

**Phil 420: *Metaphysics*
Spring 2008**

[Handout 6]

**Michael Devitt:
*A Naturalistic Defense of Realism***

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§ Summary of Main Theses

- **His defense is of commonsense realism and scientific realism.**
- **His main claim is that realism does not entail, and does not involve the correspondence theory of truth.**
- **His main position is that of “naturalism” – experience is our only teacher.**

Devitt: “Anti-realism about the physical world is an occupational hazard of philosophy.”

§ Realism

Realism usually has two elements:

- 1. semantic claim about truth and reference**
- 2. metaphysical claim about (i) existence; (ii) mind-independence.
(→ the existence dimension and the independence dimension)**

Realism as a metaphysical thesis (the semantic element should be disassociated from Realism):

— **Tokens of most commonsense, and scientific, physical types objectively exist independently of the mental.**

§ Idealism

— **Mostly deny only the independence dimension, not the existence dimension, of the metaphysical claim of realists.**

[A] According to some traditional idealists, the entities identified by the first dimension are made up of mental items, “ideas” or “sense data,” and so are not external to the mind.

[B] According to recent idealists, the entities are not, in a certain respect, “objective”: they depend for their existence and nature on the cognitive activities and capacities of our minds.

§ Realist’s claim about the objectivity of the world:

___ The world is not *constituted* by our knowledge, by our epistemic values, by our capacity to refer to it, by the synthesizing power of the mind, nor by our imposition of concepts, theories, or languages; it is not limited by what we can believe or discover. However, it is not necessarily *unknowable*.

§ Realism and the Correspondence Theory of Truth

Devitt:

___ The correspondence theory is distant from Realism, because it is silent on the existence dimension. It tells us what it is for a sentence to be true or false, but it does not tell us which ones are true and so *could* not tell us which particular entities exist.

___ The correspondence theory claims that a sentence or a thought is true in virtue of its structure, its relation to reality, usually reference relations, and the nature of reality. *This is compatible with any metaphysics.*

Contemporary Realism:

___ Most scientific statements about unobservables are (approximately) correspondence-true.

Devitt suggests that they actually combine the following two theses:

1. ***Strong Scientific Realism:*** Tokens of most unobservable scientific types objectively exist independently of the mental and (approximately) obey the laws of science.
2. ***Correspondence Truth:*** Sentences have correspondence-truth conditions.

§ Devitt’s Claim:

Both Strong Scientific Realism and his Scientific Realism are *metaphysical*, concerned with the underlying nature of the world in general. They do not have to be linked with the correspondence theory of truth.

Q: Is Devitt successful in disassociating scientific realism from the correspondence theory of truth?

§ WHY BE A COMMON SENSE REALIST?

[Commonsense Realism]

___ Such objects as stones, cats, and trees exist. These objects exist even when we are not perceiving them, and that they do not depend for their existence on our opinions nor on anything mental.

___ These beliefs are central to our whole way of viewing the world. Commonsense realism is aptly named because it is the core of common sense.

What reasons have motivated philosophers to reject this view?

- (i) **Cartesian skepticism**
- (ii) **Kant: We can know about appearances because, crudely, we make them.**
- (iii) **Constructivism: Putnam, Goodman, Kuhn (a combination of Kant and conceptual relativism)**

[Devitt's Argument for Commonsense Realism]

1. **Anti-realists, Kant and Constructivists (Putnam, Goodman and Kuhn)) appeal to epistemological skepticism in arguing against commonsense realism.**
2. **But over a few years of living people come to the conclusion that there are stones, trees, cats, and the like, existing largely independent of us. This Realism is confirmed day by day in their experience.**
3. **Therefore, the realist conviction is much more firmly based than anti-realists' epistemological speculations.**
4. **Therefore, rather than using the epistemological speculations as evidence against Realism, we should use Realism as evidence against the epistemological speculations.**

[Concluding claim]:

___ **We should put metaphysics first, and then Realism is the only doctrine that can be taken seriously.**

Empirical metaphysics → empirical epistemology

___ When we approach our metaphysics empirically, Realism is irresistible.

In sum, objections to Commonsense Realism have come from speculations in epistemology and semantics. From the naturalistic perspective, these speculations are seen as empirical. Once they are seen as empirical, they are far ill-based to justify any metaphysical conclusion.

Q: What do you think about this line of reasoning?

*** Neurath's Raft: a metaphor of human knowledge**



Otto Neurath:

___ Our knowledge is like a raft that we continually rebuild while staying afloat on it. we can rebuild any part of the boat, but in so doing we must take a stand on the rest of the boat for the time being. Similarly, we can revise any part of our knowledge, but in so doing we must accept the rest for the time being. So we cannot revise all at once.

Devitt:

___ Just as we should start rebuilding the boat by standing on the firmest part, so also should we start rebuilding our web of knowledge. Epistemology is one of the weakest parts to stand on (empirical metaphysics is the firmest).

Q: Does this metaphor give you the assurance of commonsense realism if it is possible that our knowledge could be revised and discarded in the future?

§ WHY BE A SCIENTIFIC REALIST?

The argument for Scientific Realism – Realism about the unobservables of science – starts by assuming Commonsense Realism. The argument for Commonsense Realism comes from the assumption of naturalism.

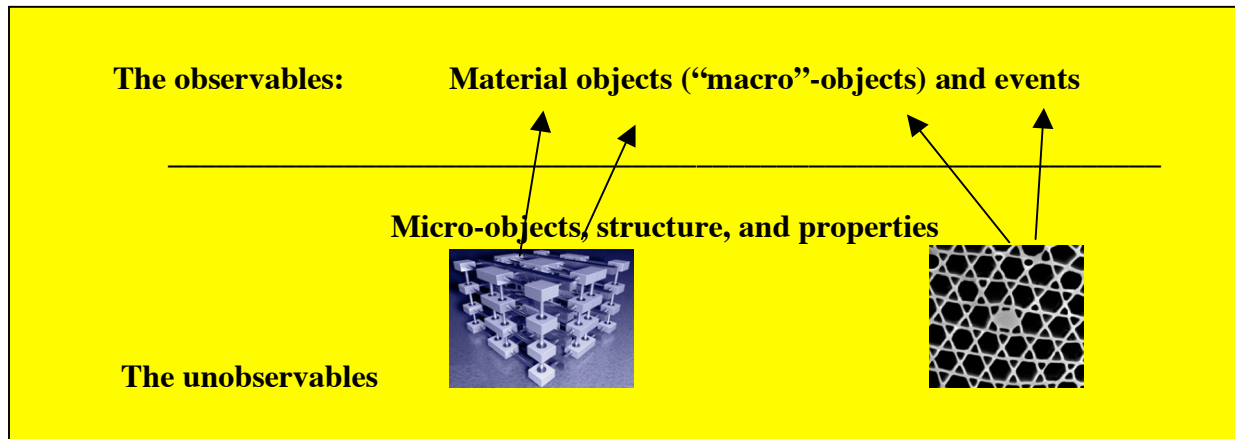
[Naturalism]:

___ The view that there is only one way of knowing, the empirical way that is the basis of science.

From the naturalist perspective, philosophy becomes continuous with science.

§ Devitt's Argument for Scientific Realism

- 1. By supposing the unobservables of science exist, we can give good explanations of the behavior and characteristics of observed entities, behavior and characteristics which would otherwise remain completely inexplicable.**



2. Such a supposition lead to predications about observables which are well confirmed.
3. Therefore, the supposition is successful.

My simple argument uses Realism to explain the observed entities. This is not to say that observational success is unimportant to the simple argument: the explanation of observed phenomena, like any explanation, is *tested* by its observational success. So according to the simple argument, Scientific Realism is successful.

[Concluding claim]:

___ We should adopt naturalism and argue the metaphysical issue first. When we do, the case for Common-sense Realism is overwhelming and the case for Scientific Realism is very strong.

Discussion questions:

1. Is Devitt successful in disassociating scientific realism from the correspondence theory of truth?
2. What does Devitt mean by the “a priori” metaphysics and the “empirical” metaphysics? Do you agree with his criticism of Putnam’s reasoning? How does he appeal to “naturalism” in support of his argumentation?
3. Devitt argues that scientific realism and commonsense realism are compatible in that what commonsense realists accept as true statements are also what scientific realists accept as true statements. Do you think he is right?
4. Devitt argues that “We should put metaphysics first, and then Realism is the only doctrine that can be taken seriously.” What are his reasons? Do you think he has made a convincing argument?
5. Devitt seems to think that there is no real debate on the issue of existence; the real debate is on epistemology and semantics. He argues that we should affirm Realism metaphysically and then engage in those other debates. Do you think this is the right position on the debate between realism and anti-realism?