we can have any concept of it, or can *describe* it in any nontrivial way. If a constructivist could be also a minimalistic realist, then realists who are antagonistic to constructivism must build more content into their theory to draw a clearer line between themselves and opponents. If realism is to be an interesting theory, worthy of juxtaposition against (for example) idealism and constructivism, it must have enough content to generate some ontological commitment that is incompatible with rival, anti-realistic theories.

What is needed is a definition of metaphysical realism that captures the two fundamental principles with which any theory worthy of the title “realism” must accord, while building in enough information about the ontological commitments of the theory to make it interesting, non-trivial, and incompatible with constructivism or idealism. One plausible attempt to articulate a doctrine of metaphysical realism with the appropriate features has been made by Michael Devitt:

Realism: Tokens of most current common-sense and scientific physical types objectively exist independently of the mental (1984: p. 23)

So, rocks, trees, cats, stars, electrons and oceans exist and have their natures independently of any facts pertaining to cognizers or their efforts at conceptualizing or building representations of reality. The world and its parts *just* exist, and facts about the world *just* obtain, regardless of what “we” think. Mount Everest exists and has the features that our best theory ascribes to it, and it exists and has those features independently of any representation of the world constructed by cognizers. The same holds for any other non-intentional piece of the world (everything from acorns to zebras).

It seems to me that the above account of realism has the following properties:

- 1) It comports very well with our prephilosophical intuitions about the nature of reality and our relationship to it
- 2) It does not (contrary to standard interpretations) entail or necessarily involve uniqueness, bivalence, or correspondence theses about truth (nor is it entailed by any of these theses)
- 3) It is compatible with conceptual relativity and relativistic truth in an important way that classical metaphysical realism is not.

Metaphysical realism, so construed, is malleable enough to accommodate substantial conceptual relativity while retaining the mind-independent existence of the world that is crucial to distinguishing realism from its competitors. Though Devitt himself is committed to a number of theses about truth which are susceptible to a variety of attacks, his commitment to those theses is *not* a function of his commitment to the version of metaphysical realism articulated above.

Prephilosophical Intuitions

1) Metaphysical realism entails that the realist is committed to the belief that *most* of the entities posited by current folk and scientific theory really exist and that their existence and nature is in no interesting or non-trivial way dependent upon anything having to do with cognizers.² The realist who claims that there are electrons should be understood as asserting the mind-independent existence of entities that have (roughly or mostly) those properties ascribed to them by our current theory about the nature of the micro-physical world. Similarly, the realist who makes a claim about Mount Everest and its attributes (e.g. van Inwagen), should be understood as asserting that the mountain exists and that its features are the way that they are irrespective of anything having to do with minds, cognizers, observation, or anything mental. Mountains and electrons are just there.

The function of the word “most” in the above definition is to allow that *some* of our beliefs, and even some of our best current theories are defective. Given that the metaphysical realist is committed only to a belief, at any given time, in most of the posits of our best theory at that time, it follows that at any given time, the realist can allow that *some* of the entities posited by the best theory at that time do *not* actually exist or are *not* correctly described by the best theory of the day. So, while *some* theoretical posits might not exist, or might not have the nature ascribed to them by theory, the world, for the most part, is full of the things “we” think it is. Rocks, sticks, dogs, cats, dirt, stars, water, oxygen, electrons, etc., are all “out there”, and we are, for the most part, correct about what they are like.

² Bearing a particular relation (e.g. being to the left of Dole) to some cognizer or set of cognizers (for example) is the sort of property that involves a trivial dependency upon cognition or the mental.

The more cautious realist may wish to reserve her assent for only those claims regarding “common sense” entities or elements of the observable, macroscopic world (e.g. rocks, trees, etc.), while taking a skeptical or agnostic stance on claims regarding the posits of “deep” scientific theory of the structure of the micro-physical realm. Devitt refers to such philosophers as “Common-Sense Realists” but not “Scientific Realists” (1984: pp. 23-24). It is not the central tenets of realism that trouble the (exclusively) common sense realist, it is the extension of the domain of the theory to the unobservable world that she finds problematic. Realism about the observable world is not incompatible with scepticism about the unobservable world.

It is doubtful that many people who have not read fairly extensively in the philosophical literature and caught such bugs as scepticism or constructivism would entertain any serious doubts as to the veracity of most of our simple “folk” theory about the nature of the world. If reflective equilibrium governs our assessment of theories about the nature of reality, it would appear that metaphysical realism has the virtue of forcing us only a short conceptual distance (if any) from our native intuitions. It is not at all clear that the same can be said of its competitors. As we turn now from concerns about its comportment with our prephilosophical intuitions, we will find that realism’s independence from any particular theory of truth is a bit more slippery matter.

Independence From Truth

2a) Metaphysical realism is a doctrine that asserts the cognition-independent existence of the external world. It is a theory about the nature of the world itself. Where, we should ask, is there a necessity for a metaphysical realist to entertain any particular “theory of truth” at all beyond something like a simple Tarskian adequacy condition - itself a trivial component of *any* theory that is offered as an account of truth? That is, why would one think (as do Putnam, Horwich, Dummett and others) that a metaphysical realist is committed to correspondence, uniqueness, bivalence, or any combination thereof? What, on the face of it, has a theory about the nature of the world itself to do with these theses about truth? The alleged entailment from one to the other rests upon an unwarranted assumption about the realist’s commitment to a particular kind of truth-maker. That assumption is that the truth-maker is, *in every case*, simply *the world*. Such-and-such proposition (or sentence) is true if and

only if the *world* itself exists with such-and-such features or has such-and-such characteristics. That is, there is an assumption that the truth relation always involves the same type of relata in the following sense: Truth-bearers either are or are not appropriately related *to the world itself*. We see this assumption in the following passage from Hugo Meynell's "On Realism, Relativism, and Putnam" :

The metaphysical realist has to argue for the kind of independence which I have asserted, while meeting the difficulties which have led so many, in defiance both of common sense and of what are at first sight the implications of science, to argue for dependence. How may she proceed? I believe that there are two crucial propositions which provide the clues that are needed: (1) it must be the case that we can make true judgments, and judgments for good reason, since the contradictory is self-destructive; and (2) the *real world* is nothing other than *what true judgments are about*, and what judgments for good reason (i.e., arrived at by a thorough application of the three types of mental operation which I mentioned above) *tend to be about*. (1995: p. 338 - emphasis mine)

In "The World Well Lost", Richard Rorty polemicizes against the alleged realistic principle that "it is the world that determines truth" (p. 660), and accuses realists of an equivocation between "the purely vacuous notion of the ineffable cause of sense and goal of intellect" and "a name for objects that inquiry at the moment is leaving alone" (p. 663). He suggests that the latter is surreptitiously substituted for the former (the world itself) when the realist needs a truth-maker that we can get a cognitive grasp of.

The problematic inference on the part of realism's opponents seems to go something like this:

- 1) The world itself is the sole truth-maker for each and every true statement.
- 2) Realists hold that the world and its characteristics are as they are independently of cognition.
- 3) Any statement either rightly says how some portion of the world itself is or it fails to do so.
- 4) Statements that rightly say how some portion of the world itself is are true, those that fail to do so are not true.

- 5) Hence, each statement is either true or else it is false (bivalence) insofar as it succeeds or fails in rightly saying how the world itself is independently of the mental (correspondence), and there is only one complete set of true statements (uniqueness), namely that set that constitutes the ideal theory of reality.

So, the argument goes, the claim that there is an objective, mind-independent world commits one to the theses of uniqueness, bivalence, and correspondence truth.

Let us take a moment to break this all into smaller, more easily digestible morsels. First of all, the opponent of realism will point out that the realist believes that there is but *one* actual world and it is but *one* way (and the way that it is independent of anything mental). A statement says that the world is some one way (in some respect) or that it is some other way. Surely, the difference between statements that are true and those that are not is that the true statements rightly say how the world is and the ones that are not true do not - this is all but trivial. The realist must, therefore, accept *bivalence* for, at least, any statement with sufficiently determinate content. If a statement says something sufficiently determinate, it either rightly says how the fixed, mind-independent world is or it fails to do so. In the former case, it is true and, in the latter, it is false.

Secondly, those statements that “rightly say” how the world is must stand in some relation to the world that those statements that fail to “rightly say” how the world is do not. It is standing in the *correspondence* relation to the world itself that makes a statement true and failing to do so that makes a statement false. Statements either correspond to the world or they do not (however correspondence might be cashed out).

Finally, the realist can accept only one complete set of true statements, namely the set of those that stand in the correspondence relation to the world. Hence, the realist’s commitment to a unique, mind-independent (i.e. “ready-made”) world entails that there must be a *uniquely correct theory* of the way that that world is. Those statements that rightly say how the world is (i.e. that correspond to it) are part of the ideal theory and those that fail to rightly say how the world is (i.e. that fail to correspond to it) are not part of the ideal theory. A unique world admits of only one correct description.

If one can show that any one of the theses of bivalence, uniqueness, or correspondence truth is false, then the metaphysical theory that entails it must be false as well. So Putnam argues that we cannot make sense of correspondence truth while Dummett inveighs against bivalence - both taking their efforts to have undermined the doctrine of metaphysical realism. I think that this strategy is wrongheaded because I do not think that metaphysical realism entails any of these three theses about the nature of truth. The basic reason for this is that the realist is not committed to the world itself being the sole truth-maker for truth-bearers.

Why should the metaphysical realist be committed to the idea that *the world* serves as sole truth-maker for all statements (taking these to be the truth-bearers). The realist *could* insist that statements are made true by being appropriately related to (what Goodman calls) *world-versions* as described from one or another cultural perspective (i.e. the metaphysical realist could be a cultural relativist about truth). That is, the realist could draw a line between the world itself and world-versions, and then assert that truth is a matter of the relatedness of statements to *world-versions* and is not dependent upon any relation to the world at all. Thus, uniqueness and bivalence would have no special attraction for such a realist, and the correspondence relation would have to incorporate relativization to culturally constructed world-versions. This may or may not be an *attractive* option for the realist, but it seems to be one that is not immediately excluded by the existence and independence dimensions of realism (its two fundamental tenets).

Some may claim that a more tenable position for the realist is the adoption of a *deflationary* account of truth, wherein truth is not taken to be a property of propositions that is in need of philosophical analysis at all. The deflationist takes the import of the truth predicate to be exhausted by the conjunction of all the unproblematic cases of the Tarskian equivalence thesis, and by its role in the formation of various expressions and the satisfaction of logical need. On this view, the predicate "is true" serves only the functions of allowing for the formation of certain kinds of generalizations (e.g. "Everything that Adam Smith said is true") and expediting the expression of infinite conjunctions (e.g. "The Law of Excluded Middle is true"); it does *not* attribute a property to propositions (the position is laid out and explicated very nicely by Horwich, 1990; Field, 1986; and Kirkham, 1995). Since anything alleged to be an account of truth must, at a very minimum, entail all uncontroversial instances of the Tarskian equivalence schema, the metaphysical realist is

not committed to any one of them (e.g. correspondence) simply by virtue of the acceptance of all appropriate sentences of the form “S is true iff p” where S names the statement expressed by p.

This position leaves, as an open question, the nature of the ontological commitment associated with the right half of the biconditional in the equivalence thesis. The thing designated by *p* may be an element of *the world* or of some *world-version* (or sometimes one of these and sometimes another), or it may not *designate* anything at all. Deflationism about truth is entirely neutral with respect to metaphysical concerns. It might be that all true statements *correspond to* the world, but it is *not* by virtue of this correspondence that they are *true* (according to the deflationist). In saying that such-and-such “is true”, one is not attributing any property, as one would be in saying that such-and-such “is radioactive”. One is simply using the truth predicate to facilitate the expression of something or other, often something which could not otherwise be expressed without adverting to an infinite conjunction (e.g. assenting to the Law of Excluded Middle). Nothing about metaphysical realism conflicts with deflationism about truth. One *can be* both a metaphysical realist and a deflationist about truth. There is, therefore, no entailment relation from metaphysical realism to any of the aforementioned theses about truth.

What about any reverse entailment, from any one of these theses to metaphysical realism?

2b) It is commonly thought that correspondence theorists must be committed to metaphysical realism. I see no reason to think this the case unless one’s understanding of the correspondence theory requires that statements correspond to a mind-independent reality in order that they be true. But such a requirement is, of course, simply question-begging. If one makes metaphysical realism *constitutive* of the correspondence theory of truth, then the latter does indeed entail the former. But such a requirement is a gratuitous addition to the correspondence theory in the context of a dispute about its ontological entailments. The correspondence theory appears to be compatible with a variety of metaphysical theories.

Why could not (for example) a constructivist also be a correspondence theorist about truth? All that is needed to consistently hold both doctrines is the insistence that facts are (in some sense) constructs and that statements are made true by their *correspondence to the facts*. Richard Boyd, in fact, makes the case that constructivists can not only em-

brace correspondence truth, but can even consistently help themselves to *causal* theories of truth and reference (typically taken to be the most plausible physical mechanisms underwriting correspondence to reality):

With respect to the question of semantic commensurability the sophisticated constructivist can certainly accept any philosophically and historically plausible diagnosis to which a realist might be attracted. *Indeed, and this is the important point, the constructivist can appropriate the causal theory of reference as an account of the ground of judgments of coreferentiality made within any given research tradition, so that she can say and defend anything about the referential semantics of actual scientific theories which a realist can say and defend.* Of course she will hold that the reference-determining causal relations are themselves social constructs, but since that is something she says about all causal relations, no special problems need infect her conception of semantic commensurability. (1992: p. 153)

The same can, of course, be said for uniqueness and bivalence. There is no reason that an idealist or constructivist (so long as she thinks that there is only one idealistic or constructed world or world-version to serve as truth-maker) cannot also claim uniqueness of correct descriptions of reality and bivalence of the truth value of statements about the world. So long as the truth-maker is a single, monolithic entity (e.g. ideas in the mind of God, or that which would be accepted by the ideal community of inquirers, or whatever), the truth bearers will exhibit bivalence and uniqueness, and they might certainly be held to be true in virtue of their correspondence to reality (though reality is deeply mentalistic given either constructivism or idealism). Berkeley could well have embraced uniqueness, bivalence, *and* correspondence theses while remaining staunchly idealistic.

If uniqueness, bivalence and correspondence truth do not entail realism, then it seems very unlikely that *any* theory about truth does. Certainly, no theory involving the epistemic properties of cognizers as a component (e.g. coherence or pragmatic theories) will entail realism, and, as has already been argued, deflationary accounts of truth are metaphysically neutral.

In short, it appears that metaphysical realism neither entails, nor is entailed by, any particular theory of truth. Realism and truth are independent issues. This should not be altogether surprising, since realism is a theory about what the world is like, whereas theories of truth are accounts of what it is for statements (propositions, beliefs, utterances, or

whatever truth-bearers there may be) to have a particular kind of property, or for the predicate “is true” to be able to play a particular kind of role in the formation of expressions. Although it is very natural to take *the world itself* to be truth-maker for a range of common, intuitive cases, it is not at all clear or uncontroversial that *all* truth-bearers are made true by being related to *the world itself* as opposed to world-versions. If they do not have to take the world as an argument in every truth-making relation, realists are not shackled to any particular theory of truth.

Putnam, and others who take metaphysical realism to involve some particular account of truth (e.g. Horwich, Dummett, and Trigg), seem to be building something into the doctrine that they are not entitled to include. One need not embrace uniqueness, bivalence, or correspondence truth in espousing metaphysical realism (or vice-versa), and objections against any of those theories of truth are not relevant to an evaluation of metaphysical realism. It is important that metaphysical realism be distinguished from alethic or semantic theories if we are to be clear about how to evaluate its legitimacy as a theory of the nature of the world.

2c) Philosophers who assume that metaphysical realism entails some particular epistemological theory about what sorts of things we can know - or cannot help but know, make a similar mistake. Realism involves a separation of sorts between the world and our representations of it. So the theory is not without consequences for our investigations into the nature of the world. For the (average) realist, the purpose of our investigations is, often, the uncovering of facts about the way that (mind-independent) reality is. The way to conduct such investigations is not to focus on the mind and its internal structure, but rather to focus the mind on the world. One should look at it, touch it, smell it, roll it around on one’s tongue, etc. The world is “out there” and our inquiries into it require that we somehow bridge the gap between it and ourselves. In *Against Relativism*, James F. Harris depicts realism as a theory governing the goals and methodology of scientific inquiry:

The inheritance received from Galileo and those who followed his lead in the remainder of the seventeenth century is a form of *realism* according to which the world or reality is understood to be a certain way, and the task of the scientist is to discover the most accurate theory for describing it. According to this realist understanding of the nature of scientific inquiry, reality is metaphorically “Out there” -- “beyond” or “beneath” scientific theory...(1992: p. 23)

Harris' understanding of realism's consequences for scientific inquiry does, in fact, accord with vulgar intuitions about the scientific enterprise, but the metaphysical doctrine of realism is not constituted by any particular theory regarding scientific inquiry or about how one is to find out what the nature of the world is.

Metaphysical realism is neither a semantic nor an epistemological thesis (except insofar as it claims independence of the world from our knowledge or beliefs about it), and the mere claim that the world exists independently of the mental is compatible with any number of epistemological theories from a fairly radical skepticism, to a Davidsonian thesis that it is impossible for us to be radically wrong about the nature of the reality in which we live. In fact, Robert Almeder argues in "Blind Realism", that it is impossible that we are not, in large measure, correct about the nature of the mind-independent world-in-itself, although we cannot justifiably pick out which of our beliefs do accurately describe the external world. He traces a line of argument back through the early Putnam to Strawson and then Peirce. All three suggest that only realism can account for the predictive success of science without having to resort to the miraculous or the coincidental.

We must, therefore, be correct about some (in fact, much) of the world, but we cannot be certain about precisely which parts of our theory of the world are correct because:

. . . the occurrence of the sensory phenomena that we would expect if the designated theoretical claims were true might just as easily be the result of other theoretical or nontheoretical claims made in the theory, claims that serve as auxiliary hypotheses or simple observational claims, while the designated theoretical claims are literally false. This hypothesis, for example, would constitute one plausible way to explain the predictive success of Ptolemy's astronomy. While the designated theoretical claims of Ptolemy's astronomy can be viewed as literally false, the predictive success of such claims would need to be a function of other true claims made in the theory. (1987: p. 73)

So, Almeder has staked out the middle-ground between the sceptics and the non-sceptics. We know that we are right somewhere - we just cannot find out where! Although I do not endorse Almeder's position, I see nothing fundamental to metaphysical realism that precludes his holding this particular thesis in conjunction with realism as set out above.

Metaphysical realists merely claim that the world is in no (non-trivial) way dependent upon cognition. They are not, thereby, committed to any

further theses about our conceptions of reality or about propositions, utterances, or statements that are intended to characterize the world in one way or another. A sceptical realist might claim to believe that tokens of most common sense and scientific types exist independently of the mental while not knowing it, whereas a realist who holds some causal theory of knowledge might assert that we can know what most (or, at least, many) parts of the world are like if we stand in the appropriate causal relation(s) to those parts. Then again, there is Almeder's position somewhere in between. All three sorts of theorists are realists, but they disagree about epistemological matters. They can all be realists because realism is not an epistemological thesis (except insofar as it holds that the world is as it is independently of what we know, believe, etc.).

Metaphysical realism is a theory of the nature of the world. It comports very nicely with our prephilosophical intuitions regarding what the world is like and what our relationship is to it. It does not entail and is not entailed by any particular theory of truth or by any particular epistemological theory (except insofar as it asserts the mind-independence of the world). The metaphysical realist asserts that the world exists and is the way that it is independently of the mental. The anti-realist must direct her objections against *that* thesis.

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