

# THE QUESTION OF REALISM

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My aim in this paper is to help lay the conceptual and methodological foundations for the study of realism. I come to two main conclusions: first, that there is a primitive metaphysical concept of reality, one that cannot be understood in fundamentally different terms; and second, that questions of what is real are to be settled upon the basis of considerations of *ground*. The two conclusions are somewhat in tension with one another, for the lack of a definition of the concept of reality would appear to stand in the way of developing a sound methodology for determining its application; and one of my main concerns has been to show how the tension between the two might be resolved.

The paper is in two main parts. In the first, I point to the difficulties in making out a metaphysical conception of reality. I begin by distinguishing this conception from the ordinary conception of reality (§1) and then show how the two leading contenders for the metaphysical conception – the factual and the irreducible – both appear to resist formulation in other terms. This leads to the quietist challenge, that questions of realism are either meaningless or pointless (§4); and the second part of the paper (§§5-10) is largely devoted to showing how this challenge might be met. I begin by introducing the notion of ground (§5) and then show how it can be used as a basis for resolving questions both of factuality (§§6-7) and of irreducibility (§§8-9). I

conclude with some remarks on the essential unity of these two questions and of the means by which they are to be answered (§10).

## 1. REALITY

Among the most important issues in philosophy are those concerning the reality of this or that feature of the world. Are there numbers or other abstract objects? Is everything mental or everything physical? Are there moral facts? It is through attempting to resolve such questions that philosophy holds out the promise of presenting us with a world-view, a picture of how the world is and of our place within it.

However, as is so often true in philosophy, the difficulties begin with the formulation of the question rather than with the attempt at an answer. The antirealist about numbers maintains:

There are no numbers.

But most of us, in our non-philosophical moments, are inclined to think:

There are prime numbers between 2 and 6.

And yet the second of these claims implies that there are numbers, which is incompatible with the first of the claims. Similarly, the antirealist about morality maintains:

There are no moral facts.

But he also thinks:

Killing babies for fun is wrong.

And yet the second claim implies that it is a fact that killing babies for fun is wrong and, since this is a moral fact, its existence is incompatible with the first claim.

How, in the light of such possible conflicts, should the realist and antirealist claims be construed? Should we take the conflict between antirealism and received non-philosophical opinion to be a genuine

conflict or not? And if not, then how is the apparent conflict between them to be dispelled?

If we take the conflict to be genuine, we obtain what has been called an “eliminative” or “skeptical” conception of antirealism. The antirealist will be taken to dispute what we ordinarily accept, the realist to endorse it. Thus the antirealist about numbers will be taken to deny, or to doubt, that there are prime numbers between 2 and 6; and likewise, the moral antirealist will be taken to deny, or to doubt, that killing babies for fun is wrong.

Of course, the mere rejection of what we ordinarily accept is perverse and so presumably the interest of antirealism, on this conception, must derive from the assumption that philosophy is able to provide us with some special reasons for doubting what we ordinarily accept. Thus the antirealist may attempt to convince us that we have no good reason to believe in a realm of abstract objects with which we can have no causal contact or that, in moral matters, we can have no justification for going beyond the mere expression of approval or disapproval. Our world-view will therefore be the product of dealing with these doubts, either by laying them to rest or by retreating into skepticism.

Anti-realism, as so understood, has a long and illustrious history; and certainly its interest is not to be denied. However, in this age of post-Moorean modesty, many of us are inclined to doubt that philosophy is in possession of arguments that might genuinely serve to undermine what we ordinarily believe. It may perhaps be conceded that the arguments of the skeptic appear to be utterly compelling; but the Mooreans among us will hold that the very plausibility of our ordinary beliefs is reason enough for supposing that there *must* be something wrong in the skeptic’s arguments, even if we are unable to say what it is. In so far, then, as the pretensions of philosophy to provide a world-view rest upon its claim to be in possession of the epistemological high ground, those pretensions had better be given up.

Is there room for another form of antirealism – and another account of philosophy’s pretensions – that does not put them in conflict with received opinion? If there is, then it requires that we be able consistently to affirm that something is the case and yet deny that it is really the case.<sup>1</sup> It requires, in other words, a *metaphysical* conception of reality, one that enables us to distinguish, within the sphere of what

is the case, between what is really the case and what is only apparently the case.

But what might this metaphysical conception of reality be? Two main answers to this question have been proposed. According to the first, metaphysical reality is to be identified with what is “objective” or “factual”. The antirealist, on this conception, denies that there are any facts “out there” in virtue of which the propositions of a given domain might be true. The propositions of the domain are not in the “business” of stating such facts; they serve merely to indicate our engagement with the world without stating, in objective fashion, how the world is. As familiar examples of such a position, we have expressivism in ethics, according to which ethical judgements are mere expressions of attitude; formalism in mathematics, according to which mathematical statements are mere moves within a system of formal rules; and instrumentalism in science, according to which scientific theories are mere devices for the prediction and control of our environment. According to the second conception, metaphysical reality is to be identified with what is “irreducible” or “fundamental”. On this view, reality is constituted by certain irreducible or fundamental facts; and in denying reality to a given domain, the antirealist is claiming that its facts are all reducible to facts of some other sort. Thus the ethical naturalist will claim that every ethical fact is reducible to naturalistic facts, the logicist that every mathematical fact is reducible to facts of logic, and the phenomenalist that every fact about the external world is reducible to facts about our sense-data.

We might see the antifactualist and reductionist as indicating two different ways in which a proposition may fail to “correspond” to the facts. For it may fail even to point in the direction of the facts, as it were; or it may fail to indicate, at the most fundamental level, how the facts are. In the one case, the propositions of a given domain will not even *represent* the facts, while in the other, the propositions will not *perspicuously* represent the facts – there will be some divergence between how the facts are “in themselves” and how they are represented as being. If either of these metaphysical conceptions of reality is viable, then it would appear to provide a way of upholding a non-skeptical form of antirealism. For it will be perfectly compatible with affirming any given proposition to deny that it is genuinely factual or

genuinely fundamental. The expressivist, for example, may affirm that killing babies for fun is wrong and yet deny that, in so affirming, he is making a factual claim; and the logicist may affirm that  $5+7 = 12$  and yet deny that he is thereby stating something fundamental. Truth is one thing, metaphysical status another.

But the problem now is not to defend the antirealist position but to see how it could even be intelligible. Consider the antifactualist in ethics. Since he is assumed to be non-skeptical, he will presumably be willing to affirm that killing babies for fun is wrong. But then should he not be prepared to admit that he is thereby making a claim about how things are? And is not this a claim about how things are in the world – the only world that we know, that includes all that is the case and excludes whatever is not the case? So is he not then committed to the proposition's being factual?

Of course, the antirealist will insist that he has been misunderstood. He will maintain that the proposition that killing babies for fun is wrong does not make a claim about the real world as he conceives it and that, even though it may be correct to affirm that killing babies for fun is wrong, there still is no fact "out there" in the real world to which it is answerable. But the difficulty then is in understanding the intended contrast between his world – the real world "out there" – and the world of common mundane fact. For what room is there, in our ordinary conception of reality, for any further distinction between what is genuinely a fact and merely the semblance of a fact?

Similarly, the reductionist in ethics will claim that ethical facts are reducible to facts of another sort and, on this ground, deny that they are real. Now it may be conceded that there is a sense in which certain facts are more fundamental than others; they may serve to explain the other facts or perhaps, in some other way, be constitutive of them. But how does this provide a ground for denying reality to the other facts? Indeed, that they had an explanation or constitution in terms of the real facts would appear to indicate that they themselves were real.

What then is this conception of reduction for which the reducible will not be real?<sup>2</sup> Just as there was a difficulty in understanding a metaphysical conception of the facts, one that might serve to sustain a metaphysical form of antirealism, so there is a difficulty in understanding a metaphysical conception of reduction. In either case, we



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