

1 Introduction

The term ‘realism’ has perhaps inspired more philosophical literature and discussion than any other within the field – the philosophical term that has launched a thousand theories and counter-theories. Almost all, if not actually all, branches of philosophy have produced literature that discusses some view labelled ‘realism’. There are debates about semantic realism, moral realism, scientific realism, property realism, realism about universals, and a whole host more.

In each of these cases, realism concerns initially the *existence* of a certain sort of entity (or entities). A moral realist thinks that there are moral properties (or facts). A property realist thinks that there are properties. However, this is insufficient as a characterisation of realism. Most think that it is not enough to think that such entities exist to be a realist about them. We also need to hold that the entities are in some sense independent: that the entities in question need to have features or nature that is distinct from how we happen to think or talk about those entities. An aesthetic realist, for example, does not simply think that beauty exists, but additionally thinks that facts about whether something is beautiful exist independently of how we happen to think or talk. The relevant properties or facts are ‘*mind-independent*’.

This Element, though, is not about any of those forms of realism, nor is it about realism in general. It is about ‘metaphysical realism’. So what is metaphysical realism? Metaphysical realism concerns the entities posited by metaphysics. Given that metaphysics is typically taken by its practitioners at least to be about ‘everything’, ‘reality’, or ‘the world’, metaphysical realism is, on the first pass, the view that the world exists and is mind-independent. Or, in slightly less grandiose terms, that there are *things* – entities of some sort – that exist and are the way that they are independent of how we happen to talk or think about them. Where other forms of realism argue in favour of the existence and independence of one sort of entity – for example, moral realism holds that moral properties or facts exist – metaphysical realism is more general in scope. Metaphysical realists might (and do) disagree about *what* exists but agree that some *thing* does and that those existents, whatever they are, are ‘mind-independent’.

As we will see throughout this Element, this first pass take on metaphysical realism is too crude and needs significant fine-tuning. I will attempt to make it more precise in Section 2. I will distinguish various forms of realism and outline some core commitments of metaphysical realism. Most important are the ‘existence’, ‘independence’, and ‘accessibility’ commitments. I will leave the details for later, but in slogan form, these, in turn, commit the realist to the

existence of some entity, the mind-independence of that entity (or the mind-independence of some of its properties), and our ability to know about (or access) such mind-independent entities.

Metaphysical realism, at this point, might sound like a common-sense position. Of course, there are mind-independent entities, some readers will be thinking. The existence of mind-independent entities might feel like an obvious truth, derivable just from your own experience of the world and the things within it. To deny this might seem strange or even contradictory. However, although metaphysical realism is often described (by realists) as the ‘default view’, there have been too many objections and anti-realist views developed to be able to mention them all in an Element like this.

Furthermore, the objections have changed over time. Someone that rejects metaphysical realism today will have different reasons and alternative views than someone rejecting metaphysical realism a few hundred years ago. My aim for this Element is to be a guide to how metaphysical realism is understood *now*, but understanding what it means to be a metaphysical realist *now* requires some understanding of how the notion of metaphysical realism has changed over time, often due to the need to respond to certain anti-realist arguments or positions.

Given this, in Section 3, I will focus on outlining some of the most prominent and influential rejections of metaphysical realism in (roughly) chronological order. By looking at the objections to metaphysical realism in this way, we will be able to see how with each new objection, or form of anti-realism, the realist has taken on additional commitments. Metaphysical realism thus begins as the default view. And it is only as objections are raised that the realist’s commitments are made explicit. My hope is that examining the alternatives to metaphysical realism in this way will help illuminate the nature of metaphysical realism itself

In Section 4, I will discuss the prospects for defending metaphysical realism more broadly. This is (by some distance) the shortest section of the Element. This is not because I think that there are no good reasons to be a metaphysical realist. Indeed, I am myself a metaphysical realist (though I tend to think that there is more right about some anti-realist arguments than many other metaphysical realists). Rather, the shortness of this section merely reflects that metaphysical realists somewhat rarely directly argue *for* metaphysical realism, but instead argue *against* anti-realism. This, combined with the common defence of metaphysical realism as the default view (see Section 2.5), has a consequence that the realism debate can often feel like a stalemate. In Section 4, I will allow myself some (hopefully not too wild) speculations about the future of the realism debate and some speculation about how we might in the future avoid this stalemate.

What it means to be a metaphysical realist will certainly change in the future. The ever-changing nature of the realism/anti-realism debate is, in my view, part of the reason why it has continued to be important to generations of philosophers. The sections and subsections of this Element are intended to be (relatively) readable in isolation. Thus, if the reader's interest is in one aspect of metaphysical realism, or the rejection of one particularly core commitment of realism, my hope is the relevant sections can be read independently of each other without too much loss of understanding, and help those new to the debate find their feet within it.

Before we begin, there are some important caveats on the intended scope of this Element. As will hopefully become clear, the aim of this Element will not be to provide the single correct account of what it means to be a metaphysical realist or anti-realist. I do not conceive of this Element as being an argument for (or against) a particular definition. Part of the reason for this is that I am somewhat sceptical that there is a correct single definition of metaphysical realism that can be consistently applied throughout the history of philosophy. For example, within the Western philosophical tradition, before around the middle of the twentieth century, the label 'anti-realist' was not used much with respect to questions about metaphysical realism. Metaphysical realism was instead primarily contrasted with idealism. Even in the early twentieth century, the focus was still on the realist–idealist debate. Carnap, one of the major influences on contemporary metaphysical realism–anti-realism debates, for example, aims to dissolve the disagreement between realism and idealism (see Carnap 1963: 17–18). This is not to say that there is no correct account of metaphysical realism. Perhaps there is, but I am not sure myself what it is, and I do not think that we have got to it yet.

Nor will I go into too much detail about the possible consequences of being a metaphysical realist, anti-realist, or idealist. Being able to label an opposing view as 'realist' (or 'anti-realist') has been taken to have various consequences, and what those consequences are has also shifted throughout history. For example (and with thanks to David Edmunds' superb historical account of the Vienna Circle), the realist–idealist debate had significant political significance in the early twentieth century, with the realism debate being invoked by Lenin as part of his power struggles with his rivals. (For those interested, Lenin was on the side of 'realism' (see Marx, Engels, and Lenin 1972), but many Bolsheviks viewed the realist commitment to 'absolute truth' and to the reality of the external world as being 'bourgeois and old-fashioned' (Edmunds 2020: 10).) I will not comment in this Element on these sorts of consequences of being a metaphysical realist or anti-realist. It is certainly an interesting (if understudied) topic. But, due to space limitations, I will keep

the discussion in this Element narrowly constrained to certain core metaphysical and ontological issues.

Lastly, it is worth noting that I am not primarily a historian of philosophy, and my training is almost entirely within the Western tradition. My apologies, then, to historians of philosophy and experts in other philosophical traditions for not commenting on many important figures and traditions. By leaving any views or figures out, or only giving them a passing mention, I am not intending to in any way downplay their significance or importance. Rather, because of the short length, wide scope, and introductory aims of this Element, it is not possible to provide a full reconstruction of all the relevant philosophers and philosophies that could be covered in work with a narrower focus. I will do my best to point interested readers to more in-depth discussions, but the topics covered in this Element should not be viewed as being (or trying to be) comprehensive.

2 What Is Metaphysical Realism?

2.1 Distinguishing Realism

Let us begin by distinguishing metaphysical realism from other forms of realism. At its most general, realism concerns the *existence* and *independence* of entities (where I use the term ‘entities’ as a catch-all general term for any *thing*, be it an object, property, fact, event, substance, process, etc.). For example, Alexander Miller defines *generic* realism as the view that ‘[Entities] a, b, and c and so on exist, and the fact that they exist and have properties such as F-ness, G-ness, and H-ness is (apart from mundane empirical dependencies of the sort sometimes encountered in everyday life) independent of anyone’s beliefs, linguistic practices, conceptual schemes, and so on’ (Miller 2019).

This ‘generic realism’ is intended to provide an account that can then be applied to various more specific, or local, cases. Generic realism, as defined by Miller at least, is more like a template for other forms of realism. Using this template, we can define some local realism about some entity, *x*, as the view that holds that *x* exists, and that *x* exists independently of how we happen to think or talk about *x*. A local anti-realist about *x* is then taken to be a denial of either (or both) the existence of *x*, or the independence of the properties possessed by *x* from our beliefs, linguistic practices, conceptual schemes, and so on.

Local realism (or anti-realism) is limited in that it is a claim about those specific entities only: if I accept the existence of the Loch Ness Monster, I could be said to be a realist about the Loch Ness Monster as I believe that there is some *x* such that *x* is the Loch Ness Monster. This is, by itself, only a form of *local*

realism as accepting the existence of Nessie does not commit me to the existence or non-existence of other entities. It says nothing about the existence of tables, moral facts, properties, unobservable entities, propositions, or any other entities, being only a commitment to realism about large loch-dwelling prehistoric creatures. Given the limited scope of local realism and anti-realism, most people are local anti-realists about some entity or entities. Few, if anybody, thinks that *everything* exists and is mind-independent (though some do hold that *nothing* exists or is mind-independent; see Sections 3.1 and 3.2).

Very often, when philosophers use the term ‘realism’, this is a shorthand for some form of local realism, with (one of) the major differences between the forms of local realism being what sort of entities it is that they are concerned with. Moral realism is a form of local realism committed to the existence of moral properties (or facts); scientific realism is a form of local realism committed to the existence of non-observable entities; aesthetic realism is a form of local realism committed to the existence of (objective) aesthetic properties; realism about properties is a form of local realism committed to the existence of (universal) properties; and so on for various other realisms that we might consider.

Metaphysical realism differs from forms of local realism in its scope. Whereas local realisms concern whether some particular entity or kind of entity exist, metaphysical realism is about whether *any* entity (or entities) exist. Metaphysical realism is realism as applied to ‘reality’ or ‘the world’. Metaphysical realism is therefore often described as being ‘global’. Thus, if we use the generic realism template, but apply it to metaphysical realism, we get the result that metaphysical realism is the view that the world exists, and that the world exists independently of how we happen to think or talk about the world.

This is fine as a way of understanding metaphysical realism to begin with, but we need to clarify what we mean by ‘the world’. There is a reading ‘the world’ that would suggest that the metaphysical realist is committed to the existence (and independence) of every *thing*. That is, for every a, b, c, \dots, n , the metaphysical realist is committed to the existence and independence of a, b, c, \dots, n .

This, though, would not be accurate. The metaphysical realist need not be a realist with respect to all entities covered by the multitude of local realisms. To be a metaphysical realist does not mean that we necessarily are committed to scientific realism, moral realism, aesthetic realism, and so on. And being a local anti-realist about the Loch Ness Monster would not necessarily mean that we are committed to metaphysical anti-realism. Rather, metaphysical realism is general or global in the sense that the metaphysical realist thinks (minimally, pending later extensions) that at least one entity exists and it is independent of us. A commitment to metaphysical realism does not commit us to the existence

of any particular entity or sort of entity – only to there being *some* (suitably mind-independent) entity.

This point should be stressed as the term ‘metaphysical realism’ has been used for various purposes throughout history, and one not uncommon use is for the term to refer to realist views about this or that particular sort or kind of entity. For example, Bigelow writes that ‘the doctrine that there are universals (other than sets) is often called “metaphysical realism” or “realism about universals”’ (Bigelow 2010: 472). So understood, metaphysical realism is specifically a position about the existence and mind-independence of universal properties (as opposed to ‘nominalists’ that reject the existence of such entities). This use of ‘metaphysical realism’ is not uncommon, but could cause confusion here.

Metaphysical realism, as I wish to understand it here, is a broader claim than a form of realism concerned with the existence (and mind-independence) of one particular sort of entity. It is realism as applied to the world. Accepting realism about universal properties therefore entails accepting metaphysical realism as it is to be understood here. If we accept that universal properties exist, then we are accepting that there is at least one entity that exists and is mind-independent. But the converse does not hold. We can be metaphysical realists, as I intend the term, without being realists about universal properties. So long as the nominalist about properties thinks that (at least some) of the particular properties they posit are mind-independent, they too will be metaphysical realists, even though they reject the existence of *universal* properties.

Putting this another way, as it will be discussed here, metaphysical realism is a view that does not concern itself with *what* exists. Rather, it is a view about *whether* some thing exists, and whether those things that exist are mind-independent. One metaphysical realist could hold that realism contains only one (or one sort of) mind-independent entity; another could hold that there are multiple entities (or multiple sorts of entities). So long as both hold that those entities exist and are mind-independent, both would be forms of metaphysical realism for our purposes here. This is not to deny that there are interesting debates to be had concerning the existence and mind-independence of universal properties (and properties more broadly). It is only to say that that debate is not the focus here. Other books in this Elements series will cover those topics and the relevant more specific forms of realism and anti-realism.

This, hopefully, provides a start towards a clearer sense what it means to be a metaphysical realist, but terms like ‘existence’ and ‘mind-independence’, need much further analysis, and we need to consider various other additional commitments that metaphysical realists typically accept. It is to these that I now turn. From now on though, we can at least simplify things a little bit: having

distinguished metaphysical realism from other forms of realism, from now on, unless otherwise specified, we can drop the term ‘metaphysical’ and simply talk of ‘realism’.

2.2 Two Core Commitments of Metaphysical Realism

2.2.1 Existence

The first and seemingly most straight forward of the commitments is to the existence of (at least one) entity. As already noted, *what* exists is not strictly important for the sort of realism under discussion here. All that the realist is committed to is that there is some *thing*. The existent might be any sort or kind of entity, although, as we will see, some additional restrictions do emerge when the existence commitment is combined with the independence commitment.

It is important to note that by accepting existence, the realist is *not* taking any position on what it is for something to exist. That is, realists can agree that something exists but disagree about what criterion an entity must fulfil to exist. Realists might therefore understand ontological commitment in any of the ways put forward in the literature on that topic (see Parent 2020), just so long as they think that there is some entity that does fulfil that requirement.

Existence is clearly a very minimal commitment. If this commitment exhausted what it is to be a realist, the requirements for realism would, for most, be easily satisfied, and it would leave very few options available to oppose realism (though there would be some; see Section 3.1). Given this, while it is a necessary condition for a view to be classified as realist, it is not viewed as a sufficient condition.

2.2.2 (Mind-)Independence

Devitt, recognising the limitations in the existence criterion as the sole commitment of realism, characterises realism as being the combination of two claims. The first is the above existence claim – simply that to be a realist is to be committed to the existence of some *thing* or *things*. On the second, Devitt writes: ‘words that frequently occur in attempts to capture the second are “independent”, “external” and “objective”. The entities must be independent of the mental; they must be external to the mind; they must exist objectively in that they exist whatever anyone’s opinions’ (Devitt 1983: 292). Devitt is therefore a realist because he thinks that ‘common sense, and scientific, physical entities objectively exist independent of the mental’ (Devitt 1983: 292). To be a realist, for Devitt, is to accept ‘something so apparently humdrum as the independent existence of the familiar world’ (Devitt 1991: vii).

What this often amounts to is a claim that realism requires us to think that there are *mind-independent* entities such that that mind-independence is part of their nature. It is not enough to think that there exists some *thing* to be realist. Rather, to be a realist, there must exist some entity, *and* the nature of that entity – the way that it is – is independent of how we happen to think, talk, or perceive it. Thus, the existence of such entities, and the ways that those entities are, are objective or independent of us. This is (partly) why the debate around realism is often phrased in terms of properties, as properties are taken to determine the nature or way that some entity is. Put in these terms, the realist thinks that there are some objects that have (at least some of) their properties mind-independently. The anti-realist will deny this.

However, although this characterisation might seem innocuous at first, the difficulty comes in clarifying what exactly we mean by ‘independent’, ‘mind-independent’, ‘external’, or ‘objective’. Each of these could be cashed out in various ways and in ways that do (or do not) make them synonyms. Potentially adding to the confusion, several realists have employed various metaphorical notions to try to help illuminate this matter, perhaps most famously that of the ‘God’s-Eye view on the world’. To reject realism is to reject that there is some “‘God’s-Eye” point of view, from which we could compare our theories and belief about the world to the world itself, as it is independently of our conceptual systems’ (Haukioja 2020: 67). These metaphors, though, are unlikely to be satisfying to those predisposed to be suspicious of realism.

Unsurprisingly, then, there has been a significant amount of literature that attempts to capture more precisely what we might mean by ‘(mind)-independence’, ‘external’, and ‘objective’, and whether these terms are synonyms after all. The rest of this section aims to clarify some of the disagreements over these notions and work towards some clearer sense of what the realist is committed to when they accept that there are ‘mind-independent’ entities.

A first complication is that there are ways of understanding mind-independence such that many objects that we interact with become mind-dependent entities. The computer that I am working at, for example, might be thought to be a mind-dependent object, as were it not for the actions of minds that design and create computers, my computer would not exist. The same goes for the mug on my desk, the desk itself, and even the tea that I am drinking. After all, we might think that without the mental states of various people, the tea I am drinking would not have been grown, processed, and available for me to buy in the supermarket.

And yet, there is a clear sense in which such mind-dependence claims are ‘mundane’ (Jenkins 2005: 199). Accepting that the artefacts around us are in

some sense mind-dependent does not force us to reject realism immediately. What the realist means by mind-independence is that despite the role that minds play in the creation of various entities, there is still something about those entities – some aspect of their nature – that is mind-independent. Even though minds may have been involved in the creation of some entity, now that it does exist, both some aspect of that entity's nature and its continued existence are not dependent on my mind (or indeed any mind even those with far greater cognitive power than we have as humans). What this means is that whatever entities a realist posits, the realist need not think that *every* entity is mind-independent, only that some are. Nor that every aspect (or property) of the entity is mind-independent. My computer might be mind-dependent in the way outlined above, but a realist might hold that it is mind-independent as some of its properties (its shape and weight, for example) are had by the computer irrespective of how I talk, think, or perceive the computer.

This does introduce the question of *which* entities, or which properties of entities, are mind-independent and how might we be able to distinguish between those that are mind-dependent and those that are mind-independent. Perhaps my computer is entirely mind-dependent. Perhaps the only mind-independent entities will be those posited by physics. Perhaps we can invoke Locke's famous distinction between primary and secondary qualities and hold that only primary qualities of an object are mind-independent. There might be various ways that we try to distinguish between those things that exist mind-independently and those exist mind-dependently. This is something we will return to in Section 2.3. But, for now, to satisfy the independence commitment, it would be enough simply for some entity to be mind-independent, irrespective of whether we could come to *know* that entity is mind-independent.

Another way to make these somewhat vague comments more precise can be found in Page (2006). Page distinguishes between ontological, causal, structural, and individuating independence. Taking the first three together, an entity is ontologically independent if would continue to exist if there were no minds, causally independent if the entity were not brought into existence by the actions of a mind, and structurally independent if the entity has its structure independent of how we happen to talk or think about it. These three notions of independence might be endorsed by a realist, and some forms of anti-realism might deny one (or more) of these independence claims. Certain sorts of idealism, for example, might deny the ontological independence of entities; Goodman's worldmaking (under certain interpretations) would deny the structural independence of entities. However, as we will see in Section 3.3, there are anti-realists who accept ontological, causal, and structural independence.

It is individuating independence that is often taken to be most important for realism. The world is individually independent of us if ‘it is divided up into individual things and kinds of things that are circumscribed by boundaries that are totally independent of where we draw the lines’ (Page 2006: 327). This would mean that to be a realist is to believe that the world comes already divided up – that there are, to use another common metaphor, pre-existing, or objective ‘joints’ in nature that we, through our methods of investigation, hope or try to discover. Putnam echoes this idea when he states that one part of what it is to be a realist is to accept the view that ‘the world divides itself up into objects and properties’ (1992b: 123) and so does Sider (2011) who holds that an anti-realist is someone that holds that the world is not made of things, rather it is made of stuff, with the distinctions that we draw between entities being by fiat.

Of course, this relies on a certain conception of ‘stuff’ and one that not everyone accepts. Markosian (2015), for example, defends positing stuff in our ontology and holds that stuff makes up things. On Markosian’s understanding of ‘stuff’, stuff can have properties that exist mind-independently. Others understand a stuff-ontology as a view that denies the existence of distinct individual objects. The world does not contain tables, chairs, and rocks under this view. Rather, the entities we typically think of as individual things are in fact patterns in the singular ‘stuff’ that really exists. What we think of as things might be mere patterns or modifications of this stuff, or bulges in space-time. Such views are straightforwardly realist, even if they are first-order realist views that posit fewer entities than other first-order realist views.

The sort of anti-realist stuff-ontology that Putnam and Sider have in mind, though, is different to this. The sort of view they have in mind does not posit stuff as composing things or posit stuff that might contain within it variations or patterns. They have in mind views that only posit undifferentiated stuff. Such views hold that there is a mind-independent world – it is not a form of idealism – but hold that the world is ‘without kinds or order or motion or rest or pattern’ (Goodman 1978: 20) or that the world is an amorphous lump (Dummett 1981; cf. Eklund 2008). Thus, a stuff-world is one that has no real or objective structure; there are no metaphysical joints or distinctions in reality itself. It is our language, thought, or concepts that carve up the otherwise undifferentiated world. Language, thought, or concepts are ‘cookie cutters’ that cut up and divide the amorphous lump reality. Properties, objects, things, and so on do not, therefore, exist mind-independently, not even as our way of talking about patterns or variations in the underlying ‘stuff’. All distinctions that we make between entities (of any sort or kind) are solely based on our psychological, conceptual, or cultural biases, rather than being reflective of the world itself, and