

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

[Handout 3]

Professor JeeLoo Liu

John Searle: Does the Real World Exist?

§ Main Theses:

1. **[Realism]: There is a reality that is totally independent of our representation of it.**
2. **[Correspondence Theory of Truth]: In general, our statements when true correspond to facts.**
3. **[Representation]: Human beings have a variety of interconnected ways of having access to and representing features of the world to themselves (perceptions, thought, language, beliefs, pictures, ideas, maps, etc.)**
4. **[Conceptual relativity]: Systems of representations, such as vocabularies and conceptual schemes generally, are human creations, and to that extent arbitrary. It is possible to have any number of different systems of representations for representing the same reality.**
5. **[Social epistemology]: Actual human efforts to get true representations of reality are influenced by all sorts of factors – cultural, economic, psychological, and so on. Complete epistemic objectivity is difficult, sometimes impossible, because actual investigators are always from a point of view, motivated by all sorts of personal factors, and within a certain cultural and historical context.**
6. **[Epistemic objectivity]: But the criteria for knowledge are not arbitrary, and they are impersonal, because having true knowledge consists in having true representations for which we can give certain sorts of justification or evidence.**

§ What Realism Is Not

1. Realism is not a theory of truth and it does not imply any theory of truth. It is not a semantic theory at all.

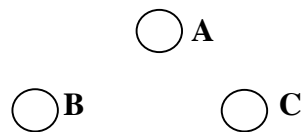
On a normal interpretation, the correspondence theory implies realism since it implies that there is a reality to which statements correspond if they are true; but realism does not by itself imply the correspondence theory, since it does not imply that 'truth' is the name of a relation of correspondence between statements and reality.

2. Realism is not a theory of knowledge; it does not assume any view from nowhere or a God's Eye View.
3. Realism is not a theory of language; it is not committed to the theory that there is one best vocabulary for describing reality, that reality itself must determine how it should be described.
4. Realism does not say how things are but only that there is a way that they are. Realism is the view that there is a way that things are that is logically independent of all human representations.

§ Three Arguments for Antirealism (and Searle's Rebuttal)

1. [The Argument from Conceptual Relativity for Antirealism]

1. [CR]: All representations of reality are made relative to some more or less arbitrarily selected set of concepts.
2. If [CR], then reality does not exist independently of our representation of it.
3. Therefore, external realism [ER] is false.



Q: How many objects are there?

- 1 = A
- 2 = B
- 3 = C
- 4 = A + B
- 5 = A + C
- 6 = B + C
- 7 = A + B + C

So how many objects are there really in the imagined world? Are there really three or seven? There is no absolute answer to these questions.

Putnam: The mind and the world jointly make up the mind and the world.

Goodman: Just as we make constellations by picking out and putting together certain stars rather than others, so we make stars by drawing certain boundaries rather than others.

Searle's reply:

___ The real world does not care how we describe it and it remains the same under the various different descriptions we give of it.

___ Different descriptions of facts, objects, etc., came and went, but the facts, objects, etc., remained unaffected.

___ The fact that different conceptual schemes allow for different descriptions of the same reality has no bearing whatever on the truth of realism.

___ *Initially it could be up to us to make up a word and use it the way we want, but once we have made the definitions and once we have applied the concepts relative to the system of definitions, whether or not something satisfies our definition is no longer arbitrary or relative.* E.g. 'cat', 'dog'

External realism allows for an infinite number of true descriptions of the same reality made relative to different conceptual schemes.

2. [The Verificationist Argument for Antirealism]

1. All we can really know, all we have access to in perception, are the contents of our own experiences.
2. The only epistemic basis we can have for claims about the external world are our perceptual experiences.
3. Therefore, the only reality we can meaningfully speak of is the reality of perceptual experience.

Berkeley: If matter did exist we could never know it, if it does not exist everything remains the same.

Searle's reply:

___ Premise 1 is false. We do perceive *objects*, not our perceptions or sense data of objects. From the fact that the epistemic basis for my knowledge is my present experiences, it does not follow that all I can know are my experiences.

Epistemology has an important but certainly not a central place in the enterprise of philosophy.

3. [The *Ding an Sich* (thing-in-itself) Argument for Antirealism]

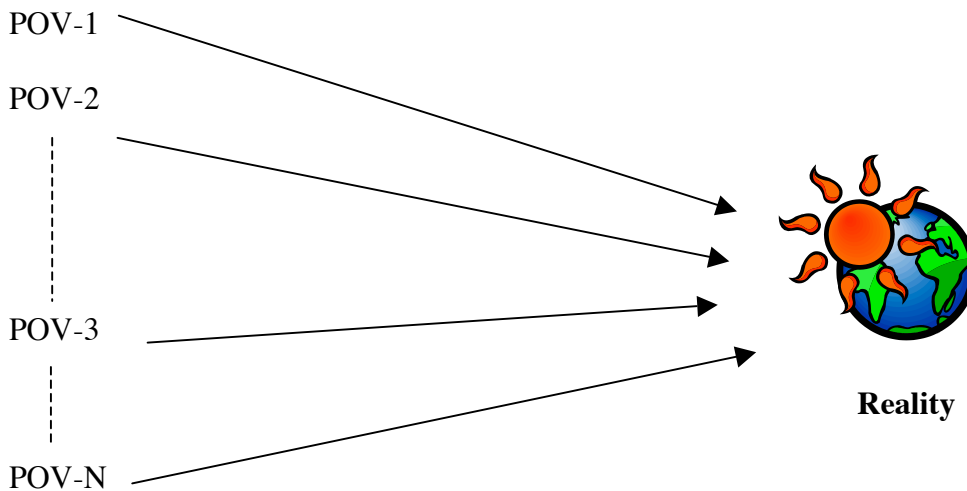
1. Any cognitive state occurs as part of a set of cognitive states and within a cognitive system.
2. It is impossible to get outside of all cognitive states and systems to survey the relationships between them and the reality that they are used to cognize.

3. Therefore, no cognition is ever of a reality that exists independently of cognition.

Searle's reply:

___ 3 does not follow from 1 and 2. It simply does not follow from the fact that all cognition is within a cognitive system that no cognition is ever directly of a reality that exists independently of all cognition.

It is only from a point of view that *we* represent reality, but ontologically reality does not have a point of view.



§ Searle: Proof of External Realism (or simply, Realism)

[External Realism] (Searle's position)

___ The view that there is a way that things are that is logically independent of all human representations.

___ Realism does not say *how* things are but only that there *is* a way that they are.

Q: Does this mean that we could possibly all be wrong about the reality because it is *so* independent of our representations?

Searle's Main Thesis:

___ **Realism is the Background condition of intelligibility. In order to engage in the debate on realism and antirealism, we are already taking realism for granted.**

(Suggestion: if there were no real world, *what* are we debating about?)

___ **Unless we take external realism for granted, we cannot understand utterances the way we normally do.**

Q: Is this a successful argument?

Searle's Target: Two basic forms of antirealism

- A. Phenomenal idealism: All reality consists in conscious states.**
- B. Social constructionism: Reality is socially constructed.**

A. [An argument against phenomenal idealism] (A "Transcendental" argument for external realism)

- 1. There is a normal way of understanding utterances, and that when performing speech acts in a public language, speaking typically attempt to achieve normal understanding.**
- 2. A condition of intelligibility for the normal understanding of these utterances is that there is a way that things are that is independent of human representations.**
- 3. Therefore, when we attempt to communicate to achieve normal understanding with these sorts of utterances we must presuppose external realism.**

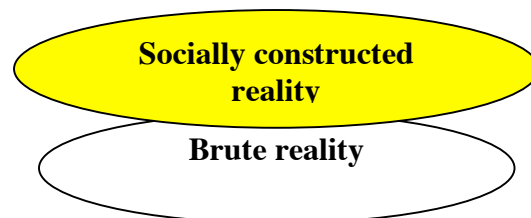
* Normal understanding requires sameness of understanding by both speaker and hearer, and sameness of understanding in these cases requires that utterances of the referring expressions purport to make reference to a *publicly accessible reality*, to a reality that is ontologically objective.

* A public language presupposes a public world in the sense that many (not all) utterances of a public language purport to make reference to ontologically objective phenomena and to ascribe features to them.

* The point is not epistemic. It is about conditions of intelligibility and not conditions of knowledge. The point is simply that when we understand an utterance of the sorts we have been considering, we understand it as presupposing a publicly accessible reality.

* Therefore, external realism is a Background presupposition on the normal understanding of a very large class of utterances.

B. [An argument against social constructionism]



Searle's main thesis:

- ___ A socially constructed realist presupposes a reality independent of *all* constructions, because there has to be something for the construction to be constructed out of.
- ___ The ontological subjectivity of the socially constructed reality requires an ontologically objective reality out of which it is constructed.

___ And the raw materials cannot in turn be socially constructed without presupposing some even rarer materials out of which they are constructed, until eventually we reach a bedrock of **brute physical phenomena** independent of all representations.

___ The ontological subjectivity of the socially constructed reality requires an ontologically objective reality out of which it is constructed.

[The argument]:

- 1. To construct money, property, and language, there have to be the raw materials of bits of metal, paper, land, sounds, and marks, for example.**
- 2. Therefore, a socially constructed reality presupposes a non-socially constructed reality.**
- 3. Therefore, there must be a non-socially constructed reality.**

§ Conclusion

- 1. I have not demonstrated that external realism is true. I have tried to show that it is presupposed by the use of very large sections of a public language.**
- 2. I have not refuted solipsism.**
- 3. Realism is part of the Background. We do not necessarily have a belief in realism.**
- 4. Once we start talking to our interlocutors we have already presupposed the existence of the real world, and we are embarrassed to try to prove what our attempts at proof already presuppose.**
- 5. The rejection of realism, the denial of ontological objectivity, is an essential component of the attacks on epistemic objectivity, rationality, truth, and intelligence in contemporary intellectual life.**

Note:

Searle criticizes Derrida severely. He says, "With Derrida, you can hardly misread him, because he's so obscure. Every time you say, "He says so and so," he always says, "You misunderstood me." But if you try to figure out the correct interpretation, then that's not so easy."