Problems with Discourse on 'Reality in Itself'

by

Damien Michael Lally
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The subtlety of nature far surpasses
the subtlety of sense and intellect,
so that men's fine meditations,
speculations and endless discussions
are quite insane, *except that there is
no one who notices.*
  - F. Bacon, *Novum Organon*, Aphorism X.

Do not stay in the field!
Nor climb out of sight.
The best view of the world
Is from a medium height.
  - F. Nietzsche, *Gay Science*,
"Worldy Wisdom".

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It is by all means a matter of *common sense* (and by this I do not necessarily mean anything more than *our* common sense: the kind of basic thinking and basic ideas common to *our* community in particular) to suppose there is something greater than ourselves afoot – to suppose there is some kind of *fact of the matter* transcending our own subjective 'take' on the way things are. We may say, for instance, that there is a fact of the matter as to what family life is like *inside* the Jones' household because it is obvious that *we*, even as neighbors, are not in a position to know with real certainty what it is like; or we may say that someone's father is 'out of touch with reality' when his beliefs blatantly contradict what we know to be the case; likewise we suppose there is a certain way that engines work even if we know nothing about them, because we are certainly capable of driving cars without so much as an inkling! The task of understanding the way things are, as opposed to the way they merely appear to us, is a task we undertake on a daily basis in a variety of ways for any number of purposes, and it is, for the most part, a task that requires little more than a willingness to observe one's surroundings and to *learn* from what one has observed.

Certain philosophers, too, have maintained that the belief in a reality 'greater than ourselves' is a matter of common sense; and we might be convinced of this were the degree of theoretical complexity in *their* notion of reality not so striking. For the purposes of philosophical discourse, the vague, quotidian notion of a certain *fact of the matter* no longer suffices – it has been reworked into the thornier concept of *reality as it is in itself*. The aim of such discourse is, after all (it is said), to uncover what is *ultimately* true – what is *ultimately* real; and there is the possibility that our everyday concept of 'reality' is inadequate because it designates whatever state of affairs *we all tend to accept* as 'ultimately

real' more so than it designates the way things 'really' are *in themselves* (in the Kantian sense: '*Ding an Sich*'); more so than it designates, that is, the way things are entirely apart from the ways we are accustomed to dealing with them.

This paper is *not* about common sense, but it does begin with the observation that it requires a great deal *more* than common sense to see why we ought to believe in a reality whose existence and nature are, by conceptual definition, so utterly removed from any and all of the ways by which we ordinarily understanding our surroundings. To subscribe to a firm belief in any aspect of *this* sort of reality, I think, must require a good deal of argumentation on the part of those philosophers who typically assert (or even deny) its existence. To say *anything* about it in the context of serious discourse and reach any level of *success* in doing so requires more than a passing reference to common sense – it requires abidance to our normal expectations to discursive conduct: it requires that these claims be *properly vetted*. This paper *will* concern whether or not discourse pertaining to the existence and nature of *reality in itself* has a clear method of 'properly vetting' its claims. Generally, attention will be drawn to a few of the more serious problems that present themselves to the success – and even the very *purpose* – of the discursive practice of making assertions about 'reality' in the philosophical sense of the word.

The first chapter concerns the characteristics of philosophical discourse on 'reality as it is in itself' – the focus of the light criticism to follow. It addresses, to summarize, the two main philosophical questions regarding 'reality' around which most of this discourse gathers – the question of 'reality's' existence and the question of its nature. Examining the kind of claims that relate and respond to each of these questions reveals that the practice of making and maintaining claims about 'reality as it is in itself' is largely an

institution of *realist philosophy*. The remainder of the chapter deals with the deeply

ontological character of realism, such that many realists characterize realism as an

exclusively ontological kind of doctrine rather than as one that includes, say, any

epistemological or semantic aspects. Examples of ontological realism are given, and the

chapter concludes with the observation that realism, as a collection of associated claims

and assertions, is fundamentally a *discursive phenomenon* – thus solidifying the primary

target of the following criticism as the body of *realist discourse*: the main body of

conversation in which claims about 'reality as it is in itself' are defended and

promulgated.

The second chapter initiates the 'critical phase' of the paper, in which I take up a

somewhat verificationist line of criticism. Important distinctions are made between the

'verificationist' ideas I'll be adopting and the more orthodox (positivist) form of

verificationism shared by A.J. Ayer and (the earlier) Rudolf Carnap. The most important

distinction is that my approach is vastly more relaxed: rather than hold that claims we

cannot verify are *literally insignificant* or *meaningless*, I hold that they are *all the more difficult to*

believe. Should it be shown that there *are* truly stubborn problems with the manner in

which realist claims are substantiated, it will follow that we have no good reason to

believe them; thus, in that event, the claims of realist discourse would not be seen as

incoherent so much as *unworthy of our consideration*. The remainder of the chapter inquires

after what sort of 'evidence' can be used in the substantiation or verification of realist

claims, and indeed, *whether* any sort of 'evidence' could even be considered appropriate in

the first place. The chapter concludes with the broad understanding that there may be

no clear means for realists to utilize evidence, which suggests there may be no clear

reason at all for us to take their claims into consideration. The paper concludes with a brief, informal discussion of what we might *do* in the wake of this realization.

Before getting into the nature of the discourse that surrounds the philosophical conception of 'reality as it is in itself', however, some treatment of that concept will prove to be necessary.

(i) 'Reality as it is in itself'.

'Reality as it is in itself' (or simply 'reality in itself') as a peculiar bit of philosophical jargon is typically intended to express the notion of the world in its autonomy; that is, the world as a state of affairs that is fundamentally distinct from and indifferent to the particular ways in which it could be construed or interpreted: reality as it is *in itself* rather than reality as it is *taken to be* and hence as it is, in a way, *outside of itself*. 'Objectivity' is often thought to be a fitting word for this sort of autonomy, insofar as such a world "exists and has its nature whatever we believe, think, or can discover"[1]; hence 'reality in itself' is often said to designate some *objective* fact-of-the-matter.

Yet 'objectivity' offers a wide degree of interpretive latitude. On the one hand it may seem natural to frame the notion in contrast to the individual, such that we say something is 'objective' if it 'exists and has its nature' regardless of what the *individual subject* 'believes, thinks, or can discover'. On that view, something is said to be 'objective' so long as it is in some sense *external* to the individual subject – that is to say, so long as it is accessible to some wider group or community – and thus *more stable* than most of what the individual is likely to perceive or have in mind. 'Externality' and 'stability' appear to be useful specifications in sociological circles to the extent that they render as plausible the objectivity of certain social phenomena, e.g., rules and institutions. For instance, the

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[1] Michael Devitt, *Realism & Truth,* p. 13.

set of *rules* for any particular card game – say, Euchre – is ideally a distinct protocol that

is agreed upon by the group of players intending to participate in the present game of

Euchre. The set of rules is '*external* to the individual' in the sense that, throughout the

course of the game, each unique player (assuming the players are all informed and

honest) will grasp, refer to and abide by *one and the same protocol*; and the set of rules is

stable to the extent that it is agreed upon as a fixed structure that will regulate gameplay

consistently. So, whether or not Jones likes it, the Jack of clubs *is* the left bower when

spades is the trump suit; and he must be prepared to accept this at all times – even when

it means the Ace he has played is worthless because it has been trumped by the Jack.

This is so because Jones has agreed to abide by a common set of rules that does not

cater to his individual ends – a set of rules that ensures the same result for any and all

such similar hands. Hence, by the standards under present consideration, the set of rules

for Euchre – and indeed, any set of rules or 'rule-like things' in general – ideally

constitutes an *objective* structure in compliance with which individual subjects are meant

to coordinate their actions. (The very same properties of externality and stability can be

found, among other places, in the laws that govern members of a society, as well as in

the grammatical structure that is shared by the interlocutors of a linguistic community.

For the grammar of a given language is *external* insofar as it is the common standard, the

'rules' – speaking loosely, of course – for discourse as recognized by a greater

community[2] that allows each and every speaker therein to be 'on the same wavelength',

as it were. The *stability* of grammar should be put more delicately, as languages can and

do change substantially over time; yet it seems that some level of consistency is required

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[2] This may presuppose the Wittgensteinian idea that language is fundamentally social, and cannot be private. Even if 'private languages' were possible, though, it seems the grammar could nevertheless be objective, albeit in an extremely diminished sense insofar as it could only be minimally externalized.

at any given point for the discourse between individuals at that point to be sufficiently coherent).

In addition to rules and 'rule-like things', broader social institutions – here roughly conceived of as well-entrenched arrays of standards and practices that pertain to specific areas of a culture's social life and behavior – have also been seen as objective entities on the present understanding of the term. David Bloor in particular has claimed that

> [t]he taken-for-granted practices sanctioned by a group have just this quality of being external to the individual. They have a stability far greater than the individual's changing desires. They are the common ground where individuals meet. They are shared. So institutions satisfy the general conditions for objectivity.[3]

Along the same lines, Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann have emphasized the perceived 'facticity' of social institutions:

> The institutions, as historical and objective facticities, confront the individual as undeniable facts. The institutions are *there*, external to him, persistent in their reality, whether he likes it or not. He cannot wish them away. They resist his attempts to change or evade them. They have coercive power over him, both in themselves, and by the sheer force of their facticity…[4]

On the account offered by Berger and Luckmann, a given social institution presupposes some sort of technical knowledge of the activity to which it refers. (For the 'institution of hunting', to cite their example, there will be "a vocabulary designating the various modes of hunting, the weapons to be employed, the animals that serve as prey, and so on", as well as some larger "collection of recipes that must be learned if one is to hunt correctly"[5]). This is arguably the case for rules and 'rule-like things' as well: the protocol for Euchre mentioned earlier requires a working knowledge of everything from what card-playing entails generally to the concepts of 'trump suit' and 'right/left bower';

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3 David Bloor, "A Sociological Theory of Objectivity", pp. 229-230.

4 P.L. Berger and T. Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality,* p. 60.

5 P.L. Berger and T. Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality,* p. 66.

likewise, the relevant legal concepts must be adequately understood before the members of a society can *knowingly* break or abide by its laws; and so forth. This is a point that needs emphasizing, for insofar as social phenomena like rules and institutions presuppose *any* sort of knowledge at all, they must consequently presuppose rational or cognitive activity; and the same, of course, is true for any broader social or institutional 'world' that these phenomena might be said to further constitute.

Here, then, there is the distinct possibility of there being some certain item – be it a set of rules, an institution, the broader 'social world', etc. – that, despite being perceived by the individual as an *objective* state of affairs, nevertheless cannot "acquire an ontological status apart from the human activity that produced it"[6]. The moral here, obviously, is not that *externality* and *stability* pick out only those things that are essentially the products of cognition on a communal or societal level (e.g. shared technical knowledge); rather, the moral is that on *this* understanding of 'objectivity' one cannot readily classify entities along the lines of a distinction between cognitive or non-cognitive origin. For the protocol of Euchre will be just as much an 'objective fact-of-the-matter' on this view as will be the molecular structure of water: both will be shown to exist as *stable externalities* relative to the beliefs and knowledge of the individual subject. To be sure, the properties of externality and stability required for 'objective existence' – so construed – are not at all *ontological* properties; which amounts to saying that 'objectivity' – so construed – is not an ontologically loaded concept.

On the other hand there is what Nicholas Rescher has termed 'ontological objectivity': a conception of objectivity that "turns on the pivotal contrast between that which is in some way connected to existing things and that which is somehow ideational

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[6] P.L. Berger and T. Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality,* pp. 60-61.

or mind-bound"[7]. For something to be 'objective' in this sense it must *stand apart* from mental activity in general, whether such activity is rational or 'pre-rational'.[8] While rules and institutions, insofar as they assume technical knowledge, are capable of standing apart from the rational processes of a *given individual*, they are surely incapable of escaping classification as fundamentally rational phenomena in the broader sense – they cannot stand apart from mental activity *in general.* Even 'pre-' or 'non-rational' mental items, e.g. sensations or Kantian 'pure intuitions', require that there be some sort of perceiving or intuiting mind: hence they too do not *stand apart* in the required manner.[9] Nor can any 'phenomenal', 'apparent', or 'represented' realm be objective (on this conception of the term) so long as it had its foundation in perception; for, as Devitt has observed, "[n]o object that is tied to perception *for its very existence* has the required independence"[10]. It may be best to illustrate the 'required independence' in modal terms: x is objective, on this conception of 'objectivity', if and only if it is possible for x to exist without there being *any* sort of mental activity. That is to say, x must be capable of existing independently of the mental; hence, to put it bluntly, something is 'objective' provided it 'exists and has its nature' regardless of whether or not there are minds. Proponents of 'ontological objectivity' characteristically seek to grasp or point to whatever state of affairs there is independently of how things happen to be observed, interpreted, conceptually constructed or, generally, *represented.* The 'objectivity' they reference

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[7] Nicholas Rescher, *Objectivity: The Obligations of Impersonal Reason,* p. 4.

[8] The obvious exception here concerns objects like chairs and tables that would exist in their present form *only* through having been rationally designed. Without clarification, it may seem as though one is arguing that chairs and tables cannot be objective in this sense. One way of dealing with this could be to say that while the physical material of these items *stands apart* – and in some sense has always stood apart – from mental activity despite its being intentionally reconfigured, the corresponding concepts 'chair' or 'table' applied over it nevertheless depend on mental activity, and so do *not* stand apart.

[9] Kant certainly thought of pure intuition as an objective feature of the human mind, but it should be emphasized that his understanding of objectivity was likely closer to the former notion discussed above. Had he thought of objectivity as implying fundamentally non-mental origin, he could not have counted pure intuition as objective.

[10] Michael Devitt, *Realism & Truth,* p. 14.

concerns a mode of existence ultimately distinct from how things are or could be 'taken to be' in the broadest sense of the phrase: here the distinctions between 'cognitive or non-cognitive origin' and between 'representation or represented' are simply taken for granted.

The problem, then, with describing 'reality in itself' as some *objective* fact-of-the-matter – in which case the phrase 'reality in itself' would seem to be interchangeable with the phrase 'objective reality' – is that different audiences conceive of 'objectivity' in different ways, such that there would likely emerge radically divergent conceptions of 'reality in itself'. If, for instance, by 'objective' one has in mind the more liberal understanding of 'objectivity' assumed by Bloor, Berger and Luckmann – call it 'objectivity$_1$' – on which an 'objective$_1$ fact-of-the-matter' could be any of those things that are external and stable relative to the individual subject, then 'reality in itself', when described as an objective$_1$ state of affairs, could suggest a world of subatomic particles *just as much* as it could suggest a world of rules and institutions – a social or institutional 'reality'. The expression would, in other words, bring to mind a reality that is *in itself* only to the extent that it is not merely a matter of how *the individual* takes it to be. The term 'real' could no better distinguish entities according to their ontological status than could the term 'objective$_1$' upon which it would be founded. However if by 'objectivity' one conceives of 'objectivity$_2$' – on which an 'objective$_2$ fact-of-the-matter' could only comprise those entities that are independent of all things mental: those things, recall, that would exist and have their nature even assuming the total non-existence of human minds or mental activity in general – then an 'objective$_2$ reality' would include *only* whatever has its roots *outside* any sort of representation or 'world-making' on our part. Generally speaking, human-made worlds and representations such as social or even phenomenal

'realities' would be easily distinguishable for their lack of ontological autonomy; on the criteria for objectivity$_2$ there would indeed be grounds for the claim that such 'realities' are not truly 'real'. 'Reality in itself' would have to be *in itself* to the extent that it would have nothing to do with interpreted, represented or conceptualized realities; nor with 'how reality could be taken to be' in *any and all* senses of the phrase.

It is only with this latter notion of objectivity in mind that it makes any sense to approximate 'reality in itself' to an 'objective reality'. 'Reality in itself', to the extent that it is an instance of *ontological* shoptalk, anyway, is meant to distinguish not only that state of affairs that stands apart from the individual, but also that state of affairs that would carry on being the case had there never been any sort of cognitive or perhaps even pre-cognitive force by which anything could be perceived, interpreted, conceived, synthesized and so forth.[11] (There would be little use indeed in ontology for a concept that lacked the criterion of 'mind-independence' by which it could discern those things that exist *because of us* from those that exist *regardless of us*). Though as we have seen, there is no guarantee that uttering the term 'objective' or the phrase 'objective reality' will lead the majority of listeners toward the more ontologically appropriate understanding of 'objectivity' (specified above as 'objectivity$_2$'), and thus toward the more appropriate understanding of 'reality in itself'. The more ontologically-loaded conception of 'objectivity' would have to be emphasized explicitly before 'reality in itself' (or simply 'reality') could be responsibly identified with an 'objective fact-of-the-matter'. So to the extent that the ambiguous expression 'objective reality' often functions as a catchphrase for the rather narrow ontological concept of 'reality as it is in itself', it seems its very

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[11] John Searle may have put the independence of this 'real world' more poignantly: "….when we all die, and all our representations die with us, most features of the world will remain totally unaffected; they will go on exactly as before" (John Searle, "Does the Real World Exist?", p. 18).

purpose *qua* catchphrase is defeated by the need to state beforehand the exact circumstances of its use.

So regardless of there being a 'more appropriate' interpretation of 'objectivity' to be adopted for ontological discourse, the fact remains that 'objectivity' is itself a slippery term – perhaps too slippery to count for much in specifying the ontological conception of reality. For as it stands, to say that something 'exists objectively' does not *obviously* mean that it 'exists independently of the mental'. It may prove wise to heed Devitt's advice here: if one wishes to discuss "a *non-mental* external world" – which is the goal as far as ontology is concerned – then one "must talk of more than objective existence"[12]; hence perhaps the most straightforward and responsible means of implying mind-independent existence is through an additional reference to the criterion of mind-independence *itself*.

On that note, John Heil has stated his preference to associate the doctrine of realism with mind-independence alone: "You are a realist," he wrote, "about a given domain – material objects, say, or numbers, or minds – if you regard that domain as mind independent: the domain is what it is quite independently of how we take it to be"[13]. On his conception, realism is the positive affirmation of some kind of mind-independent reality – no recourse at all is made here to the notion of objectivity. Of course, there likely remains *some* use in the task at hand for the notion of objectivity. Perhaps the most general, unspecific understanding we have of 'objective existence' – by which something is understood to be in some sense *indifferent to* or *grander than* any perception or conception of it, etc. – will help to underscore the sheer 'otherness' of reality in itself as

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[12] Michael Devitt, *Realism & Truth*, p. 13.

[13] John Heil, *From an Ontological Point of View*, p. 11.

an unperceived, unconceptualized (etc.) state of affairs. At any rate, though there are certainly good reasons to think mind-independence *implies* some kind of objective existence, I will assume – at the risk of sounding redundant – that references to mind-independence do not make mention of objectivity *wholly* obsolete. While I will leave much of the work of specifying precisely *how* or *why* 'reality in itself' can be called objective to the criterion for mind-independence, I will not let that criterion do *all* the talking. 'Reality in itself' – and more broadly, the ontological concept of 'reality' – will thus be treated in the following chapters as relating to some world, realm, plane of existence (etc.) that is *both* objective and mind-independent; comprising whatever field or totality of entities there is that "objectively exists independently of the mental"[14].

I. DISCOURSE ON REALITY AND ONTOLOGICAL COMMITMENT

In laying out the meaning of the phrase 'reality in itself' in the preceding Introduction, I attempted to probe an *ontological concept* in relative isolation from the claims and questions that are often brought up in connection with it, e.g. claims and questions pertaining to the *existence* or the *nature* of such a reality. I hoped to avoid altogether the manner in which the concept of 'reality as it is in itself' is engaged critically as a subject of philosophical discourse: I was not much concerned with, for instance, any of the doctrines by which one affirms or denies the existence of an 'ultimate reality' beyond human representations and interests, nor was I concerned with the internal coherence of either such stance. Rather I sought to distinguish the underlying conception of 'reality' around which this sort of ontological discourse gathers: the

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[14] Michael Devitt, *Realism & Truth,* p. 15.

notion, to reiterate, of the world 'as it is in itself' – in the sense that it would be an objective state of affairs independent of any mental activity. With the operative concept of 'reality' set in mind, however, we are better poised to examine its active role as a subject of serious inquiry. For the real brunt of my criticism is not, after all, directed toward 'reality' as an inert concept but rather toward the condition of the body of discourse that surrounds it; and further, on that basis, toward the very impulse to talk about it in the first place. Thus I turn to the *discursive practice* of making serious assertions that relate to the existence and to the nature of an objective, mind-independent reality.

The practice of making and maintaining claims of this sort about 'reality as it is in itself' largely belongs, as one can easily surmise, to the field of ontology – specifically, it belongs to those spheres of ontological discourse that relate and respond to questions of (i) *whether* in fact there does exist some unconceptualized, mind-independent reality and of (ii) *what* sort of things or 'stuff' this reality comprises. I will examine the kind of ontological statements that are made in connection to both questions, beginning with the former 'question of e*xistence*': 'Does an objective, mind-independent reality even exist?'. Generally, two 'constellations' can be identified in the body of discourse that relates and responds directly to this question: the one constellation of discursive formations in which the existence of such a world is *generally affirmed* and the opposing constellation in which it is *generally denied* – I am speaking here, of course, of the difference between realist and anti-realist constellations, respectively.

(i) Discourse relating to the 'question of existence'.

Ontological realists charge themselves with determining what sorts of things *really* exist. Though in much the same way that 'realism' is often custom tailored to fit any number of specific fields in philosophy (such that "we may speak of ontological,

semantical, epistemological, axiological, methodological, and ethical realism"[15], to name a few), there is a number of distinct species of realism that are possible *within* the field of ontology alone. So, this image of a 'realist constellation' depicts, more precisely, a system of diverse – yet closely related – discursive formations, each of which constitutes *a* realism that typically affirms the 'real' existence of a *particular set or sum of things* (everyday 'common sense' macroscopic objects, and/or unobservable entities posited in scientific theories, for instance). Now there is, at least in principle, a plethora of things whose 'real' existence could be asserted in this fashion – that is: any number of entities or groups of entities that could be substituted for *x* in the claim '*x* really exists'. Despite both the wide variety of possible *realisms* in ontological discourse and the likelihood of considerable disunity between them, though, they share a common thread: above all else, the *kind* of existence that each of them is concerned with is precisely the objective, mind-independent existence so far described. More to the point: most if not all realists in ontology think of this kind of existence in particular as the *only* kind that counts towards something's being ultimately 'real'.

We can predict that any specific *realism about x* within the confines of ontology, then, is more than likely to involve some thesis asserting the objective, mind-independent existence of *x*. Notice, though, that in the interest of obtaining a *general* form of ontological realism, the value of *x* is unimportant; rather it is the very willingness to assert *anything* as existing objectively and independently of the mental that seems to constitute the underlying characteristic of realism (or, to put it in negative terms: there simply could not be an advocate of ontological realism who was content with the claim that '*nothing* really exists'). Provided this is indeed the case, as it surely seems to be, then

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[15] Ilkka Niiniluoto, *Critical Scientific Realism*, p. 1.

even the most unspecific of affirmative existence claims ought still to be within the bounds of ontological realism. In fact, Devitt *has* recognized this most ambiguous of claims, dubbing it 'the weakest form of realism': an assertion of 'real' existence that "is completely unspecific about what exists; it requires only that *something* does"[16]. So long as the objective, mind-independent existence of 'something' suffices for realism, realism requires only a commitment to the bare fact of an objective, mind-independent state-of-affairs, however little can be known thereof. In other words it is the affirmation of a particular plane of existence – or of a particular *kind of reality* – rather than the affirmation of any particular set of entities therein that defines 'realism' as a broader class of ontological positions. Ilkka Niiniluoto has thus developed the core thesis of realism: "As an ontological thesis, realism is the doctrine that there exists a mind-independent reality"[17]. He has written further, echoing Devitt: "The thesis of ontological realism does not say anything about the *nature* of mind-independent reality – except its existence"[18].

Though this thesis is perhaps the nearest in the vicinity of a *definition* of realism,[19] it describes only realism in its barest, least committal form; which is to say that it conceals the boldness and confidence typically found in most realist accounts of the nature and furniture of the world 'as it is in itself'. Nevertheless it embodies the ontological commitment shared by all realists and effectively identifies realism as a class of discursive formations under which the *existence* of an objective, mind-independent reality is widely affirmed.

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[16] Michael Devitt, *Realism & Truth,* p. 15.

[17] Ilkka Niiniluoto, *Critical Scientific Realism,* p. 21.

[18] Ilkka Niiniluoto, *Critical Scientific Realism*, p. 28. My italics.

[19] Searle thinks this thesis exhaustively defines ontological realism (see his "Does the Real World Exist?", pp. 18-19), as does Devitt, though it should be noted that Devitt finds such a minimal commitment deeply uninteresting and prefers a richer form of realism (Michael Devitt, *Realism & Truth*, p. 15).

The opposing constellation of discursive formations relating to this question – which I referred to as the 'anti-realist constellation' – is that cluster of doctrines throughout which the existence of an objective, mind-independent 'reality in itself' would characteristically be *denied*. I wish to point out first that there is some clarification needed for my use of the 'anti-realist' label here: as is the case with the 'realist' label, there are often many doctrines that apply; and this is true even for those doctrines that relate exclusively to ontological discourse. David Chalmers, for instance, thinks of 'ontological anti-realism' as being "committed to denying that [ontological] theses have objective and determinate truth values"[20]; in other words, he conceives of ontological anti-realism as itself a primarily *metaontological* view: anti-realism *about* ontology and the statements made in ontological discourse themselves. *This* sort of claim is of course markedly distinct from that claim by which the existence of an objective, mind-independent reality is *flatly denied*: Chalmers' anti-realist would simply not be willing to make this latter assertion insofar as it presupposes that the ontological question of whether or not such a reality exists could even have a definite answer.

The kind of anti-realist position I seek to specify just now would not be advocated by those anti-realists who esteem themselves "above the metaphysical fray"[21] in resorting to metaontological criticism of ontological disputes. Rather the kind of position that I seek to identify is one that would confront the general thesis of realism *head-on*: I have in mind those species of anti-realism in which the *very same question* of whether or not there is a world independent of us would be addressed, but given the

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[20] David Chalmers, "Ontological Anti-Realism", p. 79.

[21] John Heil, *From an Ontological Point of View*, p. 59.

alternative answer.[22] The proponents of this sort of view are those who would be

operating exclusively *within* the parameters of ontological discourse in maintaining, as

Searle put it quite succinctly, "it is impossible that there should be a mind-independent

reality"[23]. This kind of view is often attributed to George Berkeley, and not without

good reason:

> Some truths are so near and obvious to the mind that a man need only open his eyes
> to see them. Such I take this important one to be, namely, that all the choir of
> heaven and furniture of the earth, in a word, all those bodies which compose the
> mighty frame of the world, do not have any subsistence without a mind – that their
> being [*esse*] is to be perceived or known, that consequently so long as they are not
> actually perceived by me or do not exist in my mind or that of any other created
> spirit, they must either have no existence at all or else subsist in the mind of some
> eternal spirit – it being perfectly unintelligible and involving all the absurdity of
> abstraction to attribute to any single part of them an existence independent of any
> spirit.[24]

On the standard interpretation of Berkeley's claim that for something *to be* is for it *to be*

perceived or for it *to perceive*,[25] it follows that it is impossible for something to exist

independently of perceiving minds: "the only things that exist, according to Berkeley, are

ideas and the minds (or immaterial spirits) that have them"[26]. Hence reality – here

specifically meaning whatever objective structure there is 'external' to minds in any sense

at all – *as it is in itself* is simply the totality of that which *is perceived*, or better yet, it is the

reality *of* perception; so even *as it is in itself* it is inherently mental or ideational. There are,

of course, alternatives to the standard interpretation. For example, there is the question

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[22] Note also that I am *not* referring to any specific anti-realist theses (e.g. anti-realism *about x*) but rather a general, unspecific anti-realist claim about mind-independent reality as a whole that could best be seen as the antithesis to the unspecific realist thesis described above.

[23] John Searle, "Does the Real World Exist?", p. 21. This is not, of course, Searle's own view; but merely his summary of the views he takes to rival his own.

[24] George Berkeley, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, pp. 471-472.

[25] *Esse est percipi aut percipere.*

[26] Roger Ariew and Eric Watkins, *Modern Philosophy: An Anthology of Primary Sources*, p. 386.

of whether Berkeley's idealism would best be hatched as an epistemological view relating to the possibilities of *our* knowledge and *our* representations as constrained by sensory perception rather than as an ontological view that infers – from the modes of our knowledge and representation – something about the extra-sensory existence of that which is purported to be *known* and *represented*.[27] On such an epistemological interpretation, however, an anti-realist formation would no longer relate or respond to the 'question of existence' – 'Does an objective reality exist independently of the mental?' – but rather to a separate question of whether there are any means for us to *know* of anything that might exist in such a way regardless of whether, in fact, it does. So I will set this question aside, focusing exclusively on the *ontological* interpretation of Berkeley's idealism.

I do not mean to suggest that Berkeley's idealism *should* be considered an ontological denial of the existence of a mind-independent reality – whether it *should* be is another matter entirely; at present it suffices to say that such an ontological interpretation of his work is indeed *plausible*,[28] and thus, in principle, tenable; the parameters of just such a view being obviously well-known and fleshed out at least in discursive 'theory' if not in discursive 'practice'.[29] Broadly speaking, *ontological idealism* of this sort makes, at least, for a potential position that philosophers could very well take it upon themselves to fortify and defend – regardless of whether they would do so in a well-reasoned fashion or

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[27] Searle has launched a similar criticism against the 'anti-realist' views of Humberto Maturana. Maturana, according to Searle, alleged that external reality is a construct of 'autopoietic nervous systems'. Searle's counterargument was that it is "just a non sequitur, a genetic fallacy, to infer from the collective neurophysiological causal explanation of our knowledge of the external world to the nonexistence of the external world" (John Searle, "Does the Real World Exist?", p. 22).

[28] Regardless of how convincing his 'ontological' arguments were, Bertrand Russell once wrote, "Berkeley retains the merit of having shown that the existence of matter is capable of being denied without absurdity" (Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*, p. 13).

[29] Discursive 'theory' and 'practice' here mark the distinction between, respectively, learning or anticipating the parameters of a view from an intellectual distance versus maintaining and actively arguing *for* that view; Berkeley's *ontological* idealism is indeed a well-known program to all philosophers regardless of their own conviction on the matter; as is its *epistemological* alternative.

whether they would do so purely as dogmatists. In addition to such idealism there are also solipsistic or nihilistic views that fit well within the frame of anti-realism laid out thus far; and despite the (apparent) unpopularity of such views in contemporary discourse on reality, they too nevertheless make for *potential* discursive formations. Generally, my present intention is not to determine whether any of these anti-realist formations are in fact defensible, or even whether, in the far-reaching 'discussion' constitutive of contemporary philosophy, they are in fact being defended.

The point so far – in mentioning both the realist and anti-realist 'constellations' of discursive formations – is not to provide a snapshot of the current ontological climate so much as it is to account for the *possible responses* there are to the question of whether or not there exists an objective reality that is independent of the mental. There are, as we have seen, two broad 'constellations' of possible formations in the sphere of discourse that relates and responds directly to the 'question of existence'; which is to say that the practice of making claims relating to the 'question of existence' is *in potentia* a jointly realist and anti-realist affair. The realists will emphatically assert that such a reality exists, whereas the present anti-realists – those idealists, phenomenalists, solipsists, nihilists, (etc.) within the range of strictly ontological anti-realism we have specified – will typically disagree; and for the most part this 'yes' and 'no' division accounts for the broadest range of possible answers to the question.

(ii) Discourse relating to the 'question of nature'.

So a solid portion of all that discourse that pertains to reality as it is in itself – that portion surrounding the question of reality's e*xistence* – allows for anti-realist contribution *just as much* as it does for realist contribution. However we must also consider that portion of claims that relate and respond to the question of reality's *nature*

or *composition*. To restate this question: it asks 'What sort of things does objective, mind-independent reality comprise?', or yet broader, 'What is this reality *like*?'. This should be carefully distinguished from certain other ontological questions: e.g., 'What is the ultimate furniture of the world?' or 'What exists?'; for these questions are not necessarily in reference to an objective, mind-independent reality. Certain anti-realists, for instance, could hold in relation to these questions that 'mental objects', 'sense data' or 'ideas' constitute the 'ultimate furniture of the world', or that it is these things that do, in fact, 'exist' – but what they would in effect be describing is the nature and content of a *phenomenal* world. To the extent that these questions can be interpreted in a variety of ways, they are only comparable to the 'question of nature', as I understand it, when 'ultimate furniture' refers to *objective, mind-independent* furniture or when the kind of 'existence' implied in the question of 'What exists?' is *objective, mind-independent* existence. For it is discourse on *this* kind of 'real existence' – and none other – that will be under consideration throughout; hence at the moment I am concerned with that sphere of discourse pertaining to, specifically, what there is in whatever reality lies beyond human 'world-making' and representation – or, generally, what the objective, mind-independent world is *like*.

Viewed in this way, discourse relating to the 'question of nature' draws heavily from the assumption that such a reality *does* exist. It is, therefore, difficult to imagine how there could be a significant contribution to such discourse on behalf of the sort of anti-realists cited earlier. Of course there is some sense in which these anti-realists could be said to *participate* in the conversation: in an extreme scenario they could even match realist participation by vocalizing one-by-one refutations (that is, for every realist claim such as 'it is *a*'s and *b*'s but not *c*'s that constitute objective, mind-independent reality',

there would then be some anti-realist counter-claim along the lines of 'neither *a*'s nor *b*'s nor *c*'s constitute such reality', and so forth). Given, though, the general denial of *any* reality beyond the mental that characterizes the particular brand of anti-realism I have in mind, there would appear to be no significant difference between their making *one* counter-claim against the 'real' existence of *a*'s, *b*'s and *c*'s and, say, their making *another* against the existence of *x*'s, *y*'s and *z*'s – for both counter-claims would be predicated upon the *same* basic anti-realist thesis (the lack of a mind-independent reality), and each individual claim would serve only to narrow the implications of that assumption to one particular group of entities. It should hardly surprise us that those anti-realists who maintain the outright denial of objective, mind-independent reality are suitably equipped to counter *any* specific realist formation; for *every* realist formation will appear to be flat out wrong, no matter what entities or groups of entities are purported to 'really' exist. Now, while this could theoretically enable ontological anti-realists to *participate* in discourse relating to the nature and composition of reality as it is in itself (again, by negating *each and every* specific thesis uttered by their realist counterparts), we must carefully observe that the overall anti-realist *contribution* in that event would seem to boil down to nothing more than the mere recapitulation of their core existential claim: '*there is no such reality to talk about!*'. So this core claim prevents the anti-realists I've been discussing from seriously and earnestly engaging the question of what objective, mind-independent reality is *like*.

On the other hand, insofar as realism – at its core – supposes an *affirmation* of some unconceptualized reality, the 'question of nature' is, by and large, a question that realists *are* capable of engaging; for there is, in a very basic sense, *something 'there' to talk about*. Moreover, on that same basis, it is a question that they often feel *compelled* to treat: "If

there is a reality independent of our thought," wrote William P. Alston, "it obviously behooves us to find out as much about it as possible"[30]. Thus the 'core thesis' of realism is often paired with some additional attempt at description – e.g. 'the objective world that *does* exist independently of minds comprises (or is the sum of) *x*'s and *y*'s specifically' – which distinguishes one particular realist position from another (say, that realism about *x*'s and *y*'s from another realism about *a*'s and *b*'s but not *x*'s and *y*'s). *This* is where the 'boldness' and 'confidence' so characteristic of the realist genus is shown – in the attempt to provide a detailed account of reality's *nature* and *composition* beyond the mere requisite fact of its existence *as* a world – as *some* noumenal world – indifferent to mental activity.

All talk of 'boldness' and 'confidence' aside, though, this has been to say that realists essentially have the opportunity – owing to the 'core thesis' of realism detailed earlier – to generate discourse that pertains to the nature or composition of reality as it is in itself; it has *not* been to say that *all* realists *do* offer up a description. Devitt's 'weak realist', recall, asserts nothing but the bare existential fact of unconceptualized reality: "This commits realism only to an undifferentiated, uncategorized, external world, a Kantian 'thing-in-itself'"[31]. There is certainly no attempt here to offer an account of what this reality is *like*, because the 'weak realist' takes it to be "a world we cannot know about or talk about"[32]. Bearing this in mind, I should prefer to finalize the point as follows: while it is plainly false that *all* realists contribute to the body of discourse relating and responding to the question of 'what reality is *like*', it seems reasonable enough to suppose that most if not all of the contributors to that same field of discourse maintain

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[30] William P. Alston, "Yes, Virginia, There Is a Real World", p. 620.

[31] Michael Devitt, *Realism & Truth*, p. 15.

[32] Michael Devitt, *Realism & Truth*, p. 15.

their claims under the assumption that such an objective world *does* exist independently of the mental; in other words, discourse surrounding the 'question of nature and composition of reality as it is in itself' appears to be predicated on that 'core thesis' of realism which is the affirmation of that reality's existence. Responding – *constructively* – to the 'question of nature' is then, by and large, an undertaking for realists alone, even despite the fact that not *all* realists will rally to the cause.

(iii) Discourse on reality as a primarily realist institution.

Ontological realism thus emerges as what is perhaps the best demonstration of the discursive practice of making serious assertions relating to the (i) existence *and* (ii) nature of reality in itself. At the very least, as we have seen, it is the realists who will tend to get the most mileage out of 'objective, mind-independent reality' as a subject of critical engagement: for those who, in fact-stating on the subject of reality, assert *more* than mere existential facts will likely be overwhelmingly of the realist persuasion. Or, to put the matter simply and decisively: there is a great deal more that is said by the realists about reality in formal discussion than there is by any other philosophical constituency; so my criticism of the practice of making and maintaining claims about reality as it is in itself is largely a criticism directed at ontological realists – at least, much more so than it is directed at ontological anti-realists.

'Ah', it could be said, 'but the anti-realist claim that there *is no* objective world that exists independently of the mental is an existential claim nonetheless; which is to say that even the anti-realists have something – even if it is only a *single* thing – to say about reality as it is in itself'. This, as I have already said, is undoubtedly so; naturally, then, my criticism of the discursive treatment of reality in itself *is* directed toward those practitioners of idealism, phenomenalism, etc. as well. But the reason I make it clear that

I shall be stalking realist prey in particular, rather than, say, *all* the practitioners of 'ontological discourse on reality' at once, is simply that a wide majority of claims made in 'ontological discourse on reality' either assert or imply that there *is* such a reality to relate to; hence the bulk of that discourse is indebted to one and the same assumption that characterizes *realism*.

Chalmers has argued for a sort of 'selection effect' at work in ontology: something to the effect that the more seriously one takes ontological questions, the more likely one is to 'go into ontology'.[33] To indulge: it is the realists, in my mind, who take ontological questions pertaining to reality in itself the *most seriously*; at the very least, it is almost exclusively within the realist family that the question of reality's nature and composition in particular is taken seriously. Would it not appear to be the case, then, that the discursive practice of making and maintaining claims about reality in and of itself is, principally, a predominately realist institution of ontology? In the interest of selecting a single strain of related doctrines rather than a cloud of discursive formations gathered around the subject of 'reality in itself', I shall center my criticism on realist discourse. If it is worthwhile to think of ontological discourse pertaining to reality as a deeply realist affair, then whatever criticisms are positioned to confront the main problems of realist discourse ought to inevitably draw attention to the problems of ontological discourse pertaining to reality in general, and vice versa. But first, of course, a closer look at realism itself.

(iv) Realism as a principally ontological doctrine.

The term 'realism' has, of course, referenced many a doctrine throughout the history of philosophy; among the more contemporary references is a doctrine concerning the

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[33] See David Chalmers, "Ontological Anti-Realism", p. 78.

objective truth or falsity of some disputed class of statements. This so-called realism was

perhaps best articulated by Michael Dummett in his *Truth and Other Enigmas*:

> Realism I characterize as the belief that statements of the disputed class possess an
> objective truth-value, independently of our knowing it: they are true or false in
> virtue of a reality existing independently of us. [….] That is, the realist holds that the
> meanings of statements of the disputed class are not directly tied to the kind of
> evidence for them that we can have but consist in the manner of their determination
> as true or false by states of affairs whose existence is not dependent on our
> possession of evidence for them.[34]

The sort of realism described by Dummett entails, specifically, that statement *P* of some

particular class of statements has an entirely objective, determinate truth-value regardless

of what we know. There is, as it were, this objective fact of the matter as to whether *P* is

or is not the case because the truth of *P* has *everything* to do with the way things are in a

reality that is independent of us; more precisely, the truth of *P* has everything to do with

whether or not the state of affairs that *P* refers to actually obtains or not in the world.

Because the relevant state of affairs either does or does not obtain in reality, *P* is either

determinately true or determinately false. This is, of course, still the case regardless of

whether we have any way of accessing the relevant truth conditions.

   Because certain statements are taken to be either true or false objectively depending

on their relation to an actual, independent world, some have subscribed to the idea that

the Dummettian formulation of realism stands in for or "implies [ontological] realism

since it implies that there is a reality to which statements correspond if they are true"[35].

In most circumstances, however, the *structured* 'world' that is required to ground the

determinate truth or falsity of the statements in a given class need not necessarily be a

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[34] Michael Dummett, "Realism", p. 146.

[35] John Searle, "Does the Real World Exist?", p. 19. It should be noted that Searle was not in agreement with this trend.

mind-independent reality. Even in the event that the 'disputed class' involves statements pertaining to physical reality, the Dummettian version of so-called realism "says nothing about the nature of the reality that makes physical statements true or false, *except that it is objective*"[36]. Devitt has added to this the thought that a phenomenal world could be sufficiently structured or objective to provide the truth conditions for physical statements,[37] and thus that even that variant of Dummettian realism pertaining exclusively to statements about the physical world need not entail any sort of *ontologically significant* reality. There would be, in that case, a diminished sense in which the world that corroborates statements regarding physical reality could be described as 'independent': a sense in which the fundamental mind-*dependence* of phenomenal reality could neither be escaped nor bypassed.

Of course, there *could* be a means of implying the existence of an unconceptualized reality – and hence of implying ontological realism – within the parameters of Dummettian realism; in my mind, the most obvious method for this lies in establishing those statements that regard objective, mind-independent reality as populating the 'disputed class'. The determinate truth-values of statements about reality in itself, it could feasibly be argued, would then *be* determinate because they take root in the correspondence with just such a reality.[38] Even so, however, this is but an implication of ontological realism incorporated within the context of a larger theory about the objective validity of claims about reality: it does not 'stand in' for ontological realism; nor, I think, is it one and the same as ontological realism, but rather a sort of realism about truth-values coupled with or drawing on ontological realism. What's more, this is

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[36] Michael Devitt, *Realism & Truth*, p. 36. My italics.

[37] So long as, say, 'physical entities' were understood to be reducible to objects or bundles of sense data.

[38] If we are willing to make *this* kind of move, though, as Devitt has suggested, "we might as well forget about truth all together and simply state Realism" (Michael Devitt, *Realism & Truth*, p. 37).

but *one* specific application of Dummett's reformulation; while the general (non-specific) conception of 'realism' he has in mind – involving a claim for the objectivity of truth-values for certain statements owing to language-world correspondence – does imply some sort of world or structure with which language corresponds, this broad understanding of 'realism' is not fundamentally constituted by any assertion for the existence of a world *that must exist apart from the mental.*

The real crux of the matter with Dummettian realism – even Dummettian realism specifically about statements pertaining to a mind-independent world – lies elsewhere: not in ontology with the existence and nature of reality in and of itself, but, not surprisingly, in *truth theory*: specifically, with the nature of truth as a relation between statements and the objectively existing states of affairs to which they refer. Devitt in particular has thus re-cast Dummett's conception of realism as, more fittingly, a reincarnation of the correspondence theory of truth. For while it cannot be seen to systematically (or exclusively) uphold the central ontological commitment of realism-proper to an objective, *mind-independent* reality, it nevertheless stands firmly by the following truth-related commitments: (1) truth amounts to correspondence between statements of a given class and an objective structure or world (as Niiniluoto has succinctly phrased it, truth involves "an objective language-world relation"[39]); and thus that (2) truth is thus independent of us, to the extent that it has everything to do with circumstances that are largely beyond our control – we suffer, in other words, the possibility of being dead wrong in our reckoning should there be significant epistemic barriers separating us from the ability to observe the relevant truth conditions. These

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[39] Ilkka Niiniluoto, *Critical Scientific Realism*, p. 2.

commitments – being what most instances of Dummettian realism *seem* to have in common – are simply *not* principally ontological.

There is further evidence for the overtly non-ontological nature of Dummettian realism in the version of anti-realism he himself has constructed to combat it. After all, Dummett, with his own professed anti-realism, has made no concerted attempt to refute the existence of an objective, mind-independent world; but rather he has focused the brunt of his attack on the claim that the nature of truth resides in the firm correspondence between statements and objective reality. What Dummett primarily sought to engage was not so much the ontological commitment to 'reality in itself' but rather the commitment to the nature of truth as correspondence; for in its stead he has proposed a justificationist theory of truth![40] At any rate, Dummett has routinely avoided direct confrontation with ontological variants of realism, favoring instead to "take as [his] preferred characterisation of a dispute between realists and anti-realists one which represents it as relating, not to a class of entities or a class of terms, but to a class of *statements*"[41], and to, yet more precisely, the objective truth conditions thereof.

I have attempted to emphasize that the kind of realism on which my criticism will be focused, and the kind which best exemplifies the practice of fact-stating on reality in itself, relates to a range of formations that are deeply – perhaps exclusively – *ontological*. We should take great care, then, to discern in that great cloud of doctrines known as 'realism' those formations that relate to, say, the nature of truth and truth conditions from those that have everything to do with the existence and nature of an objective, mind-independent reality; for these formations are decidedly not, as it is sometimes

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[40] See Dummett's short but deeply intriguing *Thought and Reality*, specifically his fifth chapter entitled "Justificationist Theories of Meaning" in which he has outlined a theory of truth and falsity that relies heavily on socio-linguistic conditioning. More of Dummett's anti-realism will be included in the third chapter of this essay.
[41] Michael Dummett, "Realism", p. 146.

presumed, equivalent. 'Realism', as I will intend the label, neither contains nor refers to any theory of truth, language, or meaning; rather, it is a theory of the world as it is in and of itself: that is, the world that would exist regardless of whether statements and language exist – regardless of whether, for that matter, *any* sort of thought or representation exists – and hence the world that would exist quite independently of any relation that may or may not be constitutive of correspondence truth. Whether or not correspondence truth implies (or is capable of implying) an objective, mind-independent reality, it does not adequately 'capture' the fundamentally ontological orientation of the sort of realism I mean to place under present scrutiny.

Niiniluoto has urged – with good reason, I think – some caution in sharply distinguishing and isolating the various genuses of realism: for

> [r]ealism is a philosophical worldview, a 'large-scale philosophical package' [….] and
> its successful defense requires that we try to find the most plausible combinations of
> ontological, semantical, epistemological, axiological, methodological and ethical
> positions.[42]

Allowing for this, there might be some issue with my treating ontological realism as a wholly self-contained system of discursive formations regarding the existence and nature of the world in itself; in that case, what I would be criticizing is something more like an ontological *aspect* of a greater body of realism. The choice here between *doctrine* or *aspect of a doctrine* is probably inconsequential, and far be it for me to determine single handedly the true shape and character of philosophical realism – however, for my own purposes, I do take issue with the *conflation* and unnecessary *combination* of claims about correspondence truth and claims about the world as it is in itself. The takeaway should be that I am not concerned with *truth*, nor would I like to assert my own opinion on the

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[42] Ilkka Niiniluoto, *Critical Scientific Realism*, p. 4.

'essence' of truth. Suffice it to say that the (largely realist) practice of making claims about reality in and of itself *appears* to me to be a functionally self-efficient ontological practice: for it is, *at the very least*, capable of being defended by those who consider themselves to be primarily ontologically oriented, and also capable of being criticized as a key instance of ontological fact-stating that occurs without significant recourse to truth theories or semantics.

(v) Examples of principally ontological realism.

My own understanding of ontological realism is essentially that which Devitt has propounded in his *Realism & Truth*: a core ontological thesis for the existence of an objective, mind-independent world, often – though not *necessarily* – followed by some attempt at 'getting at' precisely what this world is like. We have encountered already the 'core ontological thesis' of realism that commits any realist to the idea that 'something exists' independently of the mental, but I should like to briefly include a few examples of the bolder species of realism that venture so far as to grasp what sort of things constitute this reality in itself; for these formations perhaps best exemplify the discursive practice of making and maintaining claims pertaining to reality insofar as they address both the existence *and the nature* of that reality.

Devitt has counted, among these 'stronger' theses of principally ontological realism, instances of 'common-sense realism' and 'scientific realism' (to name only two, which ought to be sufficient for the purposes of brief illustration). Common-sense realists, on his view, assert that "[t]okens of most current observable common-sense, and scientific, physical types objectively exist independently of the mental"[43]; thus the observable entities of everyday life such as tables, rocks, and logs – as well as the observable entities

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[43] Michael Devitt, *Realism & Truth*, p. 22.

of scientific study such as distant asteroids and deep-sea life – are, for the most part,

taken to exist independently of the mental. Common-sense realism is argued to be a

matter of 'common-sense' in part because it takes our daily experience (and the

experience of scientists) at face value as revealing to us the true nature of reality: what we

see is, more often than not, precisely what we've got. Reality would continue to be

furnished with tables, rocks, logs, asteroids and tube worms whether or not there were

minds to observe or represent these things. Common-sense realism is, Devitt has

argued, a naturally "compelling doctrine":

> It is almost universally held outside philosophical circles. From an early age we
> come to believe that such objects as stones, cats and trees exist. Further we believe
> that these objects exist even when we are not perceiving them, and that they do not
> depend for their existence on our opinions nor on anything mental. These beliefs
> about ordinary objects are central to our whole way of viewing the world, to our
> conceptual scheme. The doctrine I have defined to capture these beliefs (2.4) is
> aptly named 'Common-Sense Realism', because it is in fact the core of common
> sense.[44]

Given the natural believability of common-sense realism, his argument goes, "we should

only give it up in the face of very convincing arguments against it and for an

alternative"[45]. (Hence it is unsurprising that one of Devitt's chief strategies against these

arguments is simply to demonstrate precisely how they fail).[46]

Scientific realists, on the other hand, contest that it is only "[t]okens of the most

current unobservable scientific physical types"[47] that constitute mind-independent reality;

examples here might include subatomic particles such as protons or the Higgs-boson. In

the absence of minds, then, the world may well be a vast system of particles – things like

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[44] Michael Devitt, *Realism & Truth*, p. 47.

[45] Michael Devitt, *Realism & Truth*, p. 48.

[46] This is the objective of the fifth chapter ("Why Be a Common-Sense Realist?") of his *Realism & Truth*, pp. 47-72.

[47] Michael Devitt, *Realism & Truth*, p. 22.

chairs and tables having been nothing more than constructs or projections of the mind, comprised of or reducible to complexes of unobservable particles, all along. Scientific realism benefits from the argument that observable entities and phenomena – even despite the fact that they do not exist in such a way as to be independent of the mental – nevertheless enable us to infer the likelihood of mind-independent entities such as subatomic particles, etc.

> By supposing [unobservable entities] exist we can give good explanations of the behaviour and characteristics of observed entities, behaviour and characteristics which would otherwise remain completely inexplicable. Furthermore, such a supposition leads to predictions about observables which are well confirmed; the supposition is 'observationally successful'. Inference to the best explanation thus takes us from hypotheses about the observed world to hypotheses about the unobservable one.[48]

In other words scientific realism *tells us something* about our experiences and allows us to transcend them, to set our 'ontological sights' on the real existence of whatever mechanisms are pulling the strings behind mere appearance.

Common-sense realism and scientific realism are perhaps the two most basic forms of descriptive realism, though of course any number of alternatives is possible. Devitt himself seems to ignore the main point of difference between these two varieties, preferring instead to be a "realist about the observable and unobservable alike"[49]. Nevertheless his – like the many other realist formations that endeavor to provide, more or less precisely, ontological 'catalogues' of what stuff there *really* is – is a strong, descriptive realism in contrast to weaker forms of realism in which the 'core ontological thesis' is left standing alone. For the purposes of the task at hand it suffices to say that the various species there are of descriptive realism – again in no way limited to the few

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[48] Michael Devitt, *Realism & Truth*, pp. 104-105.

[49] Michael Devitt, *Realism & Truth*, p. 16.

illustrations above – exemplify the practice of making and maintaining claims about the *nature* of the mind-independent world; but, of course, we must not forget the weaker forms of realism, in which the bare fact of that world's *existence* is all that is affirmed. Thus it is the full range of views from 'weak' to 'strong' gathered under the broader heading of 'realism' that *collectively* constitute most of the character of ontological discourse on *all* those questions pertaining to reality.

(vi) Concluding remarks on the discursive nature of ontological realism.

I hope to have made it clear that the assertions made within the discourse of ontological realism profess to have *everything* to do with the world as it is in itself: weak realism, as we have seen, is constituted by the claim that a mind-independent reality exists, whereas the more 'descriptive' forms of realism sprout up wherever there is a considerably more detailed account of that world, i.e. what it is made up of and what it is like. At the least, the sort of realism I wish to address is that sort whose proponents have, time and again, defended it as *exclusively ontological*: admitting of no significant semantic, epistemic, linguistic (etc.) concerns above and beyond the character of reality as it is in itself.

On these grounds, ontological realists have often viewed themselves and their positions as impervious to a number of what might now be thought of as 'positivist attacks' – that is, those 'attacks' which were thought to distract from the central *ontological* issues at hand by means of dubious redirection toward the workings and technicalities of, primarily, language and meaning. *Linguistic* concerns, realists have assured themselves, have nothing whatsoever to do with the existence and nature of the world as it is in itself – that is of course, with the world as it is *independently of human thought and representation*: for regardless of what we say or think about reality in itself, and regardless of the logical

implications of what we say or think or even of *how we say or think it*, reality simply is the way it is. There are, they have maintained, no serious implications to be made from the structural limitations of human language to the structural characteristics of the world itself that language (presumably, they might say) strives to represent. This reaction parallels another attitude – one we have seen already – which many realists have readily adopted against the infiltration of truth-discourse into discourse on reality: "mere talk of truth," Devitt has summed it up memorably, "will not yield any particular ontology"[50]. 'Similarly', the realist line of thinking often seems to go, 'mere talk of *language* determines nothing of the world in itself'.

Given that realists are concerned with the existence and nature of a world that is quite indifferent to the products and processes of mental activity, it would appear reasonable for them to deny any inference *from* the nature of human representations of reality *to* the existence or nature of reality as it is in itself. Thus I am tempted to agree that the purely ontological views of realism are themselves well insulated from counterarguments fixated on the nature of language or of truth, at least to the extent that such counterarguments would *seek to refute realist conceptions of reality on a linguistic or semantic basis*.

All this is well and good. However, lest we go on thinking – far too simplistically, in my mind – that ontological realism on the whole is characterized exclusively by the 'content' of its claims (e.g. by this or that conception of reality) and hence that it is *totally* impervious to linguistic considerations, we would do well to remember that 'realism' is ultimately constituted, if by nothing else, than by those very *claims*, *assertions* and *statements* that can be grouped in its name: for while these may all be intended to *address* purely

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[50] Michael Devitt, "Dummett's Anti-Realism", p. 77. Note: the text of this paper seems to have provided much of the material for the fourth and twelfth chapters of Devitt's later *Realism & Truth*.

ontological conceptions of reality in itself, they themselves are claims, assertions and statements nonetheless; hence realism is, as I have somewhat vaguely referred to it up until now, ultimately characterized as a federated body of *discursive formations*. Now, precisely *as* a system of related discursive formations, 'ontological realism' must be situated within a network of other views in the much broader field of ontological *discourse*. Accordingly, I have, at a few points throughout this essay so far, already opted to refer to 'realist discourse' in lieu of 'realism': the former phrase of course suggesting an inescapable link (or perhaps even an equivalence) between what is commonly envisioned as the super- or meta-linguistic 'content' of realist philosophy (the ideational 'gist' that lies beyond words) and those claims, assertions and statements which carry the 'content' and, indeed, are thought to bring it to our attention. *My* interest is in keeping the technical or conversational aspect of realism clearly in focus: that is, I mean to draw attention to its overtly discursive character as a coordinated field of *spoken or written claims, assertions and statements*; for while the 'content' of realism – if I might just entertain the very concept – may resist certain 'positivistic attacks' regarding what it is meaningful or justifiable to *say* or *argue* because it involves conceptions of 'the world' rather than conceptions of 'discourse on the world', I wonder if such attacks might achieve a more devastating effect when the object of criticism is, as I have put it, a more technical construal of 'realist *discourse*' precisely as a network of *claims* and *assertions* which exclusively pertain to 'the world in itself'.

My objective in this chapter has been to show that the discursive practice of making claims about reality in itself is (both *de facto* and in principle) a practice largely dominated by realist efforts, and hence that the target of my criticism will be, above all else, realist discourse. I have also sought to provide examples of such discourse, ranging from 'weak

realism' to stronger and much more vivid accounts of what a mind-independent reality is *like*. Further, I have concluded with the observation that realism is – quite inescapably – a *discursive* phenomenon consisting of claims, assertions and statements situated in the context of broader conversation and argumentation. The next chapter marks the opening of the 'critical phase' of this essay, in which I shall attempt to point out a few problems I find with realist discourse of the kind so far described. More precisely: I shall flesh out the major concerns I happen to have with the discursive practice and overtly realist institution of producing claims, assertions and statements that pertain to the existence and nature of reality in itself.

II. PROBLEMS WITH REALIST DISCOURSE

I hope to have established that my primary concern is with realist *discourse* and, more broadly, with the (overtly realist) institution of putting forward claims about the world as it is in and of itself; for then it ought to be evident that the forthcoming criticism will be strictly *metaontological*: far from addressing the question of whether or not realist views 'get it right' on any ontological level, I should rather prefer to ask whether or not the particular discursive practices in which realists are engaged – and over which they happen to enjoy the greatest influence – are themselves legitimated. Specifically, I have in mind the question Rudolf Carnap once deployed to frame his 'method of verification' for a given proposition: "The question is: What reasons can there be to assert this proposition; or: How can we become certain as to its truth or falsehood?"[51]. Reformulated in more precise terms of those propositions which are put forward and

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[51] Rudolf Carnap, *Philosophy and Logical Syntax*, p. 10.

defended by realists, the question thus becomes: 'What reasons can there be to assert or defend these realist propositions?'; or: 'How can we determine their truth or falsehood?'; or perhaps even: 'What *proof* is there for these claims?'; 'By what means are we to be convinced of their validity?'. The central question, to paraphrase, pertains to the matter of how those claims that constitute realist discourse are supposed to be *evidenced* or *substantiated*; I will not therefore deny the fundamentally *verificationist* orientation of my approach.

Realists have typically ignored the question of verification, yet I find it to be a fair one indeed. For although principally ontological realism, as postulated, excludes epistemic or semantic concerns (regarding, e.g., the verifiability, substantiation and/or proof of claims, and so forth), the ability of realists to maintain their *purely ontological views* in the wider context of philosophical conversation would nevertheless benefit from their having some means of verification by which their *purely ontological claims* might be corroborated, and hence, by which they might be made all the more defensible – *all the more compelling*. A pronounced difficulty in the verification or substantiation of realist claims would amount to a pronounced difficulty in the ability to take those very claims seriously – to seize on any compelling reason to *defend* or *believe* them. This, I think, must be true of a majority of claims in serious discourse: regardless of *what* is being said, the lack of sufficient relevant evidence[52] for the claim at hand will, more often than not, damn it to a level of weak conjecture; hence the conditions for verifiability, being those conditions which determine whether the given claim, assertion or proposition ought to be affirmed or to be refuted – in other words the *proof* or the *evidence* for the

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[52] Whatever *counts* as 'relevant evidence' is of little consequence: so long as it is taken to be adequate for substantiation or verification, the abundance of 'relevant evidence' will likely generate support for a claim. Much more on this theme is yet to come.

substantiation of a claim – forms the prime material by which a claim, assertion or proposition is both defended and promulgated.

Realist discourse, in my mind, faces a host of verification- and substantiation-related problems; problems involving the appropriate standards and practices (if any) for the verification and substantiation of its claims as well as the very possibility – given the subject matter of realist discourse (i.e. a *mind-independent* reality) – of imposing any such standards or practices in the first place. I will draw attention to a few of those areas where these problems appear to be most pronounced, though I would prefer not to think of the following criticism as 'comprehensive' or 'complete'. What follows will essentially be a 'soft criticism' – criticism not so much intended to definitively refute once and for all a time-honored tradition of ontological speculation, but to generate an informal awareness of the severe limitations of that tradition as it stands.

(i) The verificationist approach.

In *Language, Truth & Logic*, A.J. Ayer criticized ontological discourse – or, really, metaphysics in general – on exclusively logical or semantic grounds, in what he envisioned as a departure from and improvement upon the precedent set by weaker 'psychological' (Kantian) strategies:

> [….T]he fruitlessness of attempting to transcend the limits of possible sense-experience will be deduced, not from a psychological hypothesis concerning the actual constitution of the human mind, but from the rule which determines the literal significance of language. Our charge against the metaphysician is not that he attempts to employ the understanding in a field where it cannot profitably venture, but that he produces sentences which fail to conform to the conditions under which alone a sentence can be literally significant.[53]

Hence, returning to the charge he leveled at metaphysics earlier in the chapter,

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[53] A.J. Ayer, *Language, Truth & Logic*, p. 35.

> [….w]e shall maintain that no statement which refers to a 'reality' transcending the limits of all possible sense-experience can possibly have any literal significance; from which it must follow that the labours of those who have striven to describe such a reality have all been devoted to the production of nonsense.[54]

Ayer's strategy – and surely the earlier strategy of Rudolf Carnap, as well – targeted certain technical aspects of metaphysics: specifically, the *discursive* aspect; certainly the aim was to frustrate metaphysicians by disrupting their means of communication, or better yet, by reducing the communication of their claims to a mere exercise in meaningless chatter. This strategy is in many ways the chief inspiration for my own: my aim also being to call into question the ability of realists to justify their claims successfully in the context of a much broader philosophical forum. More specifically, my approach resembles the verificationist approach of Ayer and early Carnap in raising problems related to the discursive '*significance*' of ontological claims.

For Ayer, the measure of 'literal significance' was no other than the 'criterion of verifiability':

> We say that a sentence is factually significant to any given person, if, and only if, he knows how to verify the proposition which it purports to express – that is, if he knows what observations would lead him, under certain conditions, to accept the proposition as being true, or to reject it as being false.[55]

'Observations' here, of course, was meant *literally*: verifying some proposition sufficiently was thought to involve appealing to a range of standards and practices that were *strictly empirical*; hence the sort of proof or evidence that verification required, to be sure, mirrored precisely the sort of proof or evidence considered most suitable for substantiating the hypotheses of the natural sciences. The earlier work of Rudolf Carnap was deeply sympathetic with both of these points: for Carnap, what gave 'significance' –

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[54] A.J. Ayer, *Language, Truth & Logic*, p. 34.

[55] A.J. Ayer, *Language, Truth & Logic*, p. 35.

or more precisely 'theoretical meaning' – to a claim or assertion was indeed its "possibility of verification"[56]; and moreover, he held that verification was indeed an empirical matter, the standards and practices of which required *all* propositions to be traceable – either directly or indirectly – to observable circumstances.[57]

Now the problem for the interlocutors of metaphysical discourse, when confronted with this sort of empirical verification principle, is obvious: *there can be no proof or evidence to point to in support of the claims being made.* Metaphysical claims, which address aspects of the world existing beyond the level of observation and experience, are empirically non-verifiable, and are thus 'not significant'. As Carnap himself put it:

> Metaphysicians cannot avoid making their propositions non-verifiable, because if they made them verifiable, the decision about the truth or falsehood of their doctrines would depend upon experience and therefore belong to the region of empirical science. This consequence they wish to avoid, because they pretend to teach knowledge which is of a higher level than that of empirical science. Thus they are compelled to cut all connection between their propositions and experience; and precisely by this procedure they deprive them of any sense.[58]

The very same insoluble problem, Carnap added, also exists for realists so long as the reality they seek to describe is alleged to exist independently of all things mental, and hence, independently of that which is rendered in experience or by observation. The 'significance' or 'theoretical meaning' of any proposition by which even the mere *existence* of an objective, mind-independent reality is affirmed *or* denied is similarly imperiled: for even then, "both assertions have no empirical content – *no sense at all*"[59].

Adopting an empirical standard for verification thus reduces metaphysical discourse – and along with it discourse on the existence and nature of reality in itself – to a stream

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[56] Rudolf Carnap, *Philosophy and Logical Syntax*, p. 14.

[57] See his *Philosophy and Logical Syntax*, pp. 10-15 for more on his distinction between direct and indirect verification.

[58] Rudolf Carnap, *Philosophy and Logical Syntax*, pp. 17-18.

[59] Rudolf Carnap, *Philosophy and Logical Syntax*, p. 20.

of babble; or, as Ayer put it above, to a mere 'production of nonsense'. That is, of course, *if* one assumes the view put forward by Ayer and Carnap; though I ought to make explicit before too long one crucial point at which I depart from their more orthodox form of verificationism. While I readily agree that the verification or substantiation of claims, assertions and propositions provides (perhaps exclusively) the measure for their 'significance' in the discursive setting, my conception of 'significance' must be disentangled from that deeply semantic notion of 'significance' ('meaningfulness') assumed by Ayer and Carnap. *I* would prefer to say that those claims we find exceedingly difficult to verify or to substantiate are, as a result of that difficulty, far less compelling or defensible considering the standards of serious inquiry – there would be little reason, in other words, to *believe* them. Whether or not these claims would be intellectually or logically *meaningless*, as Ayer and Carnap would have concluded, is a matter for extended deliberation. Suffice it to say that, whether *meaningless* or simply *difficult to believe*, claims that lack the sufficient relevant evidence are substantially weaker than other claims for which relevant evidence abounds. It will suit the present purpose to maintain that, in the context of serious discourse, the more difficult a claim is to verify – that is, the less relevant evidence or proof there is to support that claim – the less compelling, believable or defensible that claim will ultimately be. *Principally* non-verifiable claims, to illustrate by means of an extreme hypothetical, ought to be virtually unbelievable owing to the impossibility of their being in any way evidenced or substantiated.

On this more relaxed assessment, an empirical standard for verification would, in restricting the range of 'relevant evidence' for all claims to that which is perceptible, rob the proverbial 'metaphysician' of his or her ability to *effectively defend and promulgate claims*;

just as it would rob the realist of his or her ability to do the same with respect to assertions relating specifically to the existence and nature of the world as it is in itself. The discursive practices in which realists (and that minority of anti-realists) engage would thus appear to be *baseless* or *spurious* much more so than they would be literally *incoherent*.

The extent to which my approach could be labeled a 'verificationist' approach is therefore limited in *at least* the following sense: the classic link between a claim's being 'difficult to substantiate' and its being 'meaningless' seems dubious and extravagant – a correlation between its being 'difficult to substantiate' and its being 'unconvincing' will surely suffice, and will, it seems, eliminate the need for excess semantic baggage. The 'verificationist' approach I espouse thus goes as follows: the 'significance' of a claim – here *only* referring to its believability or defensibility – is, in the context of serious philosophical discourse, inextricably linked and correlated to there being effective means for its substantiation or verification. A claim for which there can be little to no proof or evidence is, in most ordinary circumstances, a claim for which neither current nor prospective advocates ought to find much reason to 'hear out'. Realist discourse, then, for the sake of being a *reasonable*, *compelling* and ultimately *worthwhile* body of discourse, calls for some reliable means by which to verify or substantiate the claims, assertions and propositions that constitute it.

(ii) Standards for verification or substantiation.

So much for introducing the 'verificationist approach' by which the connection between substantiation (from proof or evidence) and significance (defensibility or believability) is emphasized and scrutinized; I move now to consider the possibility of substantiation for realist claims. Specifically, I ask after the very standards *for* their

substantiation: what, it could be phrased, might conceivably *count* as proof or evidence in the substantiation of claims pertaining to reality in itself?

Until now I have, of course, skirted the most glaring issue with the empirical standard for verification mentioned earlier: ironically enough, the principle of verification maintained throughout Ayer's work and the earlier work of Carnap is, in plain fact, itself principally *non-verifiable* – for the principle itself cannot be traced to or substantiated by observed 'facts'. (Along with the original verificationist line of criticism, that would appear to render the principle meaningless; though, for the task presently at hand, *inconsistent* surely suffices). It is, therefore, untenable or, at any rate, pedantic; thus the classically positivistic verificationists trip over their own legs in their attempt to harass the practitioners of metaphysical – and hence ontological – discourse.

The problem with orthodox verificationism has everything to do with the strictness of its principle: observational proof is, after all, said to be the *only* authentic means for verification. Had the earlier verificationists allowed for a broader range of relevant evidence they might have avoided inconsistency. But regardless of whether empirical evidence is taken to be *one among other* means for substantiation or *the one and only* means for substantiation, there is a well-known (and quite obvious) conceptual difficulty in supplying any such evidence at all in support of claims pertaining to the existence and nature of a mind-independent world. So long as observation occurs on the level of sensory experience, the problem goes, nothing observed can be properly linked to reality *in itself*; rather, all we can be said to have observed is some state affairs that exists as rendered in experience – that exists *for us*, or as taken *by us*. Bertrand Russell, in *The Problems of Philosophy*, drew out the traditional implications of this problem as follows:

It has appeared that, if we take any common object of the sort that is supposed to be known by the senses, what the senses *immediately* tell us is not the truth about the object as it is apart from us, but only the truth about certain sense-data which, so far as we can see, depend upon the relations between us and the object. Thus what we directly see and feel is merely 'appearance', which we believe to be a sign of some 'reality' behind.[60]

Russell was careful to observe the distinction between *immediate* and *mediate* knowledge of reality in itself: *immediately* there can be no such knowledge from the senses, as what is 'seen' and 'felt' relates only to the quality and character of our experience rather than from the existence and nature of the object as it is in itself; though of course it is just as difficult to imagine how any such proper knowledge of reality in itself could be *inferred* so long as the basis of inference was precisely the same experience. The problem with observational evidence, to put it more generally, involves the conceptual difficulty of our 'getting beyond' sensory experience to whatever is purported to transcend it: whether immediately or via inference, experience seems to provide no basis whatsoever for knowledge of *meta*-experiential or super-sensible states of affairs. The problem, as the early verificationists have made clear, is made all the more urgent when 'observation' or 'sensation' – or, to indulge in more Kantian terminology, the range of 'possible experience' – is assumed to be the sole material by which human knowledge is configured, for then we stand truly mired by the burning question: "if the reality is not what appears, have we any means of knowing whether there is any reality at all? And if so, have we any means of finding out what it is like?"[61]

Even assuming, then, that there *is* an objective reality existing independently of the mental, there are, and have long been, deep conceptual problems with the attempt to

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[60] Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*, p. 16.

[61] Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*, p. 16.

substantiate or *verify* claims pertaining to its existence or nature by means of empirical evidence; for the evidence provided by sensory experience pertains to a world that is, in some sense, rendered by us or that stands in relation to us. As such, the attempt to describe any transcendent reality with *any* recourse to empirical evidence, as well as the alternative attempt to infer the existence of such a reality through a *critique* of sensory perception,[62] is problematic to say the least. If claims pertaining to the existence and nature of reality in itself can be substantiated, then, it is difficult to imagine how empirical observation could count as adequate or relevant 'proof' in *any* step of the process. At the least, this has been to say that any process by which sensory experience might contribute to the verification of realist or anti-realist claims remains in dire need of elucidation, *if* there were any such reliable process to speak of in the first place. Otherwise it would seem as though empirical 'evidence' is simply irrelevant with respect to discourse on reality in and of itself.

The prospect of verification by *other* forms of proof or evidence must, then, be explored; for unlike the more orthodox verificationists, I take it that more than a single standard form of proof must be involved in the way we *actually* go about justifying our claims. At least, this appears to be the case in most everyday discursive contexts. Our "actual methods of judging the truth of what is said", to quote Dummett on this point,

> do not reduce to mere sensory observation. Even for decidable sentences, our
> means of determining their truth-value may involve mental operations such as
> counting or physical ones such as measuring. Our sentences cannot be divided into
> two classes, empirical and a priori, the truth of the one to be decided by raw

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[62] Ayer, for one, referred to just this alternative approach by which the existence of a transcendent reality would be asserted by reference to the 'deception' often found in sensory perception. Ayer condemned this line of thinking as equally problematic, stating that while "[i]t must, of course, be admitted that our senses do sometimes deceive us", we must nevertheless recognize that "it is further sense-experience that informs us of the mistakes that arise out of sense-experience". Hence "the fact that our perceptual judgments are sometimes found to be erroneous has not the slightest tendency to show that the world of sense-experience is unreal" (*Language, Truth & Logic*, p. 39). Friedrich Nietzsche famously made a similar point in his earlier *Twilight of the Idols*. For more on this, see *The Portable Nietzsche*, p. 484.

observation and the truth of the other by unalloyed ratiocination. Rather, they lie on a scale, at one end of which stand the purely observational sentences and at the other mathematical ones arrived at by unaided deduction.[63]

Substantiation normally requires, in other words, that a *number* of forms of evidence be used in backing up claims: a statement about human behavior, for instance, will likely be verified or substantiated by reference to certain observational evidence whereas the average algebraic equation will be judged true or false by means of abstract mathematical reasoning. Hence there may well be a possibility that realist statements pertaining to the world in and of itself might yet be verifiable or refutable by means of some alternative form(s) of evidence *other* than empirical 'facts', in which case the possibility of substantiating such claims and assertions may only be a matter of identifying the suitable form(s) of evidence.

Some light must first be thrown on how the 'suitable form of evidence' for *any* given assertion is identified in the first place: how do we ordinarily determine *what counts as proof* for a claim? Dummett seems to have suggested that the discursive process by which the 'relevant evidence' for a claim is determined and weighed is essentially part and parcel of the broader process by which we come to acquire language, wherein, generally speaking,

> [w]hat we learn is precisely in which circumstances we are entitled, in our own right, as it were, to make this or that assertion. [….] We learn, thus, how, when suitably placed, to recognize as true or false the statements whose senses we come to know. We also learn, for decidable statements, by what means we can so place ourselves as to decide their truth or falsity.[64]

Of course, *if* the process by which we come to recognize what counts as proof for claims and to justify those claims accordingly in the context of broader discourse were indeed situated within language acquisition, then the former would have to be, along with the

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[63] Michael Dummett, *Thought and Reality*, p. 59.
[64] Michael Dummett, *Thought and Reality*, pp. 60-61.

latter, deeply *social* and would have to arise primarily through *learning from others* how, in various situations and discursive contexts, to appropriately speak, argue and justify.[65]

On such a 'social' or 'linguistic' (or 'socio-linguistic') conception of discursive substantiation or verification, the *relevance* of so-called 'evidence' to any particular claim would largely be determined by social expectations for discursive conduct; and, as far as I can surmise, we would come to *learn* these expectations either through initial integration into our linguistic communities (as Dummett mentioned above) or through subsequent integration into more specialized fields of discourse. (The former process would likely account for how we learn what counts as proof for the bulk of our more commonplace claims, as we would be developing a *basic* linguistic competency; whereas the latter process would involve supplementing those existing patterns with further discursive training for the use and evaluation of more esoteric claims – e.g., claims belonging to discourse on particle physics). Though the social training we would receive to these ends would surely have to be complex and multi-layered, by no means could it ever be *exhaustive*: no amount of training could prepare us for *every* possible discursive scenario. The point I want to make is merely that, *assuming* a socio-linguistic model for the fixation of 'what counts as proof', much of what we would normally think to do in attempting to identify and consult 'the evidence' for the claims we encounter would be guided or constrained by our history of socio-linguistic training. There would be strong social and linguistic undercurrents influencing – to some extent – the overall direction of

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[65] Indeed this appears to be just what Dummett meant in another passage he wrote nearly four decades earlier, describing the process by which we come to identify proof in the verification or justification of claims: "What we *learn* to do is to accept the truth of certain statements of the reductive class [by this Dummett meant a related class of statements to which the disputed statements neatly and effectively 'reduce'], or, in the case that there is no reductive class, the occurrence of certain conditions *which we have been trained to recognise*, as conclusively justifying the assertion of a given statement of the disputed class, and the truth of certain other statements, or the occurrence of certain other conditions, as conclusively justifying its denial" ("The Reality of the Past", p. 362). Note the use of terms such as "learn" and "trained" that I have italicized above: it appears that Dummett was suggesting a *social* process by which one is gradually made to conform to preexisting norms, specifically by associating certain kinds of evidence and/or conditions with the truth and/or 'holding good' of certain claims.

our thoughts on where to look for 'evidence' and how to use it effectively in the justification of a given assertion.[66]

As to whether the socio-linguistic 'shoe' fits, we might estimate in all likelihood whether the system by which we *do in fact* substantiate claims has anything significant to do with the process by which we were trained to be competent interlocutors: do our actual methods of substantiation most likely derive from our being taught the structure of language itself? Do they appear to be socially engendered? In other words, is it more likely that our standards for discursive verification – including our understanding of what ought to count as relevant evidence for a variety of claims – were *inculcated* in us by our surrounding linguistic community than it is likely that they were not?

It *is* indeed difficult to imagine such a collectivized system of discursive verification as our own – whereby multiple standards for the substantiation of various types of written and spoken claims are in fact *shared* and *widely respected* among the vast majority of competent writers and speakers – congealing in some manner so as *not* to take its cues from the structure of our language; and yet more difficult to imagine such a system congealing independently of our society's influence. Consider, for instance, the tendency for most individuals in a community to converge on similar conceptions of 'what counts as proof' or 'evidence' for a given assertion – an *actual* tendency of ours on most ordinary occasions. This is *not* likely due to the fact that each one of us, left *entirely* to our own devices, and with no recourse whatsoever to the structure of our language or to the rest of society, is somehow able to distinguish one and the same set of conditions which, *in reality*, is relevant to the truth of the assertion. It is *not*, in other words, likely due to

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[66] This, I think, is important because it allows for the sort of disagreement, 'error' and even innovation often found in our *actual* experience in substantiating claims. To say that socio-linguistic training would fully prepare us for each and every discursive eventuality would be grossly unrealistic.

the fact that reality, as it is in itself, presents itself to each of us in precisely the same manner so as to eliminate our dependence on *each other* – on language and society – in discovering what counts as evidence for a claim. Does it not seem much more likely the case that our convergence owes to the fact that we have been *socially homogenized*: that in many respects we have come to think and act alike – as a herd – and that we have, for much of the way, been *drawn* by (and with) the rest of our peers to one understanding or another of 'what counts as proof' for a given assertion, probably through the very same processes of language training which are presupposed by our shared ability to ascertain the *meaning* of that assertion in the first place? Does it not seem much more likely the case that we converge simply because there are intersubjective standards in place pertaining to what is or would be 'relevant': or that the average individual thinks of certain conditions as amounting to 'proof' or 'evidence' for a claim largely because she or he has internalized the *perception* of what is relevant as held by the vast majority of her or his linguistic community?

I assume this is so, and I make the assumption mainly because the notion that one's particular language and society (among other influences, to be sure) play no important role in how one perceives and understands reality is, today, *unthinkable*; and it is precisely such an idea that would be needed to lend credence to the twin notions that (i) it is instead reality that *presents itself meaningfully to us*, and that (ii) its presenting itself to all of us *equally* is all the explanation we need for our tendency to converge on what we think of as relevant evidence for a claim. The fact that there *is* variance between cultures (distinguished by language, historical period, etc.) in how reality is perceived stands resolutely in the way of our assuming that reality impresses itself upon us meaningfully in similar ways, and thus, at the very least, makes convergence on similar conceptions of

'relevant evidence' *appear* as though it were more likely a matter of our being homogenized in the sense described above.

If I am right in assuming so, and thus, right in that the very mechanism for substantiation (being the identification and weighing of 'evidence') *is* probably a matter of how individuals are brought into alignment with their society's grander expectations for discursive conduct, then I would be right to assume that the alleged *relevance* of 'evidence', in any particular case, probably relates more to the way things are *for us* (the collective us: both society *and* ourselves) than to the way things *really* are in themselves: by that I mean to say that it is probably *not* through a direct, unmediated epistemic connection to some objective, mind-independent state of affairs that we come to learn what conditions are significant in determining whether a given claim is true or false – and thus *what counts as 'evidence'* for or against the claim; rather, it is more likely through our direct connection to (and our 'embeddedness' within) society: to *language*, and to the *discursive standards* therein. The 'evidence' for a given assertion seems as though it were a function of what society tells us is important or relevant much more so than an indication of what the related set of conditions is in the world as it exists apart from all human interests.

The problem lurking for realist discourse is obvious, for in order to corroborate a claim about the world as it is in itself, one would presumably require 'evidence' whose relevance was *not* left up to us and to our methods of interpreting and representing our surroundings. The real question realists face, then, is no longer '*Which* form of evidence is suitable for the substantiation of claims about reality?' but 'How could there even *be* any form of evidence whose 'suitability' or 'relevance' to the claim(s) being made were ultimately determined by the way things *really* are in themselves rather than by the way

things *seem to be* according to us?'. For it us unclear as to how we could *ever* come to

recognize any set of conditions as 'relevant' to the truth or falsity of a claim if not

through processes of socio-linguistic integration by which our very *sense* of 'what is

relevant' appears to be largely developed; if not through being conditioned to accept it *as*

evidence in accordance with deeply ingrained standards imparted to us by the undeniable

authority figure that is our broader linguistic community. At any rate – and to say the

very least – the process by which certain conditions must be *recognized as* or *taken for*

evidence – whether by the individual alone or, as I have argued is *much* more likely, by

the individual through continuous interaction with society – makes it exceedingly

difficult for there to be a clear conception of 'evidence' that has not been molded *to some*

degree by human interests and representations. The notion of 'evidence' whose relevance

is determined solely by the structure of reality in itself and is somehow widely

recognizable as such *outside* any socio-linguistic frame or context thus appears nigh

inconceivable; at the very least, on those conditions, there would be little guarantee of

any consensus as to its relevance.[67]

(iii) The 'external position' of realist discourse.

   To summarize the point thus far: the perceived relevance of those conditions we

come to recognize as 'the evidence' (or, to put it differently, their very recognizability *as*

'the evidence') for or against a claim appears to be *determined, first and foremost, in relation to*

one or a number of our shared frameworks for discourse – in other words the conditions that we

count as proof are 'relevant' because, more than any other reason, we are in some way

directed to believe that they are relevant. Our conception of what 'the evidence' is is most

immediately derived from what we have been *trained* by others to regard as 'evidence' in

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[67] For as B.L. Whorf quite rightly pointed out: "[w]henever agreement or assent is arrived at in human affairs, [....] this agreement is reached by linguistic processes, or else it is not reached" ("Science and Linguistics", p. 212).

most cases; therefore 'the evidence' for a given proposition is not necessarily – nor even, I would venture to say, *remotely* – any indication of what the related conditions might be in some world that exists 'external' to any and all of our frameworks; rather it is more of a reflection of whatever the bulk of our society is most readily prepared to associate with the truth or falsity of the claim – whether 'ontologically related'[68] or not. Ultimately, then, it is far from clear as to how there could even *be* evidence for claims that pertain to reality in itself.

Consequently, to the extent that the identification and provision of evidence is in fact the very mechanism for substantiation, it is *unclear* as to how the claims lodged in realist discourse can be substantiated. Should it even be the case that there were *no* means whatsoever by which to uncover some form of 'evidence' whose significance would *not* have to be constituted or in some way influenced by the linguistic community at large (a likely scenario, it would seem), then the claims of realist discourse would simply *resist* any and all efforts at substantiation, rendering them discursively 'weightless'.

Interestingly, it was for a similar reason – involving the lack of any clear notion of 'possible evidence' to render a definitive verdict on the value of certain statements – that Carnap reached his dismissal of philosophical controversies built up around 'external questions' (intentionally metaphysical questions that ask after matters as they stand *outside* the structure of a given discursive framework, including the sort of questions to which the claims of realist discourse primarily relate and respond) as essentially 'bogus'. For him it was too difficult to ascertain what sort of proof there could be for the so-called solutions to 'external questions' (because they resist our *internal* protocols for verification), and until sufficient clarifications were made, the disputants on either side of

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[68] Meaning 'related in virtue of an objective, mind-independent state of affairs existing apart from us and our representative, interpretive and conceptual schema', roughly.

the question (in the case of the question of whether there is an objective, mind-independent world: the realists and the anti-realists) would be incapable of making headway in either direction. Carnap thought that, without a firm understanding of what the possible evidence was for any potential answer, the question itself lacked philosophical clarity, and thus, urgency: "I feel compelled," he wrote, "to regard the external question as a *pseudo-question*, until both parties to the controversy offer a common interpretation of the question as a cognitive question; this would involve an *indication of possible evidence* regarded as relevant by both sides"[69].

One must wonder whether the situation is really so dire for those claims about the existence and nature of reality in itself: is there *really* no clear means of substantiating these claims? Is there *really* no clear means of reaching firm judgments as to their discursive significance? Carnap himself may have implied otherwise, for his remarks have also been read as a challenge of sorts: faced with what appears to be a perpetual lack of clarity regarding *how* and *by what standards* it is possible to definitively substantiate or verify those claims and assertions that are made in regards to reality in itself, why not *introduce* some sort of discursive framework by which clear and definite solutions could be given for metaphysical questions? The challenge, in other words, is to introduce into our existing patterns of language a protocol for *metaphysical discourse* consisting of new forms of expression as well as certain rules for their use. The benefit of introducing new linguistic frameworks, Carnap wrote, was simply that "[a]fter the new forms are introduced into the language, it is possible to formulate with their help *internal questions* and possible answers to them"[70]. 'Internal questions', of course, in contrast to

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[69] Rudolf Carnap, "Empiricism, Semantics and Ontology", p. 42. My italics.

[70] Rudolf Carnap, "Empiricism, Semantics and Ontology", p. 37. My italics.

problematic external questions, inquire after circumstances *defined by* (and thus situated *within*) the parameters of the framework;[71] as such their 'internal' answers are largely *determinate*, or at the least, they can be found out by reference to the relatively stable structure of the framework. Hence, generally, the substantiation or verification of statements that relate and respond to 'internal questions' occurs within the context of a well-defined discursive infrastructure. Should metaphysicians (ontologists especially) choose to adopt such a framework for *their* discursive conduct, the logic goes, claims and assertions pertaining to, say, reality in itself, could be substantiated in accordance with a more or less *objective* conception of reality as rendered by the framework.

But then the obvious objection is that the 'reality' being described is no longer *reality in itself;* for within the context of any framework there is a diminished sense assigned to the term 'real', whereby something is said to be 'real' only so long as it refers to some aspect or element *of the system*; the (external) question of whether it is 'real' or 'actual' *outside* of the system was, for Carnap, unthinkable.[72] Hence "the acceptance of a linguistic framework must not be regarded as implying a metaphysical doctrine concerning the reality of the entities in question"[73]. To advance truly *metaphysical* doctrines concerning the reality of certain entities is, however, *precisely* what realists intend to do; for in their eyes, 'reality' defined within or even *as* the parameters of a framework is simply not 'reality' at all. To adopt a linguistic framework in the interest of making possible the substantiation of metaphysical claims thus comes at the price making metaphysical claims ultimately answerable to linguistic schema; staunch

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[71] See Rudolf Carnap, "Empiricism, Semantics and Ontology", pp. 29-30.

[72] Carnap famously said, in reference to a framework regarding 'the world of things': "To be real in the scientific sense means to be an element of the system; hence this concept cannot be meaningfully applied to the system itself" ("Empiricism, Semantics and Ontology", p. 30). This logic would seem to apply to all frameworks.

[73] Rudolf Carnap, "Empiricism, Semantics and Ontology", p. 38.

metaphysicians – and staunch realists, especially – simply cannot not tolerate this kind of constraint: for what they *do* in fact seek to describe is said to exist independently of *any* system by which we represent, interpret or 'construct' our surroundings. The voluntary adoption of a 'linguistic framework' in accordance with which to make and substantiate claims successfully is thus hardly any different from adhering to the practices by which we would normally substantiate claims: it is simply not clear as to how *either* method could allow for a direct epistemic connection with reality *in itself*. In conforming to the standards of either alternative, realists would merely be verifying their claims by reference to some set of standards or state of affairs that they had never intended to describe – i.e. society's standards of what counts as evidence, or 'reality' as rendered in terms of a linguistic or discursive framework.

The reason, then, why realism seems unable to abide by our ordinary methods for substantiation as well as by the voluntary introduction frameworks for 'new kinds of language' – the reason, to phrase it differently, why true realists can make no use of what would be conceived of and agreed upon as 'relevant evidence' in either system – is that, in *both* systems, the very possibility of epistemic access to 'reality in itself' is questionable at best, and is utterly precluded at worst. For on a socio-linguistic model of substantiation, as we have seen, the 'evidence' reflects what we have been trained to recognize as relevant – *not* whatever conditions would a*ctually* be related independently of society's conception of things; hence when a claim is verified it is verified in relation to conceptual or representational schema endorsed by the broader community. It is unclear, on this model, how the role of the socio-linguistic community as *the* authority over discursive standards and practices could be bypassed in the interest of finding out what *really* ought to count as evidence in virtue of the way things are related in reality

itself; and moreover it is unclear how any instance of 'evidence' even encountered thereafter would not be subject to the same socio-linguistic pressure – that is to say, it is unclear how one could be sure that what one perceived as a set of 'ontologically related' conditions *was in fact* ontologically related and that one had not simply come to 'discover it for oneself' through deeply entrenched patterns of thought laid out in earlier discursive training. On the sort of conception Carnap had, for the institution of new language structures, claims are verified *within* the context of the framework in question – answers are simply understood to 'hold good' *only* to that extent. In both systems, then, claims about reality in itself cannot be properly substantiated; and if they *are* substantiated, they will no longer be claims *about* reality in itself in virtue of the nature of the evidence that would have been used the process.

The deeper problem, at any rate, which lies at the root of this 'problem with evidence', is the fact that realist discourse generally resists constraint to the interior 'reality' of any discursive framework – any interpretational, conceptual or representational schema, any 'way of looking at the world', etc. – in favor of an 'external position' by which 'reality' is not seen from within any of the ways we may interpret or construct it, but from *without* – from a seemingly *omniscient* point of view. I maintain that this is a *problem* simply because, with respect to human discourse, and of course to humanity in general, no such point of view seems possible.

Thus the loose set of criticisms I have been making, which can be drawn together by the deeper notion that realist discourse suffers in the above-stated sense from its need for an 'external position' or 'viewpoint', might perhaps be viewed in relation to a broad family of other arguments; each of which resonates, in some way or another, with the sort of attitude Hilary Putnam has exemplified in his *Realism with a Human Face*:

What I am saying, then, is that elements of what we call 'language' or 'mind' *penetrate so deeply into what we call 'reality' that the very project of representing ourselves as being 'mappers' of something 'language-independent' is fatally compromised from the very start.* Like Relativism, but in a different way, Realism is an impossible attempt to view the world from Nowhere.[74]

In this family there is, of course, the work of Benjamin Lee Whorf surrounding the principle of linguistic relativity:

> We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way – an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language. [….] We are thus introduced to a new principle of relativity, which holds that all observers are not led by the same physical evidence to the same picture of the universe, unless their linguistic backgrounds are similar, or can in some way be calibrated.[75]

After all, it is not so great a leap from the premise that the reality we experience is one molded by the structure of our language to the conclusion that we are, given the degree to which language permeates our view of things, unable to filter out its effects in the interest of reaching a language-transcendent 'view from Nowhere'. Whether or not Whorf would agree to that conclusion, it suffices to say that he would have thought that the world we find to be *intuitively real* is actually, at least in large part, a function of our particular language rather than the world as it is 'in itself'.

The sort of attitude displayed by Putnam can also be expanded to cover the broader extent to which our nature as *social* creatures influences our very notion of reality:

> Man is biologically predestined to construct and to inhabit a world with others. This world becomes for him the dominant and definitive reality. Its limits are set by nature, but once constructed, this world acts back upon nature. In the dialectic between nature and the socially constructed world the human organism itself is

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[74] Hilary Putnam, *Realism with a Human Face*, p. 28.

[75] B.L. Whorf, "Science and Linguistics", pp. 213-214.

transformed. In this same dialectic man produces reality and thereby produces himself.[76]

Another expansion or revision can be made to cover the work of Michel Foucault. Foucault was not so much interested in our conception of reality as he was in our conception of what counts as 'valid knowledge' in the context of serious discourse, and especially in the fact that our conception of authoritative knowledge changes over time, such that, as Joseph Rouse has summarized, "it might be that what counts as a serious and important claim at one time will not (perhaps cannot) even be entertained as a candidate for truth at another". So dramatic would the effect of such a change be that other "[s]tatements can be dismissed (or never even be considered) not because they are thought to be false, but because it is not clear what it would amount to for them to be either true or false"[77]. Foucault's work thus resonates with the sort of attitude displayed by Putnam because throughout it, as Paul Rabinow has argued,

> there is no external position of certainty, no universal understanding that is beyond history and society. [….] Foucault's aim is to understand the plurality of roles that reason, for example, has taken as a social practice in our civilization[,] not to use it as a yardstick against which these practices can be measured. [78]

Thus there is no coherent viewpoint for Foucault that transcends our historically-situated ways of looking at and speaking of the world: no 'external position' outside of the various frameworks and schema we have in place; no 'final arbiter' to which we might appeal in the justification of any such system other than the very parameters of the individual system itself. Even our *reason* has a historical character, such that it is senseless

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[76] P.L. Berger and T. Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, p. 183.

[77] Joseph T. Rouse, "Power/Knowledge", p. 2.

[78] Paul Rabinow, *The Foucault Reader*, p. 4.

to speak of any 'ultimate' rational viewpoint from which to behold the reality or entirety of all things in themselves.

The list goes on. It would of course be misleading to say that each of these views was maintained expressly as a means to exploit the frailties of realist discourse – to say this has *not* been my intention at all. Rather I only mean to weave the sort of criticism I have put forward into a much broader fabric of views, throughout which the coherence of an 'external position' has been widely doubted. In the writings of Whorf, Berger and Luckmann, Foucault and many others there is general disdain for the belief that we can somehow escape our linguistically-, socially- or historically-conditioned ways of looking at the world around us and arrive at a purified or 'unconditioned' view of a reality occupying a level of existence outside any and all human frameworks. Generally put, those who have evinced the sort of attitude I've been discussing maintained that there are significant problems, in some way or another, with the attempt to ignore or compensate for the degree to which we are constrained by our various ways of interpreting or constructing reality. As far as *my* take on the matter goes, these same problems are reflected in the quest for 'ontologically related' evidence – the *only* sort of evidence by which true realists can abide – for in identifying such evidence, some 'God's eye view' of the way things are in themselves would be necessitated. It has been my aim to show *why* the attempt to 'step out' of our customary ways of recognizing evidence is so problematic, and thus to place my criticism somewhere in the general vicinity of the views that are mentioned above.

Of course, many realists will deny that realism requires a 'God's eye view' at all, for the purely ontological sort of claims they intend to make do not concern the kinds of *view* or *perspective* we may or may not have. This I readily grant – nevertheless to *defend* or

justify a 'principally ontological claim' requires that one provide some sort of 'proof' or 'evidence' whose relevance is determined by the way things are *external* to any of the frameworks or schema that we have at our disposal. Thus while realism may not be *concerned* with whether we might have anything like a 'God's eye view', the fact remains that the proper substantiation of realist claims seems to *presuppose* that we might.

(iv) Concluding remarks on the 'significance' of realist discourse.

In the preceding chapter I initiated a 'soft criticism' with the observation that the discursive 'significance' of claims – their believability and their defensibility – derives from there being some sort of *proof* or *evidence* to point towards in their support; that is, claims ought to have some means of being substantiated or verified so that they might be given some 'weight', so to speak. My contention has been that there appears to be no clear method for the substantiation or verification of claims about an objective, mind-independent reality. I first followed along the old verificationist track in denying any extent to which empirical evidence could be used in support of such claims. Next, I argued that substantiation normally takes place over a wide variety of claims and thus that it requires a wide variety of 'relevant evidence'; and that the process by which we normally determine 'what counts as proof' for certain claims is of central importance, for in discovering that process we might determine whether 'relevant evidence' could be identified for realist claims. The process, as it turns out, appears to involve our being *trained by society* in the use of language and the appropriate conduct for discourse; and so any notion of 'evidence' involving 'ontologically related' conditions – the only sort of evidence that could suffice for the proper substantiation of realist claims – seems highly problematic. All of this has been intended to cast some doubt on the possibility of there being evidence, and thus of there being any means of substantiation, for claims about

reality in itself. At the root of the problem for realist discourse is its need for a 'view from Nowhere'; and so I brought the criticism to a close with the attempt to situate my arguments in the context of many others that have, in some way or another, chipped away at the very notion of a position external to all human frameworks and schema.

Should it be believed that realist discourse *does* indeed lack a clear standard for evidence, or perhaps even that it *does* lack a clear means of obtaining evidence that has not been sullied with the scourge of human influence, then the very possibility of substantiation for its claims – and indeed for any such claim pertaining to the existence or nature of reality in itself – will appear most doubtful. In keeping with the notion that substantiation begets discursive merit, then, *the very believability and defensibility of realist claims will be doubted*: without a clear means of substantiation or verification, claims about reality can be given no weight. They can be shown neither true nor false. They will be, as it were, *mired*, and the philosophical disputations surrounding them will be left intellectually stagnant.

Such, at any rate, is the broad picture I hope to point toward. The object of this chapter has not been to reach any such conclusion *decisively*, but rather to encourage a line of reasoning that leads to a much less formal understanding – to point out a few of the concerns that make the concept of a 'properly verifiable realist claim' that much harder to swallow. One reason for my caution is that it would be a bit overzealous to render single-handedly a *verdict* on a time-honored philosophical mainstay. Also, and more importantly, our being left with a *question* of the significance of realist discourse rather than with a decisive verdict of its insignificance will prove to be of the utmost importance: for it is a *choice* with which we, as the producers of discourse and the members present in discussion, are always faced; never an ineluctable *consequence*. For it

is ultimately *we* who collectively shape our discourse – *we* who decide on our own terms whether it is discourse worth having any longer; and by that same token, in the event that we suspect it might not be, it is again *we* who determine how to go about making the necessary adjustments.

III. CONCLUSIONS

Assuming, then, that the preceding discussion *has* in fact given us good reason to suppose that there are deep problems with the substantiation of realist claims, and thus that we are entitled to question the very *purpose* of 'principally ontological realism' and other related formations in the context of serious discourse, the task for us is then to decide *what we ought to do about it*. What follows is not an argument for something that *must* be done, but rather an informal suggestion as to a particular course of action that I find to be agreeable – a suggestion for something that in my mind *ought* to be done. First, though, it may be useful to look over a few alternatives in particular that we ought *not* to consider.

(i) Lowering discursive expectations.

For instance, it might seem natural to conclude something to the effect that 'because claims pertaining to reality in itself lack adequate evidence, we must accept that their truth is *probable* at best'. The effect would be to lower the degree of certainty expected of and assigned to claims about reality, such that realists and anti-realists would simply have to fit the word 'probably' into the majority of the claims they make in order to avoid the sort of nitpicking criticism leveled in the preceding chapter. The most obvious problem with this tactic is that realists (contemporary realists, anyway) rarely aspire to the level of *certainty* in the first place; at any rate, to condemn realist discourse on the grounds that 'it

cannot reach the level of certainty' would only solicit a *more* devastating response: 'What kind of discourse *can*?'. The standard 'degree of certainty', to be quite sure, has already been lowered: present realists and anti-realists alike cast arguments simply in the hopes of making their respective claims seem *more likely* than those of their opponents. The *second* problem with this approach – and by far the more important problem – is that a mere 'lowering of expectations' from apodictic certitude to mere probability fails to address the very issue we have detected: for a realist to demonstrate that a claim is even *likely* nevertheless requires *some* 'evidence'. In keeping with the criticism leveled thus far, it is the question of how (assuming the socio-linguistic nature of what we take to be 'evidence') there could be *any* evidence at all that would be suitable for realist claims – and *not* the question of how much evidence suffices – that realists seem to have the most difficulty answering clearly. Lowering the standards for realist claims would do nothing whatsoever to relieve them of the need to provide a clear answer for that question. So long as the need for suitable evidence remains in place and the method for obtaining it remains unclear, realist discourse will fail to achieve *any* standard 'degree of certitude' – set high *or* low.

(ii) Eliminating the need for evidence.

Another alternative has to do with 'common sense'. It is perhaps our common sense that enjoins us to believe we will have success in our ways of talking and thinking about the world when we have *represented it well* in doing so; or that the validity of the knowledge we strive to produce consists in its *corresponding* to the way things really are. We may feel it is a matter of 'common sense', then, to believe there *is* a mind-independent reality to which we relate, and thus that certain claims about it – namely, the ontological thesis that it *exists* – should be regarded as true whether or not they can be

proven. So another way of coping with the problems posed by substantiation might be to do away with the need for substantiation altogether in treating a portion of realist discourse as *indispensable* – for in taking certain beliefs about reality in itself to be *given*, would we not be protecting the integrity of our knowledge and the purpose of our discourse, seeing as both depend upon accurate reflection of a mind-independent reality that exists in such-and-such a way? Our dependency on having the belief that a mind-independent reality exists – our conviction in the fundamentality of the fact *that* it exists – would, in that scenario, save us the trouble of having to prove for ourselves whether it does or not.

Of course we only depend on the belief in a mind-independent reality to the extent that we go along with our 'common sense' in supposing that the firmness – or perhaps even the *objective validity* – of what we believe about the world owes to its being a depiction of the way things are independently of the mental. Some though, including Richard Rorty, have held "that objectivity is not a matter of corresponding to objects but a matter of getting together with other subjects – that there is nothing to objectivity except intersubjectivity"[79]. The obvious upshot, with respect to our search for reliable or 'objective' truth, and for the 'success' of our discourse, is that we may not need to come upon accurate *representations* of reality at all: perhaps we need only reach widespread agreement in order to achieve our ends.

One possible problem with treating certain realist claims as fundamental or indispensable is thus that it is not abundantly clear that we have such a dire *need* to presuppose a mind-independent world that exists in such-and-such a way. If the 'success' of our discourse and the strength of our knowledge can be secured through

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[79] Richard Rorty, "John Searle on Realism and Relativism", p. 72.

solidarity rather than through correspondence, the 'common sense' belief in reality as it is in itself might amount to little more than excess ontological baggage.

(iii) An end to realist discourse.

The first course of action ought not be considered because it fails to deal with the problems involved in the substantiation of realist claims – the very same problems that have prompted us to look over our options in the first place. The second option confronts the difficulty in providing evidence simply by requiring *none*; though of course it emphasizes a dire *need* to make 'givens' out of certain realist claims on our part. The emphasis appears to be somewhat misguided, considering that there may very well be other ways of securing firm or 'objective' knowledge that do *not* require us to have much of an ontological stance at all. Rorty in particular suggested that intersubjective agreement produces sufficiently firm knowledge, and thus that for us to have success in our ways of talking and thinking about the world, we need only focus on our relations with other social subjects – *not* on what 'the world is like in and of itself'. I should like to briefly explore Rorty's position here, and extract from it a much more appealing course of action for us to consider.

Specifically, Rorty wrote that because we can get our 'objective truth' through our communication with other subjects, we "gain nothing for the pursuit of such truth by talking about the *mind dependence* or *independence* of reality. All there is to talk about are the procedures we use for bringing about agreement among inquirers"[80]. In other words, because all the knowledge we need is available to us through our connection with the surrounding linguistic community, there is no useful purpose to be served in delving into

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[80] Richard Rorty, "John Searle on Realism and Relativism", p. 72. My italics.

whether or not there is anything 'mind-independent' *outside* the confines of our language or the community in which it is spoken.

There is, of course, a certain sense of 'mind-independence' for which Rorty was willing to make an exception: the sense in which something is 'mind-independent' if it 'causally antecedes' us (to borrow his term). "Given that it pays to talk about mountains," he wrote, "one of the obvious truths about mountains is that they were here before we talked about them. If you do not believe that, you probably do not know how to play the language games that employ the word 'mountain'"[81]. There would be no need to discourage talk of causal antecedence – for *this* sense of 'independence' is given meaning *by* our very ways of speaking and thinking about the world; this sense of the word is common to the way we ordinarily use language, and relates to the things we are taught in the process of learning it. Part of our normal language behavior, in other words, includes the ability to discuss what it is to *be preceded* by other things or events.

The sense of 'mind-independence' that Rorty sought to discredit was rather the sense that means something like what he referred to as 'existence in itself'. *This* is the operative sense of the word involved in the question of, say, "whether there really are mountains or whether it is merely convenient for us to talk about mountains", or more generally, "whether our reality is independent of our ways of talking about it"[82]. Thus it is obviously the sense of the word favored by *ontological realists*. Rorty thought that questions dealing with the realists' preferred sense of the word proved difficult because they had nothing to do with the inner workings of our 'language games'. The fact that it 'pays' for us to talk about mountains (to hang on to Rorty's example) tells us nothing

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[81] Richard Rorty, "John Searle on Realism and Relativism", p. 72.
[82] Richard Rorty, "John Searle on Realism and Relativism", p. 72.

about the extra-linguistic nature of mountains *themselves* in the world as it is *in itself*.[83] Questions involving the latter sense of 'mind-independence', as we have already seen, and as Rorty himself recognized, rather seek an escape route from our language to the world beyond; the 'mind-independence' they ask of is not given meaning by the ways we speak and think about the world – instead these questions prompt us to attempt to *break out* of linguistic customs. So, at least within our ordinary ways of speaking and thinking about the world, their answers are largely *inconsequential.* What Rorty ultimately suggested, then, is that "nothing could possibly turn on the answers to questions of independence in *that* sense and that therefore we can get along quite nicely without the notion of Reality as It Is in Itself"[84].

What Rorty endorsed was, to put it loosely, 'dropping the subject' with regard to realist discourse, or perhaps, 'dropping the entire conversation' on the basis of a pragmatic evaluation of our use for 'reality in itself' as a philosophical conception. If we cannot get anywhere discussing it, then the subject of discussion – and indeed the discussion itself – is hardly worth entertaining any longer. *This*, I think, is a course of action worth looking into.

Throughout this paper it has been my aim to point out a few critical problems with realist discourse as it stands – problems concerning *what* sort of evidence could be useful in the substantiation of realist claims as well as problems concerning *whether* evidence could be useful at all (insofar as we have good reason to wonder whether the 'relevance' of evidence in any situation hinges largely on what we have learned and continue to learn from the rest of our linguistic community). These problems, it seem, will carry on unless

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[83] As Rorty put the point himself: "[T]he utility of those language games has nothing to do with the question of whether Reality as It Is in Itself, apart from the way it is handy for humans beings to describe it, has mountains in it" (Richard Rorty, "John Searle on Realism and Relativism", p. 72).

[84] Richard Rorty, "John Searle on Realism and Relativism", p. 72.

realists are somehow able to provide *clear* standards for the substantiation of their claims – these standards ought to deal first and foremost with the socio-linguistic factors that have made it so difficult for us to imagine evidence whose 'relevance' is determined by reality in itself rather than by social norms and expectations for discursive conduct. They must then address precisely *what* ought to count as proof toward the verification of their claims. Generally speaking, they must make it clear as to how 'evidence' for claims about a mind-independent reality speaks to the way things *really* are, and not merely to the way we take them to be, whether through interpretation, representation, conceptualization or construction. It seems unlikely indeed that there would be consensus for any such clarification – at least, there has been no definitive standard for the proof of realist claims thus far.

Abstaining from realist discourse certainly deals with the problems I have raised – with nothing left to talk about, it follows that there would be no realist claims for which to provide evidence, no realist claims left to substantiate – no realist claims whose discursive significance seemed most unlikely given their dependence upon a link or correspondence to 'reality in itself' rather than to the views of the particular linguistic communities in which we are embedded and of which we are active members. There would be no issue with the conceptual difficulties standing in the way of a 'view from Nowhere' because no one would be presupposing such a view. There would be no *need* for a mind-independent ontology if the very concept of 'reality in itself' were abandoned for a lack of present usefulness.

To rid our discourse of the concept of 'reality in itself' would, of course, be to rid ourselves of an entire way of thinking about the world. The old distinction between 'reality' and 'appearance', or between 'representation' and 'represented', would lose all

purpose for us whenever and wherever it concerned the difference between 'mind-dependence' and 'mind-independence'. Of course, the very concept of a world *beyond* the world as it is experienced and rendered by us – as it is *infused* with our meaning – would have to be relinquished. We would simply be left with a *conception* of the world that did *not* express a concern on our part for some plane of mind-independent existence: our concern would no longer be with representing *or* distinguishing how the world really is apart from the myriad ways we take it to be – those ways would be sufficient in themselves: ends for our *living*[85] rather than means for our depicting.

Rorty cited a number of advantages to our having just this sort of 'anti-representationalist' worldview. We would, for instance, be more faithful to the Darwinian image we have built up for ourselves as *clever animals* in dismissing the notion "that Nature had cleverly contrived an organism that represents it accurately, as opposed to merely coping with it cleverly"[86]. We would also encourage a better view of philosophical progress as consisting in either weeding out old, defunct ways of speaking (e.g. realism, anti-realism) or in infusing them with contemporary novelties, *not* in 'getting closer to reality'.[87] Quite generally, too, we would be less concerned with the 'correct' view of reality and more sensitive to cultural difference and peculiarities.

Bearing all of this in mind, I would suggest that dropping the conversation as far as it centers on 'reality in itself' is the most agreeable course of action. There may be others I have not thought to consider, but insofar as the problems described throughout this paper have been tracked to the very method by which realist claims are made defensible and compelling – in short: *made worth our while* – I see no satisfactory alternative.

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[85] Friedrich Nietzsche said: "Any distinction between a 'true' and an 'apparent' world…is only a suggestion of decadence, a symptom of the *decline of life*" (*Twilight of the Idols*, p. 484).

[86] Richard Rorty, "Hilary Putnam and the Relativist Menace", p. 59.

[87] See pp. 5-6 in Rorty's Introduction to *Truth and Progress*.

(iv) Final remarks: on realist discourse and common sense.

The pragmatist or anti-representationalist attempt to "clean out the last remnants of metaphysical realism from our conversational and pedagogical practices"[88] is bound to strike some as an affront to *common sense* itself – *how* could we commit honestly to the idea that discourse would be better off without conversation on *the way the world really is*? Are we really to believe that we cannot discuss such things competently? (Recall the cornerstone of Devitt's faith: realism "*is in fact the core of common sense*"[89]).

In a limited sense, realism *surely* speaks to our common sense – from our youth we *have* learned, both from our own experiences and from what others have taught us, that there is a greater world around us that predates us and that we, as individuals, cannot substantially change, at least not on a whim. Notions of causal antecedence, of stability and of externality (etc.) – and thus, perhaps, even of *objectivity* – are rather natural devices for talking and thinking about the world. To that extent, it is all well and good for us to talk and think about an *objective reality*. Now, I say that realism speaks to our common sense in a *limited* way because the notion that it must be some *mind-independent* state of affairs that constitutes the 'real' world around us is *not* such a natural reflection – how on earth could we have come by *things in themselves*? Mind-independence is obviously not something of which we have any *experience*; nor is it a notion we find to be 'basic' in our everyday ways of talking and thinking about the world. It appears to be a concept we have gone to some lengths to *contrive* – but is there any good *excuse* for doing so? Have we any *legitimate reason* to abstract to the notion of mind-independence, or have we only come up with it by, say, amplifying beyond reasonable limits other concepts such as objectivity – e.g., by peeling back the layers of objective existence as far back as *we* are

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[88] Richard Rorty, "Hilary Putnam and the Relativist Menace", p. 58.

[89] Michael Devitt, *Realism & Truth*, p. 47.

capable of imagining – in the name of some misplaced philosophical curiosity? The latter *seems* to be more likely, as no clearly sensible basis for mind-independence leaps to mind (in our normal ways of talking and thinking, that is, what utility is there to gain from a concept that relates to whatever exists *wholly outside* of our normal ways of talking and thinking?). At any rate, that the truth of the claim that 'ontological realism represents the very best of common sense' is indeed questionable. *Nevertheless*, I will respond to that very claim with a final remark.

Common sense ought not be conceived of in absolute terms; for human history has shown beyond a doubt that *our ways of talking and thinking about the world can change* – so what's to say that our common sense cannot change with them? What's to say that common sense could even *resist* the pressure to change? Even if we suppose, though, that common sense were a timeless phenomenon, and that ontological realism were indeed a reflection of the very best of our common sense, these are still weak reasons against our making an *attempt* to get past realist discourse. In the event that we (the pragmatists, the anti-representationalists, the Nietzscheans) were *wrong,* and that the themes associated with realist discourse and with the concept of 'reality in itself' were sure to spring back up again and restore themselves as paragons of what *common sense* should ever be, we would nevertheless fail to *realize this* unless we made an honest attempt to get rid of them in the first place. Responding to the alleged timelessness of old philosophical themes and the impossibility of our ever getting past them once and for all, Rorty once wrote that we will never know "unless we do our level best to escape them, to forget them actively by getting involved with new themes, and by talking in

ways that make it hard for those old themes to come up"[90]. In other words: we will

never know unless we make an *honest* attempt based on what would seem to be the best

course of action given our current predicament.

Good advice indeed.

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[90] Richard Rorty, "Hilary Putnam and the Relativist Menace", p. 47.

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