

Philosophy 145 Realism and Anti-realism

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General Remarks on the Course

Philosophy 145, Realism and Anti-realism, is intended to introduce students 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 what 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 at least one of 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 find 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 then 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.

Course Meetings

The course will meet for lecture every Tuesday and Thursday at 11am in Emerson 104. There will be a section for the course, which will meet at a time and place to be determined. The section will most likely be taught by the instructor, unless enrollment should warrant the appointment of a teaching fellow. This section is intended for undergraduates and for graduate students *not* in the philosophy department. It is open only to those enrolled in the class. There will also be a graduate section, the meeting-time for which will be arranged during the second week of the course, and which is open to graduate students *in philosophy* who are enrolled in the course. Auditors will be welcome, as well, unless enrollment is too large.

Prerequisites

There are no formal prerequisites for Philosophy 145, but it is not a suitable first course for those who have had no prior exposure to philosophy. It is expected that those enrolled will know 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. Since there will be some material for which a basic understanding of formal logic would be very helpful, it is *strongly recommended* that students have had some exposure to formal logic, as it would be taught in Quantitative Reasoning 22, for example, but those with strong backgrounds in mathematics probably do not need any formal preparation. If you have any question about your background, please speak with the instructor.

Requirements

Every student in the course will be required to submit two short (3-4 page) papers, from a list of assigned topics, to be due on 25 March and 20 April. For undergraduates and graduate students from departments other than philosophy, I should be able to offer a choice between (i) writing a longer term paper, of 15-20 pages, and (ii) writing a second short paper (this one 8-10 pages) and also taking a final examination. Graduate students in philosophy will be required to write a term paper of 20-25 pages. Final papers are due the last day of reading period, which is 19 May 2004.

Philosophy is best learned by doing, and that includes, most importantly, discussion. All enrolled students are therefore expected to attend both the lectures and the sections, and to participate in the discussions held there.

Readings

The only required text for the course is David Lewis's *On the Plurality of Worlds*. Unfortunately, being disorganized, I only realized we would be needing this book after book orders were submitted, so it is not available at the Coop. I will order a number of copies once we know how many we will need. 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

5 February *No Meeting: Instructor Out of Town*
10 February Introductory Meeting

Ontology: Abstract Objects

12 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
14 February Sylvain Bromberger, "Types and Tokens in Linguistics", in A. George, ed., *Reflections on Chomsky* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), pp. 58-89
19 & 24 February Gottlob Frege, *Foundations of Arithmetic*, 2d revised ed. (Evanston IL: Northwestern University Press, 1980), pp. 67-81; Crispin Wright, *Frege's Conception of Numbers as Objects* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1985), sections i-iii, v, vii-viii
26 February Hartry Field, "Platonism for Cheap?" in his *Realism, Mathematics, and Modality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), pp. 147-70
2 March Michael Dummett, *Frege: Philosophy of Language*, 2d ed. (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), Ch. 14
4 March Richard Heck, "Syntactic Reductionism", *Philosophia Mathematica* 8 (2000), pp. 124-49

Modal Realism

9 March A Short Introduction to Modal Logic
Topics announced for First Short Paper
11 & 16 March David Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds*, Chs. 1-2; sections 1.3-1.5 and 2.5-2.7 may be skimmed
18 March Robert Adams, "Theories of Actuality", *Noûs* 8 (1974), pp. 211-31
23 March Robert Stalnaker, "Possible Worlds", *Nous* 10 (1976), pp. 65-75

- 25 March David Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds*, Ch. 3; section 3.3 may be skimmed
- 30 March, 1 April *First Short Paper Due*
Spring Break
- 6 April Gideon Rosen, "Modal Fictionalism", *Mind* 99 (1990), pp. 327-54
Topics Announced for Second Short Paper
- 8 April Jason Stanley, "Hermeneutic Fictionalism", *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 25 (2001), pp. 36-71

Putnam's Internal Realism

- 13 April Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth, and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), Ch. 1
- 15 April Hilary Putnam, "Models and Reality", in his *Realism and Reason: Philosophical Papers, vol. 3* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 1-25
- 20 April David Lewis, "Putnam's Paradox", *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 62 (1984), pp. 221-36
Second Short Paper Due
- 22 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

Dummett's Anti-realism

- 27 April Michael Dummett, "The Reality of the Past", in *Truth and Other Enigmas*, pp. 358-74
- 29 April 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
- 4 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
- 6 May 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
- 19 May *Last Class*
Final Paper Due