

**PHIL 470: Seminar: Metaphysics & Epistemology
Truth and Reality**

Handout (18)

William Alston: A Sensible Metaphysical Realism

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§ Metaphysical Realism

___ The view that large stretches of reality do not depend on our conceptual and theoretical choices for existing and being what they are. Or:

___ The view that vast stretches of reality are what they are absolutely, not in any way relative to certain conceptual-theoretical choices that have equally viable alternatives.

___ It is *sensible* because it recognizes that some stretches of reality do conform to the account anti-realism gives of the whole of reality.

1. It is not a departmental (local) realism.
2. It is a denial of the view that whatever there is, is constituted, at least in part, by our cognitive relations thereto, by the ways we conceptualize or construe it, by the language we use to talk about it or the theoretical scheme we use to think of it.
3. It is a denial of Putnam's semi-Kantian position – whatever there is, exists and is what it is only within a certain way of “describing” or “conceptualizing” what there is.
4. But it is not committed to the *contrary* of that position; it does not claim that all of reality is not dependent on our conceptual scheme.

§ Anti-Realism [AR]

___ Everything and every fact exists or obtains, and is what it is, at least in part, relative to certain conceptual-theoretical choices that have equally viable alternatives.

Q: In what sense should we understand “dependence”?

My explanation of *constitutive dependence* of things and facts on conceptual-theoretical choices is in terms of their relativity to [features of thought or discourse ... e.g., frame of reference for motion, distance, etc.].

To be sure, as a realist I do consider things that exist absolutely and facts that obtain absolutely, not relative to some optional mode of conception or theorizing, to be more *real*, to have a higher mode of reality than what exists or obtains only relative to one of several equally viable theoretical-conceptual schemes.

But that does not imply that what exists or obtains only relative to such schemes has no existence except for the existence of the scheme themselves.

Relative existence is still existence, even if it is not absolute existence.

§ The Contrast between Realism and Anti-realism

Anti-realism	Alston's Sensible Realism
The relativity of things and facts to conceptual-theoretical choices is a vulnerability to individual relativism.	The malleability of social statuses is not an extreme relativism – they are subject to change only by a general shift in beliefs and attitudes in the society, not just by individuals.
AR involves not just dependence, but a dependence that is possibly variable (plural).	Realism rejects the whole idea of plurality of world, versions, etc.

§ Alston's Defense of Realism

We should take realism to be the default position.

___ All of us, before we encounter clever antirealist arguments, unhesitatingly ascribe independent existence to what we take ourselves to encounter in the world. This is as deeply rooted as any conviction of common sense. It is to be given up *only if* there are strong reasons against it.

[Alston's First Argument against Anti-realism]:

1. According to anti-realism, there are a variety of equally viable conceptual schemes such that physical objects and facts have a certain character relative to one or another such scheme.
2. But those conceptual schemes themselves must also have a certain character relative to one or another more comprehensive scheme.
3. Those second level conceptual schemes would have a third level conceptual schemes which are equally viable.
4. Hence, there is an infinite regress if we grant anti-realism.
5. Therefore, anti-realism is an untenable thesis.

[Alston's Second Argument against Anti-realism]:

1. The different conceptual schemes must be construed as yielding *incompatible* construals of the entities dependent on them.
2. But they can be incompatible only if they are construals of the *same* entities.
3. This means that the view presupposes some common object of conceptualization.
4. This common object of conceptualization itself becomes the *absolute* entity which anti-realism rejects.
5. Therefore, anti-realism commits internal incoherence.

§ Natural Kinds

* Sosa's example of 'snowball' and 'snowdiscall' (an entity constituted by a piece of snow as matter and as form any shape between being round and being disc-shaped).

Alston:

- ❖ There are some kinds that are *thrust upon us* by the fact that the members of such kinds share numerous properties that are of importance for our attempts to understand the world.
- ❖ The grouping of kinds is based on a particular way of assigning an *essence* to fish and to other organisms regardless of our choices.
- ❖ They prove fruitful for taxonomy, for prediction, and for the construction of powerful explanatory theories and often provide drastic unification of diverse phenomena.

e.g. species of organisms, chemical elements, chemical compounds, fundamental physical structures, etc.

Q: What about artifacts?

Artifacts do have intrinsic, non-arbitrary principles of identity and persistence, though it comes not from nature but from art.

In both cases there are objective facts of the matter that provide a basis for placing an item in one kind rather than others to which it nominally belongs, and giving that kind a special ontological status.

§ Mereological Sums

* Putnam's example of "my nose and the lamp".

Alston:

On this approach there is a high order of infinity of such entities (any collection of individuals constitute a complex entity; any number of such complex entities constitute a higher order complex entity...)

Q: Should we count the marble of which *David* is composed as an individual in its own right, distinct from the statue so composed? Or should we refrain from doing so, taking the statue is the one and only individual in that location?

This strikes me as a matter about which we *have* a conceptual-theoretical choice. I cannot see any facts that we are constrained to recognize, whatever our preferences, that *dictate* one or another answer to this question.

§ Temporal Parts

Q: Should we consider enduring objects as having temporal parts as well as spatial parts?
 ___ Another example of different ways of conceptually organizing a domain of reality, which are such that there is no unique choice between them that is determined by the way things are apart from our choices or preferences.

e.g. a play, a baseball game, a person,...

We don't ordinarily think of enduring objects as having temporal parts, but is there anything in independent reality that constrains us to think that way, or do we have a choice in the matter?

Common-sense substance metaphysics Aristotle, Locke, Kant, ...	Process metaphysics Heraclitus, Hume (?), Whitehead, ...
The physical world consists of various kinds of relatively enduring substances that remain identical through change.	The fundamental units of reality are "actual occasions," momentary happenings each of which occupies some minimal duration.
It is the same bedside table which I see upon waking up each morning.	It is an illusion to suppose that there is an individual that retains its self-identity through the life span of what we deem an object. (There is no identity through time.)
Substances have no temporal parts.	There are no enduring objects; all things <i>are</i> temporal parts.

Alston:

A unique choice between metaphysical positions on this issue is not determined by the objective facts.

§ Scientific Worldview vs. Commonsense Worldview

Commonsense Worldview	Scientific Worldview
1. There are relatively enduring objects scattered around in space, each of which has certain properties that are essential for its self-identity, more or less definite boundaries, and so on.	1. The familiar chairs, tables, rocks, mountains, even dogs and cats have disappeared as distinct individuals. Instead we have elementary physical particles with a lot of empty space in between, or, we have energy quanta, etc.

The differences between different "things" that bulk so large in the structuring of the physical world in the commonsense view are not stressed in the scientific view.

The scientific picture is much more continuous than the commonsense view.

How to reconcile the two views

___ The first step would be to point out that differences in structuring between the perspectives is due to the fact that the one is dealing with complex totalities that are analyzed into their fine grained constituents in the other. The scientist need not deny the real (non-relative) existence of the dog when he reveals the microstructure of this complexly organized beast.

E.g. 'solid'; 'color'

___ Both become relativized to conditions of observation.

By a combination of reconstrual of property terms and a recognition of the difference between what appears to macroscopic and to microscopic observation, we can reconcile the commonsense and scientific pictures without taking each of them to be true only relative to one of a number of equally acceptable conceptual-theoretical schemes.

§ Conclusion

1. There are indefinitely many objects that exist and facts that obtain absolutely, not relative to some conceptual-theoretical scheme to which there are equally viable alternatives, and there are also indefinitely many objects that exist and facts that obtain only relative to a conceptual-theoretical scheme to which there are equally viable alternatives.
2. The absolute facts and existents are at last of a much greater variety and of much greater importance than those that enjoy the status only relative to a dispensable scheme.

→ **Sensible Realism**

Discussion questions:

1. Between Putnam and Alston, which one preserves more of (has the most affinity to) the commonsense realism?
2. Do you agree with Alston that *some* objects are indeed "absolute", "independent of our conceptual schemes"? What are your examples?