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(Anti-)Realisms: The Metaphysical Issue

Preface

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Preface

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The fundamental question of Metaphysics is “What is reality?” And the most fundamental question about this fundamental question is “Can we answer this question?”

Full realists think we can. They are convinced that the world is independent of our minds and that we can know it as it is independently of us. Half realists think that the world is independent of us (ontological realism), but that we cannot know it as it is independently of our minds (epistemological anti-realism). Full anti-realists think that both the world and our knowledge of it depend on our minds, thoughts, languages, categories, conceptual schemes, ways of worldmaking, intellectual habits, social practices, political organization, gender, sexual preferences, and so on. For them, “reality” is a deeply relative word; and reality is something we make, not something we find. It is a construct, not a ready-made. The realism/anti-realism debate is clearly meta-metaphysical. It is a way to ask whether metaphysics is merely possible, and if the anti-realist stance is a kind of metaphysics or a way to reject metaphysics.

The realism/anti-realism debate takes many forms in *metaphysics*, where it gets its full generality, in *philosophy of science*, where it opposes scientific realists and instrumentalists, in *philosophy of perception*, where one can distinguish perceptual realism from many forms of representationalism, in *ethics*, where the question at stake is to know if there

are moral facts, in *aesthetics*, when one wonders whether aesthetics properties are real and projected, and so on. Some philosophers think that this debate takes too many forms to be completely serious and honest. One can be realist in one domain and not in another. Even a realist in aesthetics, for example, is not obliged to accept the thesis that Mrs Bovary or any fictional character is real. Many scientific realists would say that non-natural properties, such as moral properties if they are such, are not real, and hence would also be moral non-realists.

The question of modality has often been at the core of the realism/anti-realism debate. We speak about what is possible or not, what is necessary or not, what ought to be the case or ought not to be the case, and so on. What do we speak about by using such formulas? *Realia* or simply what we think and speak about, something whose existence is only mental and/or linguistic? The question of truth is also very sensitive to the realism/anti-realism debate. Proposed in 1742, Goldbach's conjecture claims that every even integer greater than two is the sum of two primes. When we write this preface, it has not been proven in full generality. Realists in mathematics think that Goldbach's conjecture is either determinately true or determinately false. Perhaps we will never discover if it is true or false, but for sure it is one or the other. Anti-realists think that we constructed numbers. Goldbach's conjecture could be neither determinately true nor determinately false. Our construction of numbers does not perhaps contain the solution of such a conjecture.

In the glorious heyday of Logical Positivism, it was possible to describe Analytical philosophy as anti-metaphysical. Since, through the work of Russell, Quine, Strawson, Chisholm, Dummett, Armstrong, D. Lewis, van Inwagen, and others, metaphysics regains slowly but surely its central position in analytic philosophy. This could be the meaning of the current importance of the realism/anti-realism debate. Metaphysics is back again. It is back not only because some philosophers are realists – a lot are not. It is back because philosophers think that it makes sense to enter this debate, and not simply to claim that realism is a philosophical illusion, logocentrism, or the result of some social constraint. They do not think that metaphysics is dead but they like to discuss the question if we can understand the notion “the reality as it is in itself”, and eventually know something about it.

The following papers examine realism pro and contra. They have been presented, under this form or another, at the *(Anti-)Realisms* Conference held at the University of Nancy 2 at the end of June and beginning of July 2006. This conference was organized by our research group “Archives Henri Poincaré”. This is the opportunity to remark that the

realism/anti-realism debate is clearly in the heritage of Poincaré. Indeed, even though Poincaré defended his famous conventionalist doctrine he has always been worried by the threat of loosing contact with the conception of reality as something independent from our mind.

The volume is divided into four parts. In the first part, *The Metaphysical issue*, three papers are gathered which are all concerned with general issues of realism: realism against conceptualism, moderate against strong realism about properties, realism about axiological properties.

In his paper “Essentialism, Metaphysical Realism, and the Errors of Conceptualism”, E. Jonathan Lowe defends strong realism about essences, *i.e.*, the idea that entities have both general and individual essences and that these are knowable. He claims that such a position is a consequence of any consistent realism, and that conceptualism about essences is an incoherent doctrine. Moreover, Lowe wants to account for the cognitive role of concepts within his strong essentialism.

Sandrine Darsel’s paper “A Realistic and Non Reductionnist Strategy with respect to Properties” supports the project of a *fostering ontology* involving non-physical properties such as aesthetic ones, on a basis independent of their causal account. The author puts forward a meta-ontological argumentation in order to shift our existential criteria for properties: according to her, we should retain an explicative criterion and get rid of the more usual causal one.

Darek Łukasiewicz’s contribution, entitled “Metaphysics of Axiological Realism”, is a presentation of the Czeżowski’s account of values and axiological sentences. According to the great member of the Lvov-Warsaw School, values are not properties but should nevertheless be conceived of as real. Values are to be thought of as *modi essendi*, which are transcendental concepts. Such a kind of realism about values thus avoids the reduction of axiological sentences to naturalistic sentences.

The second part of the volume is devoted to *Modal (Anti)Realism*, and more specifically to the philosophical disputes about the ontological status of possible objects.

Frédéric Nef, in his paper “Which Variety of Realism? Some Asseverations on the Dependence of Abstracta upon Concreta”, sketches a discussion about metaphysical and ontological nihilisms. The first one holds that there could be no concrete objects, hence that there could be at most abstract objects, while according the second one there could be

nothing at all. Lowe argued that in order to avoid nihilism one should consider that abstracta depend on concreta. Nef thinks it is untrue, and claims that realism is better preserved by a moderate form of Platonism compatible with modal realism.

Scott Shalkowski's "Blackburn's Rejection of Modals" is a critical discussion of Simon Blackburn's argument against truth-conditional accounts of modalities. The author convincingly argues that one could escape the critics of circularity grounding her ontology on basic primitive modal facts.

The third part, *Truths*, is mainly concerned with what is known as *semantic* or *alethic realism*, i.e. the idea that the truth-value of sentences or thoughts is built up independently from our recognition. Alternatively the antirealistic view holds that there are no truth-conditions independent of our grasping.

In his paper "Three Forms of Pluralism about Truth", Michael P. Lynch shows the advantages and limitations of three *pluralistic* accounts of truth: simple alethic pluralism, and two kinds of functionalism, a reductive one grounded on basic properties (realizers), and a non-reductive one based on truth-roles. Michael P. Lynch argues that none of these conceptions is completely satisfactory. In his conclusion, he draws the perspective of a new account based on immanency.

Tommaso Piazza's paper, "Truth and Warranted Assertibility", examines Alston's critique of truth as warranted assertibility, one of the main accounts about truth in an anti-realist stance. The paper provides an up-to-date perspective on the realism/anti-realism debate, especially concerning its alethic aspects.

In "Mind-Dependence, Irrealism and Superassertibility" Daniel Laurier gives a systematic exploration of the relationship between fact-realism and Dummett-like accounts of judgements. He proposes to enlarge the independence-claims of realism about facts, usually restricted to knowability, to an independence from other attitudes such as conceivability. The conclusion is, against Wright, that truth being dependent upon knowability does not entail that truth should consist in superassertibility.

In the fourth and last part of the volume, *Radical Constructivism?*, two papers present philosophical disputes about strong anti-realism.

In the paper "Was George Orwell a Metaphysical Realist?", Peter van Inwagen considers the debate between Winson and O'Brien in Orwell's 1984 as a debate between a realist and an anti-realist, hence Orwell's

position as a standing up for realism about truth. Van Inwagen rejects Conant's criticisms against this interpretation as a case of nonsense in philosophy. Furthermore, the author draws a general defense of an alethic realistic doctrine.

Tom Burke's paper, "(Anti)Realist Implications of Pragmatist Dual-Process Active-Externalist Theory of Experience", proposes a pragmatic-cum-realist account of knowledge. The author reaches a position labeled as *ecological realism*, which avoids radical constructivism albeit including constructivist components. The paper thus gives new insights on the pragmatic stance about reality.

To conclude, we wish to thank the authors for their contributions to this collection which, we hope, should offer a nice overview of contemporary research about the realism/anti-realism debate in analytic metaphysics. We also thank Prosper Doh for his patient work and help to manage the technical editorial process of the whole volume.