

Truth and Realism. EDITED BY PATRICK GREENOUGH AND MICHAEL P. LYNCH. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006. Pp. ix + 253. Price £45.00 h/b, £18.99 p/b.)

This book collects papers presented at a conference of the same title at the University of St Andrews in 2004. Disputes over realism, in the very general philosophical sense of this term, persist with little hope of resolution or consensus. It is thus unsurprising to find the core of realism characterized in many ways in a short collection of papers. Different authors define realism in different ways, as a view centrally about truth, semantics, epistemology, or metaphysics. It is equally unsurprising then to find realism characterized elsewhere in the same book as a muddle of confusion, or as a relic of discredited philosophical doctrines.

The book is divided into three sections. The first, shortest section is on truth and relativism, focusing on how to characterize the differences between relativist and nonrelativist views of various discourses. The middle section is on the second term in the book's title, realism. The final section of the book is at a higher order with respect to the earlier sections. In this section, on "Methodology and the Nature of the Debates," metaphilosophical questions are raised: are there in fact any genuine, interesting disputes regarding the issues of realism? If so, how are such debates to be resolved? As the editors correctly note, there is no clear dividing line between the metaphilosophical and the philosophical issues about realism, and thus no clear dividing line between the topics pursued in the different sections of the book.

The section on relativism contains three papers. Paul Boghossian's "What is Relativism?" is the only paper in the book not written for the St Andrews conference.

Boghossian argues that uncontroversial relativist scientific views—such as the relativity of motion to a frame of reference—cannot provide an acceptable model for more controversial relativist views, such as relativism about morality. Crispin Wright, in “Intuitionism, Realism, Relativism, and Rhubarb,” argues that the ordinary view of disagreements of taste leads to puzzles. These puzzles can only be adequately resolved, according to Wright, based on a formulation of relativism about taste in terms of truth as superassertibility. J.C. Beall, in a response to Wright, contends that such disputes are better characterized by a relativized version of the correspondence theory of truth.

The second section, on realism, opens with Michael Williams’s “Realism: What’s Left?” Williams criticizes Philip Kitcher’s “real realism.” “Real realism” is the view that scientific and commonsense claims are true, and the truth of such claims is to be understood in terms of correspondence truth. Williams argues that Kitcher’s account is based on an ill-motivated “neo-Cartesian” account of knowledge, and that in light of a Sellarsian “neo-Pragmatist” account of the kind Williams has argued for elsewhere, a more deflationary kind of realism is better warranted.

Michael Devitt’s “Scientific Realism” defends the view that the unobservable entities invoked in scientific theories exist, refining a familiar defense of this view based on the success of science. He then argues against skepticism about unobservables, addressing concerns about the underdetermination of theories by evidence and the “pessimistic meta-induction” from the nonexistence of the unobservables posited by theories in the past. The arguments are presented in Devitt’s characteristically clear and forthright style. Christopher Gauker, in his critique of Devitt, focuses critically on Devitt’s view that the existence of unobservables is fundamentally not a semantic issue.

The criticisms of Devitt, mostly aimed at the deflationary theory of truth, seem misdirected, and Gauker does not articulate a clear semantic alternative to Devitt's metaphysical account of scientific realism.

Even among those philosophers who hold that realism is a metaphysical issue, there are many possible incompatible "realisms." Terry Horgan and Matjaz Potrč, in "Abundant Truth in an Austere World," make a case for an "austere metaphysical realism," one that claims that a range of entities, from common household objects like chairs to complex entities such as nations, do not really exist. The sense that many people have that such objects do exist is explained away as a "competence-performance error" akin to the Mueller-Lyre optical illusion—Any normal person telling a philosopher that chairs really do exist has failed, according to Horgan and Potrč, to recognize that the contextually relevant standards for talk about chairs has shifted in an serious ontological dispute. Horgan and Potrč then argue that, contrary to what might be expected, common sense considerations weigh in favor of their elimination of chairs from the cosmos. When common sense "goes reflective about metaphysics," it seeks a systematic theory of the composition of objects, yet there is no such theory, thus common sense leads us to eventually a rejection of composite objects like chairs (p. 152). Common sense also recognizes the vague boundaries of such objects, and "appreciates, at least viscerally, that the right ontology *cannot* include such items" (p. 154). These are, at best, questionable assertions about common sense, as Mark Richard notes in his critique of Horgan and Potrč. Richard ably shows how alternative approaches to problems raised by the composition of objects and vagueness avoid the counterintuitive consequences accepted by Horgan and Potrč.

Richard closes his paper by discussing philosophical method, casting doubt on the usefulness of linguistic approaches to metaphysical problems. This forms a nice segueway to the final section of the book, on methodology. Timothy Williamson, in the short paper opening this section, “Must do Better,” cites examples of apparent philosophical progress, such as the development of modal logic in the 20th century. Williamson hopes for similar progress in realism disputes. Williamson charges that recent writing on realism contains too much imprecision, obscurity, and vagueness. More damningly, belief in realist or antirealist doctrines is, according to Williamson, often based on wishful thinking and susceptibility to “charismatic authority figures” rather than actual argument (p. 186). Williamson makes these claims, unfortunately, without citation of any specific work or philosopher. The paper ends with a plea for clearer methods and more rigor, without making a case for any specific methods.

Paul Horwich, in “A World Without Isms,” argues against relativism, fictionalism, and error theories about apparently “weird” facts, such as modal and moral facts. Horwich contends that each of these theories requires a distinction between belief and mere acceptance of claims, a distinction that Horwich argues cannot be made. Turning from beliefs to facts, Horwich considers the possibility that such views could be recast in terms of a distinction between robust and nonrobust facts. Horwich presents and criticizes a recent attempt by Kit Fine to make such a distinction, and ultimately claims that the search for such a distinction is based on a misguided attempt to assimilate all facts to physical facts. In light of this, Horwich suggests eschewing all talk of realism and antirealism. Marian David, in “Horwich’s World,” contends that in spite of his rejection of the term itself, Horwich is a “non-reductive realist.” In light of the lack of consensus

over the dividing line between realists and antirealists noted by Horwich in his paper and exemplified in the varied conceptions running throughout this book, this stands in need of clarification.

The section on methodology includes two papers on the nature and importance of intuitions. These papers, by Ernest Sosa and Michael Lynch, while rich with interesting proposals regarding the nature of a traditional philosophical method, have little to do with the concerns over realism and relativism that run throughout the rest of the volume. The final paper in the volume is a general commentary on the St Andrews conference by the late Richard Rorty. Rorty offers an unsurprisingly bracing critique of the realist/antirealist debate, largely agreeing with Williams and Horwich in dismissing more inflationary conceptions of ontology. Rorty writes that “[o]ntology is more like a playground than a discipline,” because whatever one says regarding ontology, one can “get away with it” (p. 242). This general critique of ontology attributes philosophical interest in realism to a Parmenidean search for “superthings” such as “the One.” This critique of realism, whatever its merits, is too general to capture every philosophical concern over realism—Why think that philosophers concerned about scientific realism, mathematical realism, epistemic realism, secondary quality realism, or moral realism are all motivated by this Parmenidean concern? It is perhaps a sign of the kind of progress that Williamson cites that there are such a variety of ongoing disputes under the fuzzy rubric of realism, although it is hard to see the prospects for progress in these disputes given how little common ground there is even over what the term “realism” means.

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