

## Philosophy 145 Realism and Anti-realism

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### General Remarks on the Course

This course is intended to introduce you to some of the basic issues in metaphysics and ontology, as these subjects have been studied in recent analytic philosophy. We will begin with ontology, the basic question of which is what there is. We will study, in particular, the question whether there are *abstract objects*, sets, numbers, games, letters, words, and the like: Such objects, if such there are, are different from concrete objects, like people, or rocks, or chairs, in that they are not located in space and time (the number 2 isn't *anywhere*), and they do not causally interact with anything (the letter 'x' doesn't cause anything to happen). Some philosophers, *nominalists*, have denied that there are any such objects; they are philosophically perplexing. We will look at a proposal for how we might understand reference to abstract objects which originates with Gottlob Frege and has been developed by Crispin Wright.

We will also look at questions about modality—that is, about possibility and necessity—from an ontological point of view. Many philosophers have found it illuminating to analyze a modal claim, such as, “There might have been talking donkeys”, in terms of possible worlds, thus: There is a possible world in which there are talking donkeys. What, however, are these possible worlds? According to David Lewis, a ‘mad dog modal realist’, they are worlds just like ours: Real, physical people really do live in them, and their lives and doings are much like ours. What is *possible* is what *is the case* in these other worlds. So, for example, if it is possible (as it would seem it is) that Al Gore should have won the 2000 election, that amounts to its being the case that, in another possible world, Al (actually, someone very similar to him, since Al lives only in *our* world) really did win, and Dubya (actually, someone very similar to him) lost. Many philosophers have found this view insane. We'll check it out.

Following that, we will turn our attention to metaphysics, the basic question of which is not so much what there is, but how what there is is related to our capacity to think about it. The common sense view, it is fair to say (at least about such things as the physical world, the past, and mathematics), is that what is true about such matters is something quite independent of us: The physical world, or the past, is as it is, and would still be that way, whatever we might think about it or be able to know about it. Such a view is called *realism* about the subject matter in question. Some philosophers, *anti-realists*, have wanted to deny that (say) the past is independent of our cognitive capacities in this sort of way.

Anti-realist views come in two flavors. The most extreme denies that thoughts, or sentences, about some subject matter are so much as *capable* of being true or false. This view is perhaps best known in moral philosophy, where it is called *ethical anti-realism* or, in its most famous manifestation, *emotivism*. An emotivist holds that ethical claims, like ‘Murder is wrong’, are not fit to be true or false: They are, rather, mere expressions of attitude, meaning, when properly understood, something like, “Ooh, murder, ick”—which obviously isn't the kind of thing that can be true or false.

We will not be studying these sorts of anti-realist views in this course. Our attention will, instead, be focused upon views which *accept* that thoughts and statements about a given subject matter can be true or false, but deny that the *kind* of truth the statements can have is the fully ‘objective’ truth a realist would think they can have. Such views thus do not deny that, say, statements of mathematics *are* true or false: Rather, such views hold that the truth or falsity of mathematical statements is not *independent* of us. An extreme version of this position would hold, for example, that what is true in mathematics is just what we *know* to be true; a more sophisticated version holds that what is true is what we *can* know to be true. But the interest of such views lies not in the specific version of this connection they attempt to establish, but

rather in the very fact that they do attempt to forge a connection between *truth*, on the one hand, and our *cognitive capacities*, on the other.

One well-known exponent of such a view is Hilary Putnam, who, in a series of papers beginning in the late 1970s, argued for a view known as *Internal Realism*. We will read two of his papers from this period and two of the many responses to them. We will turn our attention toward Michael Dummett's version of anti-realism. Dummett's work is *extremely* difficult: We shall not, therefore, attempt to look at his view in its most general form nor even to look at what he would consider the most central case, mathematics. We shall instead try to get some sense for his position by looking at some of his writings on the reality of the past, which he himself regards as one of the most difficult cases for his variety of anti-realism.

### **Prerequisites**

There are no specific pre-requisites for this course, although it is *not* a suitable first course for those who have had no prior exposure to philosophy. It is expected that students enrolled will understand how to read philosophy, how to analyze and criticize a philosophical argument, and so forth. Be warned that many of the readings are *very* difficult. There will be some material for which a basic understanding of formal logic (as provided by e.g. Phil 140 or QR 22) would be helpful.

### **Course Structure and Requirements**

The course will meet Tuesday and Thursday, at 1pm, in Emerson 104. There will be an undergraduate section for the course, taught by a teaching fellow, if enrollment should warrant the appointment of one, or by the Instructor, if not. There will also be a graduate section, which is open *only* to graduate students in Philosophy, intended to provide them with an opportunity to discuss matters at a more advanced level than would be appropriate in the context of the lectures.

Every student in the course will be required to submit one short paper, from a list of topics announced on 1 March, to be due 22 March. This will be a *short expository* piece: The *maximum length* is 1500 words (or about 5 standard pages). This paper provides a chance for students to do some writing and get some feedback, and for me to make sure that everyone is with the program.

For undergraduates, I should be able to offer a choice between writing a longer term paper, of about 12-15 pages, and writing a second short paper while also taking a final examination. Graduate students, on the other hand, will be required to write a term paper of 20-25 pages. The topic for the second paper is to be chosen by the student; it should be cleared with me well before the due date. The paper itself will be due on the last day of reading period, 16 May—though it will be accepted any time before that. I will be happy to read and comment on drafts submitted far enough ahead of time. Drafts handed in by the end of classes are *guaranteed* to be returned with substantial comments within a few days. Any submitted later will be handled on a first-come, first-served basis. *I strongly encourage students to submit drafts.*

For undergraduates, the paper should be 3500-5000 words (that's about 12-15 pages), with a maximum length of 5000 words (twelve standard pages). I really do mean *maximum* (and know how to count). For graduate students, the paper should be between twenty and twenty-five pages, with 7500 words being a maximum. Concision is a virtue. Practice it.

### **Readings**

The only required text for the course is David Lewis's *On the Plurality of Worlds*. Otherwise, we shall be reading a number of articles by different authors. Copies of the articles in question will be put on reserve in Robbins Library. It will be up to each of you to make copies of the articles along the way, or to make a copy of the complete packet. Please make your copies *from the photocopies deposited in the library*, so as not to damage the books or journals in which the articles are printed.

## Syllabus

1 February Introductory Meeting

### Abstract Objects

- 6 February Paul Benacerraf, "Mathematical Truth", in P. Benacerraf and H. Putnam, eds., *Readings in the Philosophy of Mathematics*, 2d ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 403-20
- 8 February Sylvain Bromberger, "Types and Tokens in Linguistics", in A. George, ed., *Reflections on Chomsky* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), pp. 58-89
- 13-15 February Gottlob Frege, *Foundations of Arithmetic*, 2d revised ed. (Evanston IL: Northwestern University Press, 1980), pp. 58-81; Crispin Wright, *Frege's Conception of Numbers as Objects* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1985), sections i-iii, v, vii-viii
- 20 February Hartry Field, "Platonism for Cheap?" in his *Realism, Mathematics, and Modality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), pp. 147-70
- 22 February Michael Dummett, *Frege: Philosophy of Language*, 2d ed. (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), Ch. 14
- 27 February Richard Heck, "Syntactic Reductionism", *Philosophia Mathematica* 8 (2000), pp. 124-49

### Modal Realism

- 1 March A Short Introduction to Modal Logic  
*Topics announced for Short Paper*
- 6-8 March David Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds*, Chs. 1-2; §§1.3-1.5 and §§2.5-2.7 may be skimmed
- 13 March Robert Adams, "Theories of Actuality", *Noûs* 8 (1974), pp. 211-31
- 15 March Robert Stalnaker, "Possible Worlds", *Noûs* 10 (1976), pp. 65-75
- 20 March David Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds*, Ch. 3; §3.3 may be skimmed
- 22 March Gideon Rosen, "Modal Fictionalism", *Mind* 99 (1990), pp. 327-54; John Divers, "Modal Fictionalism Cannot Deliver Possible Worlds Semantics", *Analysis* 55 (1995), pp. 81-8  
*Short Paper Due*

### A Recent Proposal for an Anti-metaphysical Conception

- 3-5 April Steve Yablo, "Does Ontology Rest on a Mistake?", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, sup vol. 72 (1998), pp. 229-61, and Andre Gallois, "Does Ontology Rest on a Mistake?", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, sup vol. 72 (1998), pp. 263-83

### Putnam's Internal Realism

- 10 April Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth, and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), Ch. 1
- 12 April *No Class*
- 17 April Hilary Putnam, "Models and Reality", in his *Realism and Reason: Philosophical Papers*, vol. 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 1-25
- 19 April David Lewis, "Putnam's Paradox", *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 62 (1984), pp. 221-36

- 24 April Crispin Wright, “On Putnam’s Proof That We Are Not Brains in Vats”, in P. Clark and B. Hale, eds., *Reading Putnam* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), pp. 216-41  
 For a slightly more recent, but similar, discussion, see Bob Hale and Crispin Wright, “Putnam’s Model-theoretic Argument Against Metaphysical Realism”, in B. Hale and C. Wright, eds., *A Companion to the Philosophy of Language* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), pp. 427-57.

### Dummett’s Anti-realism

- 26 April Michael Dummett, “The Reality of the Past”, in *Truth and Other Enigmas* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), pp. 358-74  
 For a general overview of this sort of argument, see Crispin Wright, “Introduction”, in his *Realism, Meaning, and Truth* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), pp. 1-43, esp. pp. 1-29. The *locus classicus* for Dummett’s treatment is “The Philosophical Basis of Intuitionistic Logic”, in *Truth and Other Enigmas*, pp. 215-47. For the general theory of language that lies behind the argument, see Dummett’s “What is a Theory of Meaning? (I)” and “What is a Theory of Meaning? (II)”, in his *The Seas of Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp. 1-33 and 34-93, resp. Dummett’s *The Logical Basis of Metaphysics* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1991) is a book-length treatment of the problem.
- 1 May John McDowell, “On ‘The Reality of the Past’”, in C. Hookway and P. Pettit, eds., *Action and Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), pp. 127-44  
 For other discussions by McDowell, see his “Anti-realism and the Epistemology of Understanding”, in H. Parret and J. Bourveresse, eds., *Meaning and Understanding* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1981), pp. 225-48, and “Truth-Conditions, Bivalence, and Verificationism”, in Evans and McDowell, *Truth and Meaning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), pp. 42-66. For some worries about McDowell’s reading, see Richard Heck, “Use and Meaning”, *draft*, available at <http://www.people.fas.harvard.edu/~heck/use.pdf>.
- 3 May Crispin Wright, “Realism, Truth-Value Links, Other Minds, and the Past” and “Anti-realism, Timeless Truth, and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*”, both in his *Realism, Meaning, and Truth* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), pp. 85-106 and pp. 176-203  
 Wright has written extensively on these issues: Most of the other papers in *Realism, Meaning, and Truth* are concerned with them, in one way or another. A more recent and far-reaching study is his *Truth and Objectivity* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1992). For something of an overview, see Bob Hale, “Realism and Its Oppositions”, in *A Companion to the Philosophy of Language*, pp. 271-309.
- 8 May (makeup) John Campbell, “The Realism of Memory”, in R. Heck, ed., *Language, Thought and Logic: Essays in Honour of Michael Dummett* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 157-81
- 16 May *Last Class*  
*Long Paper Due*