

Realism: Philosophical and Scientific

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Abstract

What kind of realism - if any - are we allowed to endorse? It is often stated that, in order to provide realism with a solid foundation, we need having recourse to a reality that is totally independent of thought (and let alone of language). This is taken to be the key thesis of realism. But many philosophers reply that, even when we imagine a world totally devoid of human presence, we must use human concepts. From this point of view, conceptualization does not seem to be an optional we can get rid of, but rather a built-in component of the nature of human beings.

Keywords: realism; anti-realism; philosophical realism; science; scientific realism; metaphysics.

Is it possible to clearly distinguish scientific realism from metaphysical realism in Hilary Putnam's sense of the word?¹ This is a thesis that some, nowadays, do not feel inclined to endorse. The following are the essential points emerging from the debate.

It is often stated that forming a "conception of reality" is something dependent upon language. If a subject is to have a view about reality, he must have access to an inter-subjective standard provided by a social-linguistic world.² It is only in learning a language that one gains the ability to respond conceptually to the world, because only then can a person have responses assessed by social norms.

It follows - some philosophers add – that our conception of reality depends upon factors that are not totally describable by science. That is to say, we should accept the fact that there can be no completely neural-computational³ or mechanical account of how we come to have a conception of the "real". This seems to jeopardize attempts to base realism on naturalism. As we know, many reject this kind of story, and insist instead on the possibility of a straight naturalistic approach.⁴ The debate on this issue is as open as ever.

Another important point to be made about the nature of realism as such is that, according to some authors, what basically differentiates it is the *epistemological* thesis

¹ See H. Putnam (1978), (1981) and (1990).

² This point has been stressed by Donald Davidson and Wilfrid Sellars in many of their works. See especially D. Davidson (1991) and W. Sellars (1997).

³ Such as the one endorsed in P.M. Churchland (1988) and (1990).

⁴ This is the case, for example, with Michael Devitt. See M. Devitt (1991a) and (1991b).

that the entities to which ontological commitment is made (by human beings) exist independently of any *knowledge* of them.⁵ But, then, it looks possible (some even say easy) to turn the metaphysical thesis related to the existence of such entities, into an epistemological one. If so, what is at stake in the realism/anti-realism debate, is neither a question of metaphysics nor of semantics, but of epistemology.⁶ Michael Dummett, instead, believes that the true nature of metaphysical disputes about realism is that “they are disputes about the kind of meaning to be attached to various types of sentences”.⁷ We all know that the “independence thesis” plays a key role in metaphysical realism.⁸ As Putnam remarks:

On this perspective, the world consists of some fixed totality of mind-independent objects. There is exactly one true and complete description of “the way the world is”. Truth involves some sort of correspondence relation between words or thought-signs and external things and sets of things. I shall call this perspective the *externalist* perspective, because its favorite point of view is a God’s Eye point of view.⁹

However, the use of the term “independence” implies “independence from *something*”, namely the mind. Thus, according to this trend of thought, it looks as if we cannot avoid reference to minds even resorting to the most basic tenet of metaphysical realism.

Putnam in fact writes:

What the metaphysical realist holds is that we can think and talk about things as they are, independently of our minds, and that we can do this by virtue of a “correspondence” relation between the terms in our language and some sorts of mind-independent entities.¹⁰

The third point to be raised is the following. It is usually held that a very important issue in the general problem of realism - and in the realism/anti-realism debate as well - is anti-realism about the physical world. But to what extent is this assertion true? Sometimes philosophers charged with being anti-realists or idealists turn out not to be *clearly* so if one reads their works carefully. Think of the alleged “linguistic idealism” in Wittgenstein’s thought: from several points of view, it is questionable to interpret Wittgenstein in this way.

The fact is that it seems wrong to equate “anti-realism” and “idealism”.¹¹ One thing is to claim that entities are made up of mental items, like classical idealists do; quite

⁵ A strong defense of this thesis can be found in R. Trigg (1989).

⁶ This is what Anthony Grayling argues in A.C. Grayling (1997). As is well known, the essentially semantic character of the realism/antirealism debate is instead stressed by Michael Dummett. See especially M. Dummett (1978) and (1991).

⁷ M. Dummett (1991), p. 14.

⁸ At least in the version of “metaphysical realism” made popular by Hilary Putnam.

⁹ H. Putnam (1981), p. 49.

¹⁰ H. Putnam (1983), p. 205.

¹¹ As Grayling underlines in A. Grayling (1997).

another is to say that our access to reality is always mediated by epistemic and mind-involving constraints.¹² What distinguishes such a view from a realist one is that, unlike the realist, the antirealist can make no sense of metaphysical claims without resorting to some kind of supporting epistemology. The important point, in sum, is that to reject metaphysical realism (at least in Putnam's sense of the term) is not the same as endorsing the view that there are "no mind-independent objects in the world".

The fourth point is that it may turn out to be difficult to be realists about both common sense objects and scientific entities.¹³ According to some authors they belong, in fact, to two different conceptual schemes (as Sellars, for example, claims¹⁴ and van Fraassen denies¹⁵). But it is true that any attempt at reconciling the two schemes, or at reducing them to one, gives rise to problems which admit of no easy solution. It has often been claimed, in fact, that the ontology of the two schemes seems to be incompatible under many respects, and that one scheme (usually common sense) is fated to be replaced by the other (science). A scientifically oriented philosopher might at this point be tempted to state the absolute superiority of the scientific worldview, but there are many doubts about the possibility of attributing to science such a primary role in assessing any kind of conceptual scheme.

Strictly connected to these remarks is the issue of the relations between metaphysics and epistemology. Many realists claim that metaphysical questions should be kept separate from epistemological issues. But can we *really* do this? And what does the expression "straightforwardly metaphysical" mean?

After all, any kind of ontology is characterized by the fact that the things of nature are seen by us in terms of a conceptual apparatus that is always - and substantially - influenced by mind-involving elements. It might be stated that ontology's task is to discover what kinds of entities *make up* the world, while epistemology's job is to find out what are the principles by which we get to *know* reality. It is obvious, however, that if our conceptual apparatus is at work even when we try to pave our way towards a not conceptualized reality, our access to it entails anyhow the involvement of the mind. Naturalization of the mind - and of its activities - is an obvious answer to this problem but, as I said at the beginning, the agreement on naturalization cannot be taken for granted.

We must thus face the question of "ontological pluralism", a basic tenet of contemporary neo pragmatism.¹⁶ Ontological pluralism is in turn connected to the existence of possible alternative ways of conceptualizing the world. It has, in fact,

¹² A clear example of the second position is contained in N. Rescher (1973).

¹³ Michael Devitt endorses this position without hesitation in his works.

¹⁴ See W. Sellars (1963) and (1968).

¹⁵ B. van Fraassen (1990).

¹⁶ See, for example, R. Rorty (1982) and (1999).

been noted that our world-view can never be absolute, and that intelligent creatures whose experiential modes are substantially different from our own are bound to conceptualize reality in a diverse way. If so, it would seem to follow that any objective ontology should be left in the background.

The seventh and last point is the following. We are confronted, eventually, by a crucial question: *what* kind of realism - if any - are we allowed to endorse? It is often stated that, in order to provide realism with a solid foundation, we need having recourse to a reality that is totally independent of thought (and let alone of language). This is taken to be the key thesis of realism. But many philosophers reply that, even when we imagine a world totally devoid of human presence, we must use human concepts. From this point of view, conceptualization does not seem to be an optional we can get rid of, but rather a built-in component of the nature of human beings.

However, such remarks do not necessarily lead towards some form of anti-realism. It is possible to state that, due to our cognitive position in the world and its limitations, the perspective provided by the conceptual framework we employ cannot be transcended. This amounts to saying that, although the world does not need our participation in order to be, our epistemic access to the world is given by such participation. Any description, thus, is bound to be determined by our operational perspectives.

Nothing prevents us from claiming that objective reality - a reality which does *not* depend on our cognitive capacities - is *there*. But, of course, a strong realist is not likely to be satisfied with such an answer, because this position corresponds, more or less, to what Micheal Devitt defines as "Weak, or Fig-Leaf, Realism", that is to say, a commitment to there being just *something* independent of us.¹⁷

In the last analysis, it may turn out that realism still is an arguable and defensible position. If one asks what difference it makes, the answer is that realism is likely to undermine the largely diffused anthropocentric stance which identifies reality with our (limited) knowledge of it. As I said, a strong realist cannot be satisfied with this, but the question to be asked is: are we in a position to say anything *more*? A commitment to there just being *something* independent of us is enough for establishing, at least, the basic tenet of metaphysical realism in Putnam's sense. On the other hand, to say *more* than this means to get involved in disputes which stem not only from the philosophical field, but also from science itself, quantum theory being a paradigmatic example.

¹⁷ M. Devitt (1991a).

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