

## 2<sup>nd</sup> Sem Philosophy General

### Realism:

The question of the nature and plausibility of realism arises with respect to a large number of subject matters, including ethics, aesthetics, causation, modality, science, mathematics, semantics, and the everyday world of macroscopic material objects and their properties. Although it would be possible to accept (or reject) realism across the board, it is more common for philosophers to be selectively realist or non-realist about various topics: thus it would be perfectly possible to be a realist about the everyday world of macroscopic objects and their properties, but a non-realist about aesthetic and moral value. In addition, it is misleading to think that there is a straightforward and clear-cut choice between being a realist and a non-realist about a particular subject matter. Rather, one can be more-or-less realist about a particular subject matter. Also, there are many different forms that realism and non-realism can take.

The question of the nature and plausibility of realism is so controversial that no brief account of it will satisfy all those with a stake in the debates between realists and non-realists. This article offers a broad brush characterization of realism, and then fills out some of the detail by looking at a few canonical examples of opposition to realism. The discussion of forms of opposition to realism is far from exhaustive and is designed only to illustrate a few paradigm examples of the form such opposition can take. Note that the point of this discussion is not to attack realism, but rather to give a sense of the options available for those who wish to oppose realism in a given case, and of the problems faced by those main forms of opposition to realism.

There are two general aspects to realism, illustrated by looking at realism about the everyday world of macroscopic objects and their properties. First, there is a claim about *existence*. Tables, rocks, the moon, and so on, all exist, as do the following facts: the table's being square, the rock's being made of granite, and the moon's being spherical and yellow. The second aspect of realism about the everyday world of macroscopic objects and their properties concerns *independence*. The fact that the moon exists and is spherical is independent of anything anyone happens to say or think about the matter. Likewise, although there is a clear sense in which the table's being square is dependent on us (it was designed and constructed by human beings after all), this is not the type of dependence that the realist wishes to deny. The realist wishes to claim that apart from the mundane sort of empirical dependence of objects and their properties familiar to us from everyday life, there is no *further* (philosophically interesting) sense in which everyday objects and their properties can be said to be dependent on anyone's linguistic practices, conceptual schemes, or whatever. In general, where the distinctive objects of a subject-matter are *a, b, c, ...*, and the distinctive properties are *F-ness, G-ness, H-ness* and so on, realism about that subject matter will typically take the form of a claim like the following:

#### ***Generic Realism:***

*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.

Non-realism can take many forms, depending on whether or not it is the existence or independence dimension of realism that is questioned or rejected. The forms of non-realism can vary dramatically from subject-matter to subject-matter, but error-theories, non-cognitivism, instrumentalism, nominalism, relativism, certain styles of reductionism, and eliminativism typically reject realism by rejecting the existence dimension, while idealism, subjectivism, and anti-realism typically concede the existence dimension but reject the independence dimension. Philosophers who subscribe to quietism deny that there can be such a thing as substantial metaphysical debate between realists and their non-realist opponents because they either deny that there are substantial questions about existence or deny that there are substantial questions about independence.

### **Lock's Representative Realism:**

Unlike Descartes, philosopher John Locke did not believe in innate ideas, those which you are essentially born with. Instead he fostered the idea that our mind was more like a blank slate. He called this the *tabula rasa*. Experiences gained through senses and reflection filled this slate.

Locke borrowed an age-old distinction of simple and complex ideas from Descartes. He described simple ideas as those which originate in one sense and cannot be broken down any further. An example of a simple idea would be color. Complex ideas are a combination of simple ideas. It was with these two types of ideas that one could know the primary and secondary qualities of an object.

Locke maintained that all objects have certain attributes that fall into two categories which are primary qualities and secondary qualities. Primary qualities exist in the object. The shape, size and location of an object would all be considered some of its primary qualities. These qualities are objective according to Locke, because they are perceived the same to everyone. Secondary qualities are the attributes that the perceiver brings to the object such as smell, taste, color and sound. Obviously these types of qualities are subjective because not everyone has the same taste or sense of smell. John Locke believed that error to knowing something lied in the secondary qualities.

Locke built his theory of representative realism upon these ideas. He once said, "The mind represents the external world, but does not duplicate it." This is an area that Descartes and Locke agreed on. They believed that instead of actually experiencing the world first hand we indirectly experience it through representations. We used the example of a photograph in class stating that what appears in the photo is not fully accurate compared to reality. Some of what you perceive is correct and some is not. You may see red eye or a glare. Just because you see those things does not mean they actually exist in reality.

Locke's theories seem to make the most sense to me. His ideas are held by many and are likely regarded as unmistakable to most people. As popular and easy to understand as Locke's theory may be that doesn't make it a sound epistemological theory. Berkeley sought to crack holes in what could have been a solid theory.

Berkeley, being the most extreme of the empiricists, disagreed with Locke on the idea of primary and secondary qualities. He maintained that you couldn't know an object through its primary qualities and that in fact they were just as subjective as the secondary qualities. In response to Locke's claims that size and shape were primary qualities he would object saying that they are subjective and rely on the perceiver. For example, you look at the sun and it appears to only be the size of a quarter in the sky because of the distance that you are away.

In my opinion Locke's theories appeal more to common sense than rational thinking. I believe almost anyone who has not taken a course in philosophy would likely agree with Locke's ideas. People would come to the conclusion that just because you are perceiving the sun as smaller from a distance, doesn't mean that the sun itself has actually changed in size.