Realism and Objectivity

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'Realism' and 'objectivity' are philosophers' terms of art with no strict synonyms in ordinary English. This has not prevented philosophers from using these terms with confidence approaching that of a native speaker. Most will not, for instance, hesitate to label a Subjectivist view of morality (on which an act is wrong for a subject just in case the subject herself disapproves of performing the act) as an irrealist view. And they will likely add that morality is not an objective matter according to the Subjectivist. Similarly they will agree over judgments about Instrumentalism in science, and Idealism about the material world. But broad agreement over simple cases does not by itself select a single meaning for a term of art, and in fact philosophers disagree significantly over application of these terms to anything beyond the simple cases, offering wildly divergent general accounts of the meaning of these terms.

It is probably a mistake to ask about *the* meanings these terms. One is free to use one's words as one wishes, and when terms of art are at issue, it is hard to claim that a philosopher has misused or mischaracterized the term. The aim of this entry is not therefore to legislate usage of the terms 'realism' and 'objectivity.' Rather there are some uses of these terms on which they *seem* to mark out very interesting and worthwhile distinctions between types of philosophical views on a topic. I will outline some very simple and general structural features that would characterize these interesting uses of each term. Then we can ask whether there actually are any very natural kinds that play these roles—that is, if there are any non-gerrymandered and theoretically interesting properties that use of 'realism' and 'objectivity' could plausibly be *about*. It is a live possibility that some ways of using of these terms of art do not lock onto anything interesting in the world.

One clarificatory point should be noted at the outset. Some philosophers use 'realism' and 'objectivity' as if they were interchangeable synonyms: they say that a view is realist about its domain if and only if it makes its domain out to be fully objective. I will not follow this usage here. Instead I will primarily be investigating one use of 'realism' on which it picks out a kind (if it picks out anything at all) that is typically of interest to metaphysicians. And I will work with uses of 'objectivity' that mark an epistemic notion, to be characterized in terms of paradigmatic epistemic properties like knowledge, justification, and the like. A metaphysical notion of realism and an epistemic conception of objectivity will not be equivalent.

Realism: motivating examples and structural features

Here is a standard distinction in ethics made with the word 'realism': a Subjectivist, who holds that ethical statements are reports about an agent's psychological state is not a realist about ethics. By way of contrast, a Non-naturalist, who holds that wrongness is an irreducible and sui generis component of reality, is a realist.

'Realism' is applied to other domains to make the same kinds of distinctions. An Instrumentalist philosopher of science—who holds that talk about quarks, spin, and other "unobservables" to be shorthand for talk about how measuring instruments would respond in various circumstances—is not a realist. Meanwhile someone who takes scientists' talk of unobservables at face value (much like we treat talk of chairs, people, and shapes) is a realist. Similarly a Behaviorist about mental states—who takes pain and other mental states to be nothing more than complex dispositions to behave in various circumstances—is not a realist about mental states. But an Identity Theorist, who identifies pain and other mental states with particular neurophysiological states, is a realist.

These are just a few examples that pattern with a fairly common use of the word 'realism.' As a first pass, it would seem to mark a significant distinction in the alleged metaphysical status of the relevant domains: the Subjectivist has a very different view of the metaphysics of wrongness from the Non-naturalist. Realist and Instrumentalist views of quarks disagree dramatically over the place of quarks in the world. The nature of pain is quite different on an irrealist Behaviorist understanding than it is on the Identity Theory.

From these examples we can read off a few additional structural features that would be satisfied by any reasonably natural, non-gerrymandered referent for 'realism.'

First, it must be compatible with there being substantive truths in non-realist domains. Our irrealists do not necessarily deny that it is true that people sometimes do wrong actions, that quarks have spin, or that sharp needles can cause pain. They are irrealists in virtue of what they say the relevant truths consist in. They need not go so far as to deny that there are any truths at all in the domains in question.

Second, the realism/irrealism distinction is domain-independent: wrongness, unobservables from physical science, and mental states are all distinct kinds of things. But it is quite natural to think that, when we apply 'realism' and 'irrealism' in each area, we are using the terms with identical meanings in each case. The difference between realism and irrealism is the same, regardless of whether what is at issue is ethics, scientific unobservables, mental states, or something else.

Finally, realism is compatible with some reductions of the domain in question. An Identity Theorist offers a reductive view about mental states, but comes out as a realist. The Behaviorist also reduces mental states—but her reduction base is different, and this makes her view an irrealist one. This point is reinforced by focusing on the view of modality from David Lewis (1986), which reduces modal facts to facts about what occurs in maximal spatiotemporally separate regions.

While many find the reduction hard to believe owing to its associated ontology, it is nonetheless natural to read Lewis as a realist about modality.

We can give these structural features labels for convenience:

TRUTH COMPATIBILITY   Irrealism about a domain D is compatible with the existence of substantive truths about D.

DOMAIN NEUTRALITY   For any domain D, 'realism' and 'irrealism' can apply non-trivially and univocally to D.

REDUCTION COMPATIBILITY   For some domains D, some reductive views are irrealist about D while other reductive views about D are realist.

Any property that does not have these three features will either be too gerrymandered to be an interesting property that is at issue in debates over a metaphysical conception of realism, or else will be too distant from common uses of the term 'realism' to plausibly be what philosophers are talking about. Below I will outline three prominent and historically important metaphysical characterizations of realism. All of them fail to capture the structural features outlined here.

Realism: existence

One way of using the word 'real' treats it as interchangeable with 'exists.' Someone might say that Santa Claus isn't real, and by this, simply mean that Santa Claus doesn't exist. Some philosophers have been impressed by this connection with existence, and reached the conclusion that realism about a domain *just is* the view that the domain exists. Views of this kind assimilate all irrealist views to the kind of irrealism found in J. L. Mackie's "moral scepticism" or "error theory", which Mackie describes as follows:

> [W]hat I have called moral scepticism is a negative doctrine, not a positive one: it says what there isn't, not what there is. It says that there do not exist entities or relations of a certain kind, objective values or requirements, which many people have believed to exist. (Mackie 1977: 17)

This suggests a characterization of realism about a domain D as equivalent to the following claim:

Existence   Discourse about D involves terms that refer to objects and properties that exist.

Thus we can read Mackie as claiming that moral discourse uses terms like 'wrong', but that wrongness doesn't exist, and hence that the central terms of moral

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discourse don't refer to anything. Mackie's error theory comes out as irrealist in the sense of **Existence**.

But **Existence** as a characterization of realism won't capture the Truth Compatibility feature. Mackie's error theory is an extreme version of irrealism; more modest versions that are compatible with **Existence** are possible. For instance, Subjectivism is compatible with it being true that telling lies is wrong. Subjectivism says that what it is for telling lies to be wrong is that telling lies is disapproved of. Since it is true that telling lies is disapproved of, it is true that telling lies is wrong. From this it is trivial to infer that telling lies has the *property* of wrongness, and so that wrongness exists. The Subjectivist, though an irrealist, accepts **Existence**.

Realism: mind-independence

Other philosophers start with a range of examples of irrealism which imply that the domain in question is mind-dependent. Subjectivism, which makes wrongness dependent on an agent's attitudes of disapproval, is an irrealist view. So is Instrumentalism about unobservables, where the notion of measurement which is essential to the view is plausibly to be cashed out partly in mental terms. These examples motivate a "mind-independence" condition on realism. For instance in his chapter "What is Realism?", Michael Devitt says that this condition for realism is satisfied by something "if it exists and has its nature whatever we believe, think, or can discover: it is independent of the cognitive activities of the mind." (Devitt 1991: 15) Realism about a domain D, on this characterization, is true iff the following holds:

Mind-independence The objects and properties in D do not essentially depend on mental objects and properties.

In ethics, this characterization of realism can be found in Sharon Street (2006), among other places.

Mind-independence as a characterization of realism, however, is incompatible with Domain Neutrality. This can be seen when we apply **Mind-independence** to realism about the mind itself. Dependence is standardly taken to be an *irreflexive* relation: nothing depends on itself. But then any view about the mental will entail that it is not dependent on mental states, and hence that it does not satisfy **Mind-independence**. Thus any view of the mental will come out as realist, and realism about the mental will be trivial, contrary to Domain Neutrality. Consider, by way of illustration, the intuitively irrealist Behaviorist view of pain. According to Behaviorism, that one is in pain depends on one's exhibiting pain-behaviors. But behaviors are not mental entities, and so according **Mind-independence**, Behaviorism is a realist view of pain.

Realism: absolute fundamentality

Another approach to realism uses a notion that is central to much recent metaphysics; roughly, this is the notion of the *fundamental*. The fundamental is, roughly, that which doesn't depend, or exist in virtue of, anything else. This is motivated by the thought that, if something is metaphysically fundamental, then it is *most* real in the metaphysical sense. (For a more detailed discussion of the relationship between dependence and fundamentality, see Barnes (2012).) Kit Fine (2001) gives a seminal discussion of this approach to realism, which is adapted to a characterization in the following passage by Ralph Wedgwood:

> What exactly is realism? Following Kit Fine (2001) I shall suppose that a realist about the normative is a theorist who says that there are normative facts or truths—such as the fact that certain things ought to be the case, or that it is not the case that certain things ought to be the case—and that at least some of these normative facts are part of reality itself.
>
> The notion of *reality* invoked here is a notion that has its home within a certain sort of metaphysical project—namely, the project of giving a metaphysical account or explanation of everything that is the case in terms of what is real [...] [I]f certain normative facts are real, then [...] these normative facts, properties or relations may also form part of the fundamental account or explanation of certain things that are the case. (Wedgwood 2007: 1-2)

This suggests the claim that realism about a domain D is equivalent to the following:

Absolute Fundamentality D is absolutely fundamental.

Taking **Absolute Fundamentality** to characterize realism has some advantages. For starters, it yields a notion that is compatible with Truth Compatibility and Domain Neutrality. There can be truths about both fundamental and non-fundamental domains, and so irrealism is compatible with substantive truths. And it is coherent to adopt views on which the mental is absolutely fundamental (e.g., Cartesian Dualism) and views on which it is not. So we need not carve out special exemptions for the mental when deploying the term 'realism.'

However, **Absolute Fundamentality** is not consistent with Reduction Compatibility. Identity Theory is a realist view of the mental, but it is also reductivist, as it identifies mental states with neurophysiological occurrences. These neurophysiological occurrences in turn are not fundamental; the fundamental consists in microphysical facts about charge, mass, and so on. According to **Absolute Fundamentality**, then, it is not a realist view. The same result applies to *any* reductivist view. For instance in ethics, so-called 'naturalist' reductions such as that found in the Railton (1986) paper "Moral Realism" claim that ethical properties

depend on non-fundamental psychological properties. **Absolute Fundamentality** will again identify the resulting view as an irrealist one, and the reason is that this conception of realism is inconsistent with Reduction Compatibility.

Realism: relative fundamentality

We have seen that none of the above characterizations of realism can capture all of the structural features. Perhaps there is no very natural property that does this.

But before settling for this pessimistic conclusion, there is a view in the neighborhood of **Absolute Fundamentality** that deserves to be explored. This doesn't appeal to the binary distinction between what is fundamental and what is not, but rather to the notion of *relative* fundamentality, expressed by the predicate 'is more fundamental than.' Some plausible (and relevant) claims about relative fundamentality include: the Behaviorist will need a long an complicated disjunction of behaviors to identify pain (one can be in pain either by screaming, or by clutching one's arm and grimacing, or by exhibiting another item on the long list of pain-behaviors), and so pain is not very fundamental on the Behaviorist view. Meanwhile the neurophysiological states which, according to the Identity Theory, are identical to mental states will not be so disjunctive. Intuitively, they will constitute a psychologically natural, and somewhat fundamental, kind. It is then plausible that pain is more fundamental on the Identity Theorist's view than on the Behaviorist's view.

Analogous comparisons seem plausible for Subjectivism and Non-naturalism about ethics, and for Instrumentalism and Realism about scientific unobservables. This suggests, as a first pass, that a view is realist about a domain D just in case it entails the following:

Relative Fundamentality D is more fundamental than it is according to salient competing views of D.

Relative Fundamentality also is not incompatible with the structural features required of any adequate metaphysical conception of realism. It entails Truth Compatibility, since highly non-fundamental domains may none the less exist, and be such that discourses about them contain true statements about the relevant non-fundamental entities. It is consistent with Domain Neutrality since there is no domain which is trivially highly fundamental; it is a substantive question for any domain (including the mental) how fundamental it is. And finally it entails Reduction Compatibility since a domain might be reducible yet still more fundamental than other salient competing views make it out to be.

Clearly there is much more investigation to be done into whether **Relative Fundamentality** captures a philosophically interesting metaphysical kind to serve as the referent of 'realism.' (For a fuller development of this idea, see Dunaway (MS).) Further investigation would proceed, ideally, by identifying additional structural features of the notion of realism, and would ask whether **Relative**

Fundamentality or any other relatively simple metaphysical notion might have all of these features.

Realism and objectivity: the No Triviality condition

Here is one further structural feature of realism, which will also serve as a crucial structural feature in our subsequent discussion of epistemic conceptions of objectivity.

Gideon Rosen's paper "Objectivity and Modern Idealism: What is the Question?" is a seminal discussion of various metaphysical conceptions of objectivity, which are more closely related to realism as conceived in the first half of this paper. But it highlights what is not only an important structural feature of realism conceived metaphysically, but also objectivity conceived epistemically. This is the No Triviality condition, which I will introduce in the context of one of Rosen's central arguments.

The structure of Rosen's argument is relatively simple but has the potential for very general application: it takes a candidate characterization of non-objectivity and alleges that it follows from the characterization that *every domain whatsoever* is objective. So, Rosen concludes that the candidate characterizations of objectivity fail to adequately capture their target.

This reveals an important structural feature of objectivity: that it must non-trivially distinguish objective from non-objective domains. Any characterization of objectivity that fails to do this will fail to capture a core feature of objectivity. We can call this the No Triviality Condition:

No Triviality There are at least some domains D that are objective, and at least some domains D^* (distinct from D) that are not objective.

To illustrate one application of No Triviality, consider (following Rosen) a "response-dependence" characterization of objectivity. A property is *response-dependent* just in case it is instantiated in virtue of how that thing affects agents like us. Rosen then takes the substantive understanding of objectivity given by **No Response-dependence** and argues that it fails to capture No Triviality:

No Response-depednence D does not contain properties that are response-dependent. (Rosen 1994: 298)

Take *constitutionality* as an example of a response-dependent property: laws are constitutional just in case the Supreme Count is disposed, after investigation, to judge them so. (Any examples here are bound to be controversial, but the point applies with any example of a response-dependent characterization of a property in hand.) **No Response-dependence** fails to entail that constitutionality is not objective, according to Rosen:

> So far we have been given no reason to think that the facts about what a
> certain group of people would think after a certain sort of investigation

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are anything but robustly objective. The facts about how the court would rule are facts of modal sociology ...but on the face of it they possess the same status as the facts about what any other collection of animals would do if prompted with certain stimuli, or set a certain problem. The facts about what the court would do with a given case ...are thus, for all we've said, features of the objective world. And if the facts [about constitutionality] just are these very facts, then [we have] no special grounds for thinking of them as less than entirely real. (Rosen 1994: 300)

Since the same point applies to any response-dependent property, **No Response Dependence** will fail the No Triviality condition.

The central claim in Rosen's argument is that the fact that constitutionality is response-dependent (i.e., that something is constitutional because the Supreme Court justices would judge it to be so) is itself a perfectly objective fact by any measure. It is just as objective as the fact that a mouse would run away if it saw a cat, or the fact that an electron would repel another nearby electron; the fact that something has any of these dispositions is an objective fact about the world just like any other. Response-dependence is no different from these other dispositions.

The general version of this claim, which secures a failure of No Triviality, is that for any fact p that is response-dependent, the following holds: (where O is the operator 'it is objective that' and RDp means 'p is response-dependent'):

$O(RDp)$

This general claim has some plausibility. Claims about response-dependence do seem to be just as objective as any other kind of dispositional fact. But of course there are two issues here: one is the objectivity of the fact *that p is response-dependent*; this is the claim the above passage from Rosen supports. The other is the objectivity of p itself. This latter fact (if it is a fact) is the following:

$O(p)$.

According to Rosen it is the objectivity of the allegedly relevant feature of p—that is, the objectivity of the response-dependence of p—which implies that p itself is objective. This is the following claim, which is a substantive and non-trivial one:

$O(RDp) \rightarrow O(p)$

(*Cf.* Rosen on p. 301: "*Intuitively*, if the facts in the contested class can simply be read off in a mechanical way from the facts in an uncontroversially objective class, then there can be no grounds for denying the same status to facts in the contested area.")

Thus this premise is necessary for securing the conclusion that every domain will be objective, and No Triviality is violated. This points toward a powerful form of argument which, if sound, would serve as a serious challenge to any substantive understanding of objectivity. I will return to the prospects for the general form of argument below.

Objectivity: epistemic shortcomings

No TRIVIALITY not only places substantial constraints not only on metaphysical conceptions of realism and objectivity, but also on the epistemic conceptions of objectivity which will be my focus here.

Some uses of 'objective' are explained primarily in epistemic terms. Begin with the contrast between objectivity and *relativity*. (This is, for instance, the starting point in Thomas Nagel (1989).) Roughly, relative facts are those that hold only in relation to agents: for these facts there is no such thing as a non-objective fact holding simpliciter, but only holding in relation to some agent. In ethics, the relativity of the domain would amount to the claim that murdering is wrong relative to some agents, but it not wrong relative to others. But objective domains, like physics, are not relative in this way: there is no need to specify an agent relative to which the laws of physics hold; they are true simpliciter, and hence objective.

What relativity in the intended sense amounts to is a tricky matter in need of explanation, and I will limit my attention here to some alleged defining epistemic symptoms of relativity. In picturesque terms, these approaches all aim to articulate the following idea. It is in the nature of relative (and hence non-objective) facts to be epistemically accessible for the agents they hold in relation to. That is, if the fact ϕ holds relative to agent a, then a has fairly easy epistemic access to ϕ. Objective facts, by contrast, do not by their nature bring this epistemic status. It might not be easy to know, or have epistemically non-faulty beliefs about them. This epistemic aspect to objectivity is distinct from the metaphysical approach to realism from the previous section, and so represents an importantly different topic for investigation. I will introduce some substantive understandings of what the important epistemic difference between objective and non-objective domains might be in subsequent sections.

One leading epistemic approach to non-objectivity, which is developed in Crispin Wright (1992) and elsewhere, has been widely applied to articulate the intuitive absence of objectivity in matters of taste, aesthetics, humor, and ethics. (See Kölbel (2002), Dreier (2009), and Egan (2014) for more discussion of these ideas.) The central idea in Wright (1992) is that non-objective facts are those for which there is a possibility of a "shortcoming-free disagreement." When dealing with objective facts, subjects who form disagreeing opinions are such that one of them must fall prey to some kind of epistemic shortcoming in reaching their opinion. Take judgements about ordinary objects formed on the basis of perception. Two subjects might both in the Oval Office, visually surveying their surroundings, and disagree about whether there is a desk in the room. It follows from the fact that there is a disagreement that one of them is epistemically non-ideal. There are various ways they might instantiate a shortcoming: this might be by virtue of having impoverished visual inputs, or having an improperly functioning perceptual apparatus, being biased, and so on. But one of these shortcomings (either in cognition or in environment) must be present in at least

one of the subjects who is disagreeing about the furnishings of the Oval Office. Since the disagreement must exhibit a shortcoming, the facts about desks in the Oval Office are objective facts.

Non-objective domains differ in this respect from the Oval Office's furnishings. Take comedy as an example. According to Wright, the non-objectivity of the funniness of a particular joke shows up in our epistemic lives in the form of the possibility of a shortcoming-free disagreement over the joke's funniness. You and I can arrive at distinct judgments concerning whether that joke is funny: I think it is, you think it isn't, yet it doesn't follow that one has impoverished comic inputs, or is biased, etc.

The terminology used to formulate this idea is at best suggestive. Wright recognizes this, and offers the notion of *cognitive command* as a sharpening of the shortcoming-free characterization of objectivity. His official definition of cognitive command is as follows:

> A discourse exhibits Cognitive Command if and only if it is a priori that differences of opinion arising within it can be satisfactorily explained only in terms of "divergent input", that is, the disputants' working on the basis of different information ..., or "unsuitable conditions" ..., or "malfunction." (Wright 1992: 93)

Wright goes on to give further clarification of the various shortcomings that explain disagreement of objective matters: divergent input, unsuitable conditions, or malfunction. But even without getting bogged down in these details, we can ask some initial questions about the proposal that it is a feature of objectivity in a domain D that D satisfies **Cognitive Command**:

Cognitive Command The facts in D are such that it is a priori that disagreements in discourse about D could be explained as the product of divergent input, unsuitable conditions, or malfunction amongst at least one of the disputants.

Some questions can be raised about whether **Cognitive Command** satisfies the No Triviality feature of objectivity. One line of questioning begins with the following assumption: it is possible to know the facts in some non-objective domains. For instance, one can have comic knowledge. This assumption seems innocuous, but it is problematic for a **Cognitive Command**-based understanding of objectivity.

To see why, we can work a more precise understanding of what "divergent input" amounts to. Wright says that disputants have divergent inputs just in case two disputants are working on the basis of different information. On one very natural sharpening of this idea, the "information" one has will be one's evidence, and one's evidence will be the totality of what one knows. (*cf.* Williamson (2000: Ch. 5); see also Hawthorne and Srinivasan (2013)). Hence in any case where there is a dispute over p, if someone could know whether p, then it could be that the

dispute is one for which there is divergent input. (Since ex hypothesi this is a dispute over p, the non-knower does not even believe the truth concerning p. She thus does not know whether p and has different evidence.)

This threatens to make the "divergent input" condition too easy to satisfy. If it is possible for someone to know whether a joke is funny, then any dispute over the funniness of the joke is one where it could be that someone knows more than the other disputants. (Since if someone knows that the joke is funny, it follows that it is true that the joke is funny. The disagreeing interlocutor doesn't even believe that the joke is funny—this is what makes for a disagreement—and so they can't know it.) Hence it will be very natural to say that a dispute about the comic can be diagnosed as one where disputants have different information, a condition of **Cognitive Command**.

This line of reasoning suggests that even paradigmatic non-objective domains will satisfy **Cognitive Command**, and the No Triviality feature is violated. But it is only suggestive, since one crucial assumption is that facts in non-objective domains can be known. We could of course reject this, and endorse Moderate Skepticism for non-objective domains:

Moderate Skepticism   Not all of the facts in D are such that someone could know them.

If Moderate Skepticism were true of the comic (and other non-objective domains), then some comic facts would be unknowable. There would then be no guarantee that disputes about them could be diagnosed as cases of divergent input. This puts **Cognitive Command** back in the running as a central feature of objectivity.

Whether it is a structural feature of objectivity that Moderate Skepticism is not true of non-objective domains is not a question I will try to answer here. But it is a substantial and non-trivial consequence of **Cognitive Command** that, if it can satisfy the No Triviality condition, non-objectivity must be accompanied by a degree of skepticism.

Objectivity: the belief-knowledge connection

There are substantive hurdles to using **Cognitive Command** as a characterization of objectivity. But we can side-step some of these hurdles by taking a different approach to articulating the central insight behind **Cognitive Command**. Objective domains are characterized by **Cognitive Command** in terms of the features of *disagreements* about those domains. Disagreements involve two people forming incompatible beliefs, and objectivity is characterized in terms of the presence of epistemic fault on the part of one of the disagreers. However there are closely related epistemic properties that are independent of and unrelated to what happens in disagreements. For instance one might focus on the idea that it is in the nature of non-objective domains that beliefs about them are, or could easily

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be, free from epistemic defect. (This does not require the possibility that someone could, in a similarly non-defective way, form a disagreeing belief.) This alleged feature of non-objectivity is emphasized, for example, by the conclusion in Street (2006) where she introduces a kind of relativity into the ethical facts with the goal of earning epistemic advantages that a realist account cannot have. Here is a slightly more detailed gloss on this intuitive idea.

Begin with an independent characterization of *suitably ideal conditions* for forming a belief about domain D. These will include logical and probabilistic coherence, at a minimum, and perhaps will involve additional constraints that rule out other imperfect forms of reasoning. Call a belief about D that is formed in suitably ideal conditions a *competent belief*: in short, it is not infected by epistemic defects that arise from defective reasoning and the like. One motivating idea behind epistemic conceptions of non-objectivity is that, if D is not objective, then a competent belief about D is guaranteed to have important epistemic credentials. Meanwhile, if D is objective, then it is possible that a belief about D is competent and yet lacks these credentials.

If we take knowledge to be the paradigm of epistemic success, then this amounts to the idea that domains D that satisfy **Belief-Knowledge Connection** are the non-objective domains:

Belief-Knowledge Connection (BKC) For any claim about D, if one forms a competent belief about D, then one thereby knows the claim about D.

Objective domains, by contrast, do not satisfy **BKC** and allow for competent belief-formation that is not knowledge. For example one could form a competent belief about the presence of a chair in the Oval Office (an objective fact), but owing to an unfriendly epistemic environment fail to know that there is a chair in the Oval Office. Meanwhile competently believing that a joke is funny is sufficient for knowing that the joke is funny.

BKC is just a simple instance of a family of epistemic conceptions of objectivity, and our focus here is not on whether it is right. One could refine the conditions for being a competent belief, or one could replace knowledge with other epistemic credentials like justification or warrant. However instead of playing with these details here, we can use **BKC** as a test case to evaluate some claims about the structural features of objectivity.

Objectivity: Collapse and the Master Argument

Recall that, in his argument that **No Response Dependence** fails the No Triviality feature, Rosen employs the following premise:

$$O(\mathrm{RD}p) \rightarrow O(p)$$

That is, if it is objective that p is response-dependent, then p is objective.

If this premise is generally valid, then this sets up a "Master Argument" that No Triviality is violated by *every* conception of objectivity. We can run a Rosen-style argument by substituting any proposed characterization of non-objectivity in place of response-dependence, and show that any candidate for non-objectivity p is in fact fully objective. The general version of the premise in question is Collapse, where Φ is any alleged characteristic feature of non-objectivity:

Collapse $O(\Phi p) \rightarrow O(p)$

If Collapse is a structural feature of objectivity, then the following Master Argument will show that *any* substantive conception of objectivity fails the No Triviality condition:

The Master Argument

$O(\Phi p)$

$O(\Phi p) \rightarrow O(p)$

Therefore, $O(p)$

All we need to do is substitute the proposed characterization of non-objectivity for Φ, and the argument will be exactly the same in essentials as Rosen's. Triviality ensues.

Collapse and epistemic objectivity

However Collapse is very dubious when we are dealing with epistemic conceptions of objectivity. One way to illustrate this is by showing that, when we use **BKC** as a candidate characterization of objectivity, the resulting instance of the Collapse principle is false. This will give us a feel for how the Master Argument would apply if extended to epistemic conceptions of objectivity.

Using K to stand for 'could be known,' a fact Φ that could be known can be written as $K\Phi$. We can state some features of **BKC** using this notation. First, since according to **BKC** objective facts are not guaranteed to be known by competent believers, there are situations where the only facts that can be known by such believers are the non-objective ones. That is, the following holds for any fact Ψ in these situations:

$\neg O\Psi \leftrightarrow K\Psi$

Next we can look at what happens if we try to extend Collapse to any conception of non-objectivity. Assuming that satisfying **BKC** is equivalent to non-objectivity, then in situations where only non-objective facts are known, Collapse is equivalent that the claim that the following holds for any fact Φ:

$OK\Phi \rightarrow O\Phi$.

But, finally, we have seen that if we are in a setting where objective facts fail to be known by competent belief, then objectivity is equivalent to the absence of knowledge; $\neg O\Psi \leftrightarrow K\Psi$ holds. So its being objective that Φ is known means that it is not known that Φ is known. And if Φ is objective, then this means that it is not known. Thus COLLAPSE is (modulo our earlier assumptions) equivalent to the following claim:

$$\neg KK\Phi \rightarrow \neg K\Phi.$$

This is just what is known as the 'KK principle' in the epistemology literature. (See especially Williamson (2000: Ch. 4).) COLLAPSE implies that KK is true in settings where objective facts are unknowable. This is grounds for a *reductio*: in general, the fact that you don't know that you know something doesn't imply that you don't know that thing. (Just as I might want a coffee right now without knowing that I want a coffee, likewise I might know that I am cold without knowing that I know I am cold.) And restricting the principle to settings where only non-objective facts are knowable by competent belief don't make KK any more palatable. KK implies that facts about what is knowable are guaranteed to be among the facts that are knowable, and hence (given **BKC**) are not objective. This is not an appealing result.

(N.B. Rosen only applies his argument to metaphysical conceptions of objectivity, which are much more similar to the kinds of view we are labelling with the heading of 'realism' here. Since we concluded that **Relative Fundamentality** is most promising as a characterization of metaphysical realism, it is worth noting in this connection that the fundamentality-facts might be very fundamental, without every non-fundamentality-fact being very fundamental. Then, the relevant instance of COLLAPSE is false for relative fundamentality.)

Connections: magnetism

We have so far considered some various candidates for the natural kinds that might underly talk of realism and objectivity. It should be clear that on some of the candidate characterizations covered here there is no strict entailment between realism and objectivity: for instance, domains can be not-very-fundamental and also difficult to know. But there still might be some interesting connections between the notions, and below I will give a brief discussion of some of the possibilities.

Suppose we accept a view of ethics on which it is highly fundamental: say we hold, unlike the Subjectivist, that ethical properties are fairly natural, non-gerrymandered properties studied by social science. (*Cf.* Boyd (1988), Sturgeon (1988).) On the **Relative Fundamentality** characterization of realism, our view of the normative is a good candidate for a realist view. Many writers, starting with David Lewis (1983), have held that highly fundamental properties have an additional feature: they are easy to refer to. Roughly, this means that a community

of speakers doesn't need to use a term with a high degree of fit with a highly fundamental property in order to successfully refer to it. For instance since gold is pretty fundamental, a community of speakers could use 'gold' with some idiosyncracies—say they are reliably tricked into sincerely saying that iron pyrite ("fools gold") counts as 'gold'—yet sill succeed in referring to the element Au rather than the disjunction of Au and iron pyrite. The disjunction is a better fit with their use of 'gold,' but that is overridden by the superior fundamentality of Au.

Call the thesis that highly fundamental properties are easy to refer to *reference magnetism*. If reference magnetism is true, then realism about a domain will have some bearing on whether that domain is objective.

To illustrate, consider our realist view of obligation according to which it is highly fundamental. One can competently use 'ought', and yet use it in a way that does not fit best with obligation; rather, one's use fits better with some other obligation-like property. Let's call this other property *obligation**. (A simple example to illustrate this would take obligation to be happiness-maximization, and obligation* to be a property instantiated by most happiness-maximizing actions, but not those that require violating the autonomy of a rational agent.) The phenomenon of reference magnetism will produce some false beliefs about obligation in this scenario. For even though one's use of 'ought' will track obligation*, one's beliefs will be about *obligation*, not obligation*. For instance: suppose *a* is an action that instantiates obligation* but not obligation. One's usage of 'ought' will lead one to accept sentences of the form 'one ought to do *a*.' And since reference magnetism is in operation, one will normally form the belief, when accepting such a sentence, *that one ought to do a*. This means one has a false belief about obligation—by hypothesis, *a* does not instantiate obligation, and so one's belief is false. If reference magnetism hadn't been in operation, things would have gone differently: the sentence 'one ought to do *a*' would have referred to the less fundamental property obligation*, and the resultant belief would have been true.

This gives rise to some connections between realism and objectivity. For instance according to **Cognitive Command**, objective domains preclude shortcoming-free disagreements. Reference magnetism plus realism makes the disagreement portion easier to come by: since communities who use their terms for a highly fundamental domain differently can still refer to the same property, they stand in a position to actually disagree with each other, rather than merely taking past one another.

BKC carves out objectivity differently: it requires that, if a domain is objective, then it is possible to competently believe a claim about that domain and not know it. Here again there is an interesting and significant connection between realism and objectivity. Adding reference magnetism to realism about a domain will, as we have seen, imply that one can refer to properties in the realist domain, even if one doesn't use terms in a way that fits those properties perfectly. (In the simple illustration from above, this would involve referring to happiness-maximization, even though one treats some maximizing actions that require autonomy-violations

as not obligatory.) Imperfect use of 'ought', which results from applying 'ought' to a non-obligatory action *a*, can still succeed in referring to obligation. And a normal process of belief-formation in these cases will result in false beliefs about obligation—one will come to falsely believe that *a* is obligatory. This is where is the interesting connection lies, given **BKC**: these beliefs will be competent beliefs. But since they are false beliefs, they are not knowledge. So realism entails objectivity.

More connections: surprising entailments

We focused on some ways in which realism as characterized by **Relative Fundamentality** might entail objectivity in the previous subsection. In this subsection I will focus similar entailments that appear when we adopt alternative conceptions of realism.

Suppose, for example, **Mind-independence** characterizes realism about a domain, and so irrealism about a domain entails that that domain is mind-dependent. Facts about the mental are perfectly objective. So, irrealism about a domain entails that the domain in question is objective—a surprising result.

The crucial premises here are that (i) mental facts are objective, and (ii) if mental facts are objective, then whatever depends on them is also objective. Premise (ii) is a restricted version of Collapse, and follows from multiple characterizations of objectivity. For instance, if **Cognitive Command** characterizes objectivity, then objective domains will be those that do not permit shortcoming-free disagreements. Facts about what mental states someone is in will not permit shortcoming-free disagreements; if (for example) I believe that you want an ice cream, and you believe that you don't, then one of us must have made a mistake of reasoning, or had inadequate evidence when arriving at our belief. If ethics is mind-dependent, then, facts about what ought to be done will depend on mental states of the same sort as the fact that you want (or don't want) an ice cream. But then the facts about what ought to be done will not permit shortcoming-free disagreements, because disagreements about ethics will either be based on a disagreement about the mental (which cannot be shortcoming-free), or else based on a mistake about how ethics depends on the mental.

Things go similarly if we work with objectivity in the sense of **BKC**. Again, suppose for illustration that ethics is mind-dependent by virtue of the facts about what ought to be done depending on mental facts—facts similar to the fact that you want an ice cream. These mental facts will be such that competent beliefs about them might not be knowledge. For instance I might have reasoned impeccably but, owing to your deceptive testimony, come to believe that you want an ice cream when you really don't want one. So my competent belief will not be knowledge, and facts about mental states are perfectly objective according to **BKC**.

The mind-dependent ethical facts will then be objective as well. If I could competently believe and yet not know that you want an ice cream, then I could

competently believe and yet not know the ethical facts that depend on it. As a very simple case, suppose it is true that, if it is a fact that you want ice cream, then it is a fact that I ought to give you ice cream. Moreover suppose that I know this. Believing that you want ice cream, I competently infer from my knowledge of the relationship between the ethical and mental that I ought to give you ice cream. By this route I come to believe that I ought to give you ice cream. But since I don't know that you want ice cream (since it is false that you want one, and you have misled me), then I also won't know that I ought to give you ice cream, since this belief rests on my unknown belief about your mental states. So I will competently believe, and not know, an ethical fact. It is objective, just like the mental fact it depends on.

Conclusion

Realism and objectivity are notions of central philosophical interest, and many classic philosophical debates have at their heart disputes over the reality or objectivity of a subject matter. The arguments discussed here will, hopefully, provide useful examples for philosophers who wish to make progress on understanding, in a rigorous way, what is at issue in these disputes. We can avoid disputes that rely on flimsy intuitive applications of philosophical terms of art, without losing touch with the profound and exciting issues that motivate disputes over realism and objectivity in ethics and elsewhere.

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