

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

[Handout 2]

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Michael Devitt:

What is Realism?

§ A Metaphysical vs. a Semantic/Epistemic definition of ‘Realism’

Definition 1: [Hirst]

___ Realism is 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.

Q: How could we know that material objects or external realities exist apart from our knowledge or consciousness of them?

Definition 2: [Dummett]

- ___ 1. Realism is a *semantic* thesis, a thesis about what, in general, renders a statement in the given class true when it is true.
- ___ 2. Realism involves acceptance, for statements of the given class, of the principle of bivalence.
- ___ 3. Realism is the view that statements of the given class (in local debates) have determinate truth values – they are either true or false whether we could verify them or not. Truth or falsehood is not dependent on verifiability or assertability.

Q: Do you accept that a sentence or a proposition is either determinately true or determinately false?

Devitt: I am only defending realism as a metaphysical thesis. Hence, I shall ignore ‘truth’ in characterizing ‘realism’.

§ Two Dimensions of Realism

[The Independence Dimension]

___ An object has objective existence, in some sense, if it exists and has its nature whatever we believe, think, or can discover; it is independent of the cognitive activities of the mind.

___ A realist would reject Berkeley’s “to be is to be perceived.”

Q: Is *reality* constituted by our knowledge, by our epistemic values, by our capacity to refer to it, by the synthesizing power of the mind, by our imposition of concepts, theories, or language?

___ examples of concepts and reference: ‘contract,’ ‘promise,’ ‘art,’ ‘sofa,’ ‘jade’, ‘water,’ ‘lemon,’ ‘gold,’ ‘diamond,’ ‘aluminum’, ‘atom’,

___ examples of the synthesizing power of the mind: causation, time,

Q: Do our concepts *track* divisions among objects as nature has them, or do concepts *create* divisions among objects?

[The Existence Dimension]

___ Common-sense physical entities (stones, trees, cats, etc.) exist.

___ Some unobservable entities that our science posits exist.

§ Devitt’s Formulation of ‘Realism’

1. Weak Realism:

___ **Something objectively exists independently of the mental.**

2. Realism [Devitt]:

___ **Tokens of most current common-sense and scientific physical types objectively exist independently of the mental.**

→ (i) Commonsense Realism:

___ **Tokens of most current observable commonsense and scientific physical types objectively exist independently of the mental.**

[Argument against commonsense realism]:

1. What commonsense believed in the past have often turned out to be false.
2. It is possible that what we now believe will turn out to be false in the future.
3. Therefore, we can never know for sure that what we claim to exist and what their nature is like really do exist the way we believe them to be.

*** Devitt’s Proposal: realism (t)**

___ **Realism (t) is realism for any time *t*.**

___ **What present day realist should defend is realism (now).**

___ **A realist at time *t* believes realism(t).**

(ii) Scientific Realism:

___ **Tokens of most current unobservable scientific physical types objectively exist independently of the mental.**

___ **Different scientific theories in history do make progress toward the real truth of the world.**

[Argument against scientific realism]:

1. With each radical theory change goes a change in ontology: unobservable entities posited in previous scientific paradigms turned out not to exist.
2. It is likely that from the perspective of some theory we shall adopt in the future, the entities of present theory do not exist.
3. Therefore, unobservable entities do not exist independently of the scientific theory that posits them.

Devitt's reply:

___ The realist should not commit himself to future entities. It would be absurd to commit himself to past ones unless they are also present ones. So he must commit himself to present ones.

Q: In what sense do we say that electrons, the 11th dimension, string, membrane, etc. exist? Are they merely our theoretical posits?

Q: When we go through a paradigm shift in science, do we get a change in our ontology (on what exists and what does not) as well?

Q: Devitt seems to be suggesting a relativistic realism – relative to time. He accepts realism (now). If realism is relative to the time-period we are in, do we still have realism?

§ Realism and Physicalism**[Physicalism]:**

- (1) The only entities that exist are physical entities or those composed only of physical entities.**
- (2) Ultimately, physical laws explain everything.**

Physicalism and realism have been confused by some philosophers, but they are in fact quite distinct doctrines:

___ Realism does not entail either (1) or (2).

___ Realism is compatible with dualism. **Q: Does commonsense posit the existence of souls and angels?**

___ A Realist could be a non-reductivist (against 2).

§ Devitt's position: Separate the metaphysical issue of Realism from the semantic or epistemic issue of 'truth'

Typical argument against realism:

1. If the realist's independent reality exists, then our thoughts/theories must mirror, picture, or represent that reality.

2. Our thoughts/theories cannot mirror, picture or represent the realist's independent reality.
3. So the realist's independent reality does not exist.

Devitt: (1) is false. "To question whether our theories aim at 'picturing the world' is not 'to question whether electrons 'really exist.'"

We can make the ontological commitment to the existence of cats without any recourse to a semantic theory.

e.g.

(2) Cats exist.

Statements like (2) are central to my account of Realism.

A semantic theory of a sentence could clearly help us to understand that sentence, but the theory is not necessary for understanding.

Conclusion:

___ Ontology can be separated from semantics. Our ontological commitment is not simply the result of our semantic theory (of truth, reference or meaning).

§ Appendix: Theories of truth

Truth

“Truth” in the ontological sense = “Reality”

vs.

“Truth” in the semantic sense

Q: What are “truth-bearers”?

___ sentences, statements, utterances, beliefs, propositions, etc.

Q: What should one expect of a theory of *truth*?

___ to analyze the notion of “truth”

___ to define the conditions under which a truth-bearer is rendered *true*.

§ Four Major Theories of Truth

1. [the correspondence theory]

___ This theory holds that a proposition (or sentence, utterance, statement, belief) is true when it corresponds to reality.

2. [the pragmatist theory]

___ This theory holds that a proposition is true just in case it is useful to believe the proposition.

3. [the coherence theory] = [coherentism]

___ This theory holds that a proposition is true just in case it coheres with a specified system of belief.

4. [the deflationary theory] = [deflationism]

___ This theory denies that there is anything more to truth than certain logical functions of the truth predicate “is true.”

§ 1. The Correspondence Theory of Truth

Devitt:

___ The ordinary semantic notion of truth is a ‘correspondence’ notion.

Correspondence

(1) Classical view

___ A sentence is true iff it corresponds to the facts (or to reality).

a statement
<utterance>



a portion of reality
< a state of affairs >

<proposition>
<sentence>
<belief>, etc.

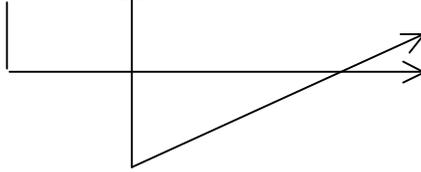
<facts>, <events, objects>
<sets>, <properties>, etc.



isomorphism, correspondence, conformity,
agreement, accordance, copying, picturing
signifying, representing, reference, satisfaction

Q: How can a sentence “correspond” to any fact? What sort of relation is this “correspondence”?

‘Tom is happy.’



refers to

(2) Contemporary view:

— Sentence of type x are true or false in virtue of

- (i) their structure;
- (ii) the referential relations between their parts and reality;
- (iii) the objective and mind-independent nature of that reality.

Q: How is reference established between a term or a sentence, and an object, a property of the object, or a state of affairs containing the object?

Aristotle: “To say of what is not that it is not or of what is not that it is, is falsehood; and to say of what is that it is and of what is not that it is not, is true.”

Thomas Aquinas: “A judgment is said to be true when it conforms to the external reality.”

§ The Pragmatist Theory of Truth

[James]:

“The true is the name of whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief.”

“The true ... is only the expedient in our way of thinking.”

“... what is better for us to believe is true *unless the belief incidentally clashes with some other vital benefit*. Now in real life what vital benefits is any particular belief most liable

to clash with? What indeed except the vital benefits yielded by other benefits when these prove incompatible with the first one?"

"... sometimes alternative theoretic formulas are equally compatible with all the truths we know, and then we choose between them for subjective reasons ... we follow 'elegance' or 'economy.'

"... expedient in the long run and on the whole of course; for what meets expediently all the experience in sight won't necessarily meet all farther experience equally satisfactorily. Experience, as we know, has ways of *boiling over*, and making us correct our present formulas."

[Peirce]:

"... consider what effects, which might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of those effects is the whole of our conception of the object."

"... let us ask what we mean by calling a thing *hard*. Evidently that it will not be scratched by many other substances. The whole conception of this quality, as of every other, lies in its conceived effects."

[Dewey]

Truth, or warranted assertability, characterizes those beliefs to which we give the honorific title, 'knowledge.'

⇒ 'x knows that *p*' = 'x believes *p*, *p* is true and *x* has good reason for his belief that *p*.'

§ The Coherence Theory of Truth

We can never get outside of our beliefs to assert anything as true or false. Therefore, all we talk about as true is what coheres with our belief system.

There is no ontological distinction between beliefs and what makes beliefs true. Reality is like a collection of beliefs. Therefore, truth comes in degrees.

Q: What is the coherence relation?

- a) consistency
- b) entailment

Q: Whose belief system counts?

- a) the largest consistent set of propositions currently held by actual people
- b) by people like us (with finite cognitive capacities) who have reached the limit of inquiry
- c) by an ideal omniscient being

Q: What difference does it make to Coherentism whether the system of beliefs belong to people like us, or to an omniscient being?

Q: Can maximum coherence prove correspondence?

___ e. g. Davidson's view

Hempel:

___ We can only know whether a proposition coheres with a set of beliefs; we can never know whether a proposition corresponds to reality.

Rescher:

___ Our "knowledge" is... no more than our *best estimate* of the truth of things. Lacking the advantage of a God's eye view, we have no access to the world's facts save through the mediation of (potentially flawed) *inquiry*. All we can do – and what must suffice us because indeed it is *all* that we can do – is to do the best we can in the cognitive state of the art to *estimate* "the correct" answer to our scientific questions.

§ The Deflationary Theory of Truth (Minimalism)

(1) To assert that a statement is true is simply to assert the statement itself.

e.g. 'Snow is white' is true = Snow is white. In this case, we can eliminate the word 'true'.

e.g.

1. It is true that Caesar was murdered.
2. It is false that Caesar was murdered.

(2) There is no more to truth than the equivalence thesis.

*** The equivalence schema:**

___ '*P*' is true if and only if *p*.

Q: What is the equivalence schema about?

- ___ a) sentences
___ b) propositions

Q: What is the "iff" relation supposed to be?

- ___ a) means the same as
___ b) materially equivalent (biconditionals)
___ c) necessary equivalence (necessary biconditionals)

(3) The equivalence thesis does not hold in virtue of any pairing of sentences with situations. Rather, (i) it holds because of the role of the word 'true' – the two sides of the equivalence thesis express the same thing; (ii) it holds because of the empirical fact that the sentences of which 'true' is predicated on the left are synonymous with the sentences used on the right.

(4) Truth is not a property having some nature in need of scientific explanation. 'Truth' is simply a term that is convenient to have, and is essential to our use of language.

e.g. 'What Sam said was true.' In this case, we cannot eliminate the word 'true' like we could in cases such as 'It is true that the earth is round.'

(5) The common mistake of philosophers of truth is to assume that truth has a nature of the kind that philosophers might find out about and develop theories of. "Truth" is not a property that exists on its own.

Ayer:

___ "And this shows that the words 'true' and 'false' are not used to stand for anything, but function in the sentence merely as assertion and negation signs. That is to say, truth and falsehood are not genuine concepts. Consequently there can be no logical problem concerning the nature or truth."

Quine:

___ "The truth predicate is a device for disquotation."

e.g. 'Snow is white' is true iff snow is white.

This theory is sometimes called the redundancy theory, the minimalist theory, the disquotational theory, the no-truth theory, or the disappearance theory.