

WHAT GENERATES THE REALISM/ANTI-REALISM DICHOTOMY?

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ABSTRACT

The most basic divide amongst analytic metaphysicians separates realists from anti-realists. By examining certain characteristic and problematic features of these two families of views, we uncover their underlying metametaphysical orientations, which turn out to coincide. This shared philosophical picture that underlies both the realist and the anti-realist project we call the Modern Picture. It rests on a crucial distinction between reality as it is for us and reality as it is in itself. It is argued that this distinction indeed generates the realism/anti-realism dichotomy, and is also responsible for the problematic aspects highlighted earlier. We conclude by sketching an alternative philosophical picture that rejects the distinction between reality as it is for us and reality as it is in itself, which we call the Aristotelian Picture, and consider whether it is able to avoid the issues to which the Modern Picture gives rise.

Despite its remarkable resurrection in recent decades, analytic metaphysics is still often regarded with suspicion. Its most controversial aspects are, as one would expect, topic of the metametaphysical debate

that has gained significance in recent years.¹ On this meta-level, some complain that one or another dispute is “merely verbal”², others develop theoretical frameworks designed to show that one or another metaphysical view fares best with respect to some allegedly universal standard for metaphysical theorizing (familiar theoretical virtues such as parsimony, simplicity, strength, and fit are frequently alluded to)³, still others stress the importance of our scientific and/or common sense understanding of reality as a guide for proper metaphysical theorizing.⁴ Looking at what is going on both on the metaphysical and on its meta-level, we find a familiar and fundamental division within contemporary metaphysics between what we will call *metaphysical realists* and *metaphysical anti-realists*. Realists understand the metaphysical project to be about capturing the true, objective, mind-independent structure (or make-up, or layout, or fundament) of reality—in short, a theory that captures reality as it is *anyway*, to use Bernard Williams’ apt phrase.⁵ Anti-realists, on the other hand, insist that this project is problematic, or even incoherent, roughly because we always approach reality from a certain perspective, a certain conceptual point of view, which makes an understanding of reality at all possible and hence cannot be “peeled off” in order to reach this alleged objective, mind-independent reality.⁶

¹ See, for instance, the recent collection of essays entitled *Metametaphysics* (Chalmers et al., 2009).

² See especially Hirsch (2002, 2005, 2008), though his complaint is not aimed at metaphysical disputes generally but rather at quite specific ones.

³ See, e.g., Rodriguez-Pereyra (2002, ch. 12); Sider (2012, ch. 1) and also Sider (2009) and other essays in the mentioned *Metametaphysics* collection (Chalmers et al., 2009). See also §1.1 below.

⁴ E.g., Ladyman et al. (2007); Elder (2005, 2011).

⁵ See Williams (1978, pp. 48–9).

⁶ It is difficult to characterize the realism/anti-realism divide in a neutral way, without already offending one or another defender of realism or anti-realism. The purpose of our characterization, however, is merely to sketch the divide, not to

The present essay aims to extract from key observations within the contemporary (meta)metaphysical discussion an underlying picture, a shared metametaphysical starting point, that explains this duality of views. In doing so we then find ourselves confronted with a fairly traditional question: is there an alternative to this picture? Is there a “third way” that is neither metaphysically realist nor metaphysically anti-realist in spirit? It is not our aim to embark on a detailed exposition and defense of such an alternative picture, although we will illustrate our results by providing a rough sketch of what an alternative might look like. We focus on diagnosing the situation at hand: the realism/anti-realism dichotomy. Our diagnosis will provide reasons for abandoning the currently dominant picture in favor of an alternative picture.

The first section is thus devoted to a critical discussion of both the realist and anti-realist positions and their metametaphysical underpinnings, leading to a sketch of said philosophical picture, that shapes the project of metaphysics in current analytic philosophy. We call that picture the *Modern Picture*. Our discussion of metaphysical realism focuses on one particularly telling feature: it yields a growing range of radically diverging views between which it is impossible to adjudicate on the basis of the realist’s metametaphysical understanding of how their project is to be carried out. There is just no way to put aside even the most outrageous of metaphysical speculations—a good testimony for which is the continuing recurrence of such positions (e.g., modal realism, blobjectivism, nihilism⁷). Our discussion of metaphysical anti-realism in turn focuses on one of its most striking features: it aims to reject the very idea of a mind-independent reality, yet depends crucially on that same

offer precise formulations of either family of views. In §1 below we will proceed to develop a more detailed exposition of the divide.

⁷ See, respectively, Lewis (1986); Horgan and Potrč (2008); Unger (1980) and Dorr and Rosen (2002). See also §1.1 below.

idea for its own articulation. The main claim of the first section is that these characteristic, unsatisfactory features of both realism and anti-realism point to a comprehensive philosophical picture that underlies the entire realist/anti-realist opposition: the Modern Picture.

The second section develops our diagnosis of the sketched situation, which comes down to spelling out the defining features of the Modern Picture. The very basis of the Modern Picture turns out to be its strict separation between reality as it is for us and reality as it is in itself. We trace out in some detail how this picture gives rise to the unsatisfactory duality of metaphysical options problematized in §1. Along the way, we come to see that against the background of this Modern Picture, the problematic aspects of realism and anti-realism highlighted in the previous section are to some extent inevitable.

In the third section we introduce, by reference to the defining features of the Modern Picture as developed in §2, a potential alternative to it: the *Aristotelian Picture*. On the *Aristotelian Picture*, no fundamental distinction between reality-for-us and reality-itself is allowed; we consider various consequences that result from this basic thought. The crucial difference between the Modern and the *Aristotelian Picture* lies in the way they portray the relation between concepts and reality, as we will see.

1. Uncovering the Picture

Realists⁸ attempt to construct metaphysical theories purporting to describe the fundamental/objective/mind-independent structure or make-

⁸ For simplicity's sake, we will drop the qualification "metaphysical" and just talk about realists and anti-realists.

up of reality (or something such).⁹ Anti-realists attempt to show that realists embark upon a futile quest, that the only sensible notion of ‘reality’ we can have is that of a reality as carved up by us, that is, a reality that is partly constituted by our own conceptual activity, our cognitive perspective (or something such). One popular way of expressing the pivotal point of disagreement between realists and anti-realists is as follows: realists urge that their theories describe the world as it *mind-independently* is, whereas anti-realists argue that the very categories employed in such purported descriptions are, after all, *our own* categories, and hence that the very idea of a mind-independent reality in the realist’s sense is deeply mistaken.

1.1. The Metametaphysics of Realism

Realists hold widely diverging views. To mention but a few of the more salient ones: there is the camp of David Lewis, whose metaphysical program includes four-dimensionalism, Humean supervenience, and counterpart theory; there is the camp of David Armstrong, whose metaphysical views center on universals between which necessary connections hold and which are instantiated by objects, thus resulting in states of affairs; there is the camp of the ontic structural realists, who elevate the structure that fundamental physics unravels to a metaphysical status; there is the camp of the neo-Aristotelians, whose metaphysical

⁹ Jenkins (2010) contains a helpful discussion of various ways of spelling out realism. She recommends construing realism in terms of objectivity or mind-independence, as we do, and distinguishes realism in this sense both from the claim that ontological disputes are substantial (“inflationism”) and from the claim that there is an ontologically weighty reading of the quantifiers (“quantifier invariance”).

program typically includes essentialism, hylomorphism, and three-dimensionalism; et cetera.¹⁰

Given this diversity of views, it is not surprising that many discussions within the realist camp end in impasses. This situation is due to the core of the metametaphysical views that can be associated with the various realist positions, as we will now set out to illustrate. Realist metaphysics is normally conceived of as a largely *a priori* discipline, and hence the only way to adjudicate between the diverse positions is by way of examining various features of the metaphysical theories themselves. Typically, simplicity, parsimony, strength, and fit are the features that are deemed of importance: metaphysical theories should not be needlessly complicated; they should not postulate entities without sufficient reason for doing so; they should be comprehensive, accounting for many aspects of reality at once; and they should be consonant with our scientific and/or commonsense understanding of reality (here most realists go beyond the mere *a priori*). The overall strategy is, thus, like that of an inference to the best explanation: whichever theory explains best how the world is *for us*, as we know it through science and/or everyday life, whilst using as little and elegant resources as possible wins the metaphysical prize of capturing how the world is *in itself*. Typical test cases for metaphysical theories include the traditional metaphysical puzzles of identity, composition, persistence, etc.¹¹

¹⁰ See, respectively, Lewis (1986) and Sider (2012); Armstrong (1978, 2004); Ladyman (2002), Ladyman et al. (2007), and Landry and Rickles (2012); Lowe (2009) and Fine (1994, 2003).

¹¹ Notice that what is to be explained by this theory is not the way the world *appears* to us but rather the way the world *is* for us (which includes mere appearances as well as concrete physical things). Scientifically minded realists tend to import scientific theories into their metaphysics; some of them go so far as to pronounce metaphysics “naturalized” (Ladyman et al., 2007).

The problem with these theoretical virtues is that they are simply not decisive. First, there is lots of room to shift the priorities: is a parsimonious but more complicated theory better than a simple but less parsimonious one? Secondly, why are *these* the important theoretical virtues, and not others? Thirdly, and most importantly: even if such problems can indeed be overcome, as many realists think¹², there is still no reason to think that radical divergence of views can be prevented.

To illustrate this problem of divergence, consider the following theory—let’s call it *numberism*: the only things that exist are the real numbers, with their many properties and the many relations that hold between them. That’s all: a very simple and parsimonious theory, and strong too, since it tells us all there is to know about reality. Fit can be arranged for by way of “indirect correspondence” (a strategy actually used by Horgan and Potrč (2008)): scientific and/or ordinary truths are indeed true, but in fact their truth consists in no more (and no less) than that certain complicated theorems about the real numbers hold. For example, that you are now reading this essay could be true simply because there are three real numbers which stand in a specific ternary relation. It surely is no easy task to provide a systematic way of paraphrasing every true sentence into some sentence concerning the real numbers, but there seems to be no reason why it could not be done (e.g., with the help of a Davidsonian truth theory).¹³

Numberism is false—and not only that, it is an outrageous metaphysical theory. Yet the metametaphysical orientation of the realist debate in metaphysics provides no real grounds for dismissing it. Indeed, this orientation is more likely to favor numberism over many alternatives that are actually defended, given its excellent score on simplicity, parsimony, and strength.

¹² See, e.g., Rodriguez-Pereyra (2002, ch. 12) and Sider (2012, ch. 1).

¹³ Quine actually considered a theory very much like numberism once; he rejected it mainly because the ideology would be impractical (Quine, 1964).

Realists are likely to object to our complaint by pointing out that our use of “indirect correspondence” to argue that numberism scores sufficiently high on the theoretical virtue of fit fails entirely to do justice to the point of this virtue. Well, here we can agree: if consonance with scientific and/or common sense wisdom can be gained in such cheap a way, there is no reason for establishing it at all (except for rhetorical reasons). The question then becomes: what *more* is required of a metaphysical theory in order for it to score high on the theoretical virtue of fit? The answer: we should take our scientific and/or commonsense knowledge *seriously*. If, after due examination, we declare that there is an oak tree in the backyard, this means that there really is an *oak tree* in the backyard (barring skeptical scenarios), and so oak trees should be allowed to be part of the furniture of the world. But then, what *are* oak trees, metaphysically speaking? Here we get to the heart of the matter: in reply to such a question, the realist allows himself to say *anything* whatsoever. To switch to a more serious example, take the following Lewis-like view. Oak trees are space-time worms (four-dimensionalism), that is, mereological sums of space-time points (or their contents) displaying certain patterns of qualities. Now, space-time points may be thought of as quadruples of real numbers (coordinates), the properties instantiated at those points may be thought of as sets of such quadruples, so oak trees can be thought of as sets of quadruples of real numbers that are members of certain properties. That’s pretty close to numberism, even though we started out by insisting that we take our scientific and common sense knowledge “seriously”. Now, this argument is not intended to show that Lewisian metaphysics just is numberism, because it is evidently not. The point is, rather, that if a Lewis-style conception of material objects is acceptable from a realist metaphysician’s point of view, then numberism is too.

It seems that the metaphysical realist is in no position to decide which of the many alternative metaphysical theories is the correct one—not even in a position to dismiss such outrageous theories as numberism. Of

course, the considerations we have voiced at best hint at a case for these bold conclusions—a proper argument would have to dig much deeper into the various versions of realism. That is not our aim here; our survey of realism (and anti-realism) only serves to expose the underlying metametaphysical picture. So, let us ask the more interesting question: why do we find this divergence problem within metaphysical realism? Consider: as realists, we take ourselves to be discussing the ultimate make-up of reality, but we are supposing this ultimate make-up to be something that lies *behind* the world as it is known to us through science and/or common sense—indeed, it is supposed to explain this. Because of this set-up, there is no decent way of doing justice to the point of the theoretical virtue of fit: what the metaphysical theory is supposed to capture is entirely disjoint from reality as it is for us. The picture that is assumed is that familiar ever since the British Empiricists made it popular: there is this “something I know not what” that lies beyond the world as it is *for us*, and this something is the target of the realist.¹⁴ Given such a picture, however, it is not surprising that there is so little convergence amongst realist projects. We are locating the target of those projects in an unreachable place, as it were. One can see why Kant decided that there really is no point in speculating about what such a ‘world-in-itself’ is like.

Fraser MacBride opens his review of Rodriguez-Pereyra (2002), who defends a version of nominalism, with a very typical statement:

Take David Lewis’ theory that possible worlds are disconnected spatio-temporal regions whose inhabitants we routinely discuss in

¹⁴ It is open to the realist, of course, to hold that certain parts of our sciences (e.g., physics) do have a metaphysical say on what reality-itself looks like, thus hoping to back their metaphysical story up with serious, empirical science. This thought motivates certain realist philosophers of science, such as Ladyman et al. (2007).

ordinary modal discourse. Famously, Lewis' theory met with an incredulous stare from those to whom it was presented. But Lewis faced the incredulous stare down. Following arguments where they led, he showed that his theory enjoyed benefits that outweighed the cost of offending intuition. In doing so Lewis exercised a liberating effect on contemporary metaphysics, blowing away the cobwebs of ordinary-language philosophy and making it acceptable for philosophers to advance bold and surprising claims about reality. (2004)

The point we have been developing is this. It is fine that Lewis has succeeded in liberating us from “the cobwebs of ordinary-language philosophy”, in getting us to critically reflect on deeply-ingrained prejudices and intuitions concerning metaphysical questions—but, by “making it acceptable to advance bold and surprising claims about reality” he also contributed to opening the floodgates to a neverending stream of ever-more-diverging metaphysical views. That is a symptomatic problem of contemporary metaphysical realism.

To repeat: these brief and sketchy remarks are not meant to provide an actual *argument* against metaphysical realism. We are highlighting features that are symptomatic for the metametaphysical picture on which the project of metaphysical realism is based. That picture, which we call the *Modern Picture*, delineates the target of the realist project in such a way that the disconcerting divergence we have highlighted results.

1.2. The Metametaphysics of Anti-Realism

The anti-realist is impressed by the fact that whatever theory we come up with, it will be couched in a certain language, it will depend on a certain conceptual scheme. Hence, he will not be surprised that there is so much disagreement amongst realists: there is no point in empty speculation, nothing *can* constrain their metaphysical theorizing. Yet for the anti-realist this doesn't mean that such theorizing is useless—as Carnap famously argued, we should simply locate the significance of such theory

construction elsewhere.¹⁵ Instead of asking which theory is true, we should ask the pragmatic question: which theories are *useful*? Does it help us to adopt one or another scheme of thinking? From this point of view, there is no absolute reason to change our language or our conceptual apparatus, nor is there any reason to choose one theory to the exclusion of all others: pluralism makes more sense, since different theories might well be useful for different purposes.

From such a perspective it seems indeed as if all those quarrels among realists are merely “verbal disputes”¹⁶: it’s all just a matter of “language choice”, or choice of conceptual framework. For anti-realists, doing metaphysics is nothing more than discussing which conceptual schemes to use for what purposes. For example, if we find possible-world talk useful, we adopt it. The question as to whether possible worlds really exist or are rather fictions or something such simply does not arise. Those are, to use Carnapian terminology, *external questions*, as opposed to *internal questions* phrased within the conceptual scheme we have adopted¹⁷ (e.g.: what should the accessibility relation look like when explicating alethic modality in terms of possible worlds?).

Anti-realism thus takes a deflationary stance towards metaphysics. Still, the picture underlying the position is at root the same as that underlying the realist discussion: there is a distinction between the world as it is in itself and the world as it is for us, in science and/or common sense, given our faculties of perception and conception. The anti-realist argues that our conceptual scheme applies only to the world as it is for us (indeed, is partly constitutive of that world), and hence thinks it futile, or even incoherent, to theorize about the world-in-itself. One can indeed

¹⁵ See especially Carnap (1950), and also, e.g., Goodman (1978).

¹⁶ This is, very briefly, the complaint Eli Hirsch likes to make for some metaphysical disputes. However, he doesn’t take this stance in every case. See, e.g., Hirsch (2002, 2005, 2008).

¹⁷ For the external/internal distinction, see Carnap (1950).

find anti-realists reluctantly speak of this world-in-itself as an “amorphous lump” (Dummett, 1973, p. 73) or as just “stuff” (Sidelle, 1989, 1998)—determinations that are supposed to convey that no determinations are possible, since every determination is inevitably *our* determination and hence not mind-independent.

Here we stumble upon some uncomfortable aspects of the anti-realist family of views that are symptomatic of the underlying metametaphysical picture. Firstly, and most importantly, it is problematic to claim that *there is* this world-in-itself, even though we cannot provide any positive characterization of it whatsoever. For what exactly is thus being claimed? It is reasonable to demand from any ontologist that she be able to explain *what* exactly she takes there to be—that is, to provide positive characterizations.¹⁸ Yet as soon as the anti-realist starts providing such characterizations for reality-itself, she has moved towards realism: the provided characterizations are bound to be couched in some conceptual scheme or other, yet they are supposed to characterize mind-independent reality. That’s precisely what the realist does. It appears that the anti-realist is forced to admit some minimal, hidden portion of realism in order to be able to state her view in the first place.

Secondly, there is the thorny issue of what *we ourselves* are supposed to be—either we take ourselves to be what we are (say, human beings, or agents) because of our conceptual scheme, or we don’t. If the former, then we are to believe that “the authors *in* the stories are the *real* authors” (Putnam, 1977, p. 496), a position which, as Elder puts it, comes closer to Zen *koans* than to serious (analytic) philosophy (Elder, 2011, p. 53). If the latter, however, we have to conclude that we occupy a metaphysical position different from that occupied by all other things in the world,

¹⁸ On some interpretations of Kant, he has tried to answer this demand by claiming that his notion of a thing in itself is a *Grenzbegriff*, a notion that lies at the very boundary of what makes sense for us, and hence only admits of negative usage—see, e.g., Kemp Smith (1918).

given that they are dependent on our conceptual schemes while we are not. This would commit the anti-realist to a view of ourselves as transcendental egos of sorts, which is quite controversial, at least within analytic metaphysics. And finally, allowing the conceptual schemes that belong to us as subjects so fundamental an influence on the make-up of reality entails a deep and unsettling kind of relativism—even if it is ensured that we humans necessarily share the same basic conceptual scheme.

Again, our purpose is not to arrive at final verdicts concerning anti-realism; we merely intend to capture those features of the anti-realist orientation that are symptomatic for the underlying metametaphysical picture, in order to identify precisely that picture. We can now see that that underlying picture is *the same* as the one we found in our discussion of realism: the Modern Picture. From the anti-realist perspective, the target of metaphysical inquiry can only be the world as it is for us *as opposed to reality as it is in itself*—and that’s exactly why we should be *anti-realists*, so the thought goes. The realist complains that we end up with a kind of skepticism, a categorical denial of knowledge of an independent, external world: we are trapped in *our* reality.¹⁹

As an aside, note that among anti-realists there is divergence in views too, of course, but it is far less pronounced than in the realist case, and hence does not lead to such impasses as can be observed in the realist discussion. Given the anti-realists’ overtly pragmatic understanding of metaphysical theorizing, differences in views won’t bother them as much as in the case of the realists: this, indeed, is thought to be a major virtue of the anti-realist standpoint. Anti-realists are mainly in the business of

¹⁹ Stroud writes: “The thought that we can have no knowledge of things as they are independent of us is what makes scepticism so distressing” (1984, p. 162). Giving up on independence does not relieve the distress, so the realist feels.

defending anti-realism against realism (and here we do have something like a stalemate).

This concludes our survey of those features of realism and anti-realism that illustrate the underlying Modern Picture. The next section systematically develops and critically reflects on this Modern Picture, which we have thus discovered to underlie most of the contemporary metaphysical discussion on both sides of the realism/anti-realism divide.

2. Exploring the Modern Picture

In the previous section, we extracted a first approximation of the philosophical picture that forms the background for large parts of the current metaphysical discussion, for realists and anti-realists alike: as metaphysicians, we are concerned with reality as it is in itself, either to provide a positive theory as to what this reality is fundamentally like (realism), or to argue that no such theory is possible, that we can only inquire into reality as it is for us (anti-realism). Let us unpack this first approximation carefully.

It is crucial to both parties that we distinguish between reality as it is for us and reality as it is in itself. This distinction is required for the very formulation of the realist and anti-realist projects, as we have seen. We have been deliberately vague on what exactly one should take “reality-itself” and “reality-for-us” to mean, since that differs quite a lot among the diverse versions of realism and anti-realism. A nice way of bringing out what exactly we wish the distinction to capture is to indicate how it bears on Sellars’ famous and colorful distinction between the manifest and the scientific image.

On the one hand, Sellars says, we have the manifest image, which pictures the world as we, on reflection, take it to be; as such it contains “not only ‘cabbages and kings’, but numbers and duties, possibilities and

finger snaps, aesthetic experience and death” (Sellars 1962, p. 35). On the other hand, there is the scientific image, which results from the scientific practice of postulating entities that explain the manifest world: it takes its point of departure from the manifest image, but goes on to construct an independent conception of reality, of how things *are*, as opposed to how we take them to be (in the manifest image). Now, the task of the philosopher, according to Sellars, is to bring those two images together in stereoscopic vision in such a way that no clash ensues (roughly). Since we’re actually in the middle of developing the scientific image, this will involve getting clear on what the scientific image may look like, on what the manifest image consists in (consulting common sense), as well as uncovering problematic aspects of either image as one compares the two.²⁰

Sellars’ view on the task of philosophy illustrates a standpoint that the more scientifically-minded metaphysical realist might take: the scientific image is meant to capture reality-itself while the manifest image is merely our parochial, anthropocentric, subjective take on reality, or in other words, captures reality-for-us but not reality-itself.²¹ Anti-realists, on the other hand, will urge that the scientific and the manifest image are just two versions of reality-for-us, and that neither of them is any closer to reality-itself than the other.

What is crucial to the Modern Picture is the very idea of a reality-itself that is in some sense more real than reality-for-us, where it is left open how we should conceive of this reality-itself—realists construct their positive conceptions of it out of certain privileged ingredients taken

²⁰ See Sellars (1962), and see Stanford (2012) for an interesting critique of Sellars’ images talk and his related fairly metaphysical understanding of philosophy.

²¹ Other versions of realism will locate our scientific view of the world more on the side of reality-for-us, thus claiming the realm of reality-itself for metaphysics proper, as we have seen.

from reality-for-us; anti-realists deny that it is even possible to construct a positive conception of reality-itself.

Our first basic metametaphysical principle thus reads:

Separation. Reality as it is in itself is to be strictly distinguished from reality as it is for us.

Separation requires a certain take on how we relate to reality-itself and to reality-for us. We may capture the required orientation in the following two principles, one epistemological, the other metaphysical:

Source. Perception consists in affectations of our sensory apparatus by reality-itself, and hence constitutes our primary access to that reality.

Mind-Dependence. Our concepts are the mere products of our minds.²²

Our attempt to formulate these two principles is bound to raise some eyebrows. Those familiar with the philosophy of perception know that especially the formulation of *Source* is sensitive to several controversies. Yet for our purposes it is enough if we focus on the core idea, and not on the tricky details: perception puts us in connection with reality-itself while our concepts do so only via, say, their extensions (on a realist reading), or not at all (on an anti-realist reading). As to *Mind-Dependence*: how exactly concepts relate to reality is, of course, again a delicate matter—for our purposes, it does not matter how one understands

²² This principle is related, in interesting ways, to the nominalist position in the medieval debate on universals. It is, however, impractical to name this principle “nominalism”, because its proper counterpart would then be “realism”, which is bound to be very confusing. Furthermore, “nominalism” already has quite some uses within analytic philosophy that are likely to confuse as well.

that relationship. In fact, our formulation of *Mind-Dependence* is too strong in this respect, because we don't wish to exclude views on which concepts are abstract objects of sorts, and hence not products of our minds. The crucial point is that concepts are not (or at least not in general) constitutive of their instances, that is, of mind-independent, external reality-itself.

Separation, Source and *Mind-Dependence* together form the backbone of the basic philosophical picture informing the metaphysical discussion. Together, they give rise to the following trio of views:

Skepticism. Given that we can only get to the real world with the help of our own concepts (*Mind-Dependence*) via our own sensory inputs (*Source*) it is impossible to say whether anything we take ourselves to know about the real world is really true. Behind the veil of sensory inputs, to which we apply our concepts, a reality radically different from our conception of it might exist. We can never know.

Anti-Realism. Given that every claim to knowledge is phrased by use of our own concepts or language (*Mind-Dependence*) as applied to what our senses deliver (*Source*), we must concede that we can only claim knowledge of the world as it is *for us*, and not of the world as it is *in itself*. *Skepticism* and *Realism* have to be rejected because they involve a mistaken understanding of what the target of our cognition is.

Realism. *Skepticism* and *Anti-Realism* have to be rejected because they don't do justice to our scientific and/or commonsense understanding of and interaction with the real world. Using our own concepts (*Mind-Dependence*), which are always subject to refinement and enrichment through scientific progress, we are able to reconstruct what reality in itself, to which we only have access via our sensory inputs (*Source*), is like.

To illustrate the relations between these three options, it is helpful to understand them as responding in different ways to the following two philosophical issues that arise from *Separation*, *Source* and *Mind-Dependence*:

Justification. We need to justify our claims to knowledge of the world as it is in itself, given that what we have is merely (1) how that world presents itself to us through our senses (*Source*) and (2) our own concepts (*Mind-Dependence*).

Truth. We have to make sense of how any judgment we make with the help of our own concepts can be true of the world in itself, which may involve making sense of how our concepts/words can be properly connected to things in the external world (reference).

The skeptic's response to *Justification* is that there is no way for us to justify any claim to knowledge about the world as it is in itself. The implicit understanding of truth for the skeptic is one of correspondence to how things are in the world as it is in itself—truth does not involve any epistemic component.

The anti-realist agrees with the skeptic's response to *Justification*, but adds that we in fact only need to justify claims about the world as it is for us. The accompanying explication of truth naturally involves an epistemic component: to claim that some judgment is true is to claim that it is justified or warranted, in some appropriately idealized sense. In effect, the anti-realist claims that the world we perceive and think about is the world as it is for us, not the world as it is in itself—it is the former that should (and does) concern us, not the latter.

The realist, however, argues that we *can* justify claims to knowledge of the world as it is in itself, by appealing to an inference to the best explanation: the world as it is in itself should explain the way it presents itself to us (i.e., reality-for-us). The accompanying explication of truth agrees with that implicit in the skeptic's position. A paradigm realist

explication of truth would be in terms of *truth-making*: our true judgments are made true by the world's being a certain way (e.g., by certain states of affairs or facts obtaining, or by certain objects that instantiate certain properties or stand in certain relations, etc.).²³ The nice thing about truth-making, for the realist, is that he can plug in his favored metaphysics to yield appropriate truth-makers—talk about oak trees, say, can be made true by space-time worms, or by features of the one blobject, etc. (cf. §1.1).

Let us put our findings so far into a little scheme:

	<i>Skepticism</i>	<i>Anti-Realism</i>	<i>Realism</i>
Can we justify knowledge of the world-in-itself?	No	No	Yes
Does truth involve correspondence with the world-in-itself?	Yes	No	Yes

It is not unreasonable to take both the realist and the anti-realist to be responding to the skeptical challenge, the one by rejecting the skeptic's understanding of truth, the other by rejecting the skeptic's take on justification.

We now have a more substantial sketch of the philosophical picture we call the *Modern Picture*, and of how it gives rise to the realism/anti-realism dichotomy. we found out, in the previous section, that it indeed stands in the background of the contemporary (meta)metaphysical debate. Adopting the Modern Picture results, as we have indicated, in an oscillation between two problematic positions: finding skepticism unsatisfactory, we can either become realists but be at a loss as to how we can adjudicate between highly divergent realist metaphysical theories, or

²³ See, e.g., Armstrong (2004).

we can admit our alleged inability to discover the nature of the world as it is in itself and make do with the anti-realist restriction of our knowledge to the world as it is for us—which in turn quickly leads to serious issues, such as a commitment to the idea of a reality-itself that is denied any content, that again motivates a return to realism.

In recent years, several philosophers, such as John McDowell and Hilary Putnam (but also, though less explicitly, David Wiggins, Fiona Ellis, Sebastian Rödl and Michael Thompson) have, from various angles, tried to overcome this uneasy situation by, in effect, questioning the very philosophical picture on which it depends.²⁴ The present essay aims to contribute to this trend by exploring the Modern Picture specifically from the point of view of (contemporary analytic) metaphysics.

From a metametaphysical point of view, we may ask what kind of metaphysical picture emerges once we reject the problematic Modern Picture, which we characterized by formulating the principles *Separation*, *Source*, and *Mind-Dependence*. That is the purpose of the next section, in which we sketch an alternative to this Modern Picture that promises not to lead to the unfortunate realism/anti-realism dichotomy.

3. A Better Picture?

Before we engage in metaphysical thinking, we tend to take things as they present themselves: we're naive realists of sorts. As we are, to a large extent, in ordinary life. From this naive point of view, we see ourselves as subjects who are directly confronted with objective reality through our faculties of perception. As soon as we start to critically examine this naïve, unreflective picture, we move towards the Modern

²⁴ See, e.g., McDowell (1994, 2009), Putnam (1992, 2000), Wiggins (2001), Ellis (2005), Rödl (2007), and Thompson (2008).

Picture. We observe, for example, the crucial role that our sense organs play for our view on reality, the ease with which they can be deceived, the fact that various animals are sensitive to features of the environment we are not sensitive to (and *vice versa*): in short, we are pushed towards a subjectivist understanding of certain perceptible features of things. On the other hand, we notice that our concepts play an important role, too: my ecologist friend tends to see a lot more during our walk in the forest than I, because I lack many of the required concepts. We notice considerable differences in conceptual schemes amongst different cultures. We come to recognize how intricate the connection between our conceptual framework and our view on the world is, both in our understanding and in our perception of it. In short, we come to suspect that what we naively took to be reality is in fact merely reality *as it is for us*, and that we may be far removed from reality *as it is in itself*. We have come to replace the naive, unreflective picture with the Modern Picture; in its wake, skeptical doubts about our ability to gain any knowledge at all of reality as it is in itself arise.

We have identified *Separation* as the root of the Modern Picture. It installs a gap between reality-itself and reality-for-us, and once we have that gap, we have to find a way to deal with it. The problems of *Justification* and *Truth*, in their typical form, become urgent: we are pulled in the opposite directions of realism and anti-realism.

Now that our philosophical eyes have been opened, we cannot go back to the naive, pre-reflective view. Yet we have entertained considerations that put the Modern Picture in an unfavorable light: it leads to a duality of unsatisfactory metaphysical positions. Hence we may wonder whether it is possible to reject *Separation* without giving up entirely on critical reflection on our world view. It is important to note that rejecting *Separation* does *not* imply rejecting the innocuous distinction between how things seem to be and how things really are. That distinction was already present within the naive picture, after all.

The present section aims to develop an alternative to the Modern Picture in very rough outline that is, as it were, “post-skeptical”.

Rejecting *Separation* means discarding the picture according to which reality-itself is fundamentally hidden from us, and reaches us at best merely indirectly, via reality-for-us, which we experience and live in. What this rejection implies for our relation to reality is best illustrated by first revisiting the other two principles constitutive of the Modern Picture, *Source* and *Mind-Dependence*. We thus move towards an alternative to the Modern Picture which we call the *Aristotelian Picture*.

As an alternative to *Source*, we may consider McDowell’s conception of experience as *openness to the world* (as developed in his (2011)). To use his typical wording, the idea is that in experience we “take in how things are”²⁵, instead of being confronted with the mere effects reality exerts upon us, which we then have to relate to a reality hidden behind them. This approach to perception is usually called “direct realism” in the philosophy of perception. McDowell’s way of fleshing out this idea comes down to the proposal that what we take in, in experience, is not devoid of concepts, but rather already endowed with conceptual content.²⁶ The details of this proposal do not matter for our purposes—the principal thought is that what we receive through perception in its many forms is *not* disjoint from the conceptual.

This brings us to the other principle, *Mind-Dependence*. An alternative to it is harder to make decent sense of. A first, straightforward attempt might run as follows: our concepts are constitutive of reality, of their instances, rather than being mere pointers, mere products of our own minds. Yet this is too easy: we do have the ability to cook up concepts as we wish, and these are not always even beginning to be adequate (as the

²⁵ See McDowell (1994, p. 25).

²⁶ On such a view, problems related to hallucination and illusion are dealt with by adopting some version of disjunctivism—see, e.g., the discussions in Haddock and Macpherson (2008).

history of science shows). The situation is rather similar to that in the case of perception: we want room for mis-conception, but still allow successful conceptual activity to reach all the way to the world.

One very straightforward way of locating concepts in the world (focussing, for simplicity's sake, only on sortal concepts for material objects) is by equating them with essences—which immediately provides a reason to call the philosophical picture we are developing “Aristotelian”. If we take a sortal concept to have a certain content that is, ideally, explicable in some kind of definition that captures at least the conditions of identity, persistence, and existence for its instances, we could take that definition to be the “real definition” of the things to which the sortal concept applies.²⁷ It is useful to compare this rough essentialist understanding of concepts with realist and anti-realist approaches to concepts.

The realist typically takes concepts to be mental or abstract objects to which extensions correspond in reality-itself. The concepts are mere pointers to these objects; perhaps they embody parts of our knowledge of such objects, or useful rules for object classification that fix their extensions; but they are not part of the metaphysical make-up of the objects themselves. The anti-realist, on the other hand, takes objects to be located in reality-for-us, and to be partly constituted by our conceptual framework. For the anti-realist, an object is always an object as picked out by a certain sortal concept; and that's precisely why it cannot be an inhabitant of reality-itself.

Now, on the alternative picture we are developing, there is no reality-itself versus reality-for-us distinction. Yet we are attempting an understanding of the material things inhabiting reality more or less as the anti-realist would have it, i.e., as partially constituted by concepts, but

²⁷ A similarly essentialist understanding of properties could also be developed, for example along the lines of Elder (2011, ch. 8), who defends a sparse view on properties based on contrariety.

without the anti-realist's mind-dependent understanding of those concepts. That is, the things in reality are still as mind-independent as the realist could ever demand, simply because their essences are independent from whatever we may think of them. It turns out, then, that without *Separation*, we may combine the virtues of realism and anti-realism without running into their respective problems.

Promising gestures towards an essentialist position that suits the Aristotelian Picture can be found especially in Thompson (2008): Thompson carefully develops a series of distinctions between ways concepts figure in our judgments concerning different levels of being—abstract objects, physical things, living beings, rational agents.²⁸ His view on these different types of conceiving of objects, of things, can be naturally transposed onto the metaphysical level, whence a differentiated view on how essences operate emerges, that is read off from the way our actual thinking about these various realms of nature works. Here we come to recognize what makes rejecting *Mind-Dependence* so difficult: the adherent of the Aristotelian Picture is to explain how concepts can be operative, find expression, in real, concrete phenomena of various kinds. Put in Aristotelian terms, the task is to come up with a proper notion of *formal causation*—a type of causation that is not a relation between events or processes, but rather is internal to its effect: a concept/essence becoming manifest in concrete phenomena, such as an electron behaving just as an electron should in certain circumstances, or a tree protruding branches just as that particular kind of tree should, given the obtaining conditions.

The purpose of these remarks on essentialism is not to articulate a clear-cut version of it (let alone defend one), but rather to illustrate the role the idea of essence can play in the context of a non-Modern picture.

²⁸ Thompson's discussion focuses on action theory and ethics. The fact that he finds himself forced to develop his own metaphysics along the way shows to what extent metaphysicians are under the spell of the Modern Picture nowadays.

Interestingly, when reading contemporary essentialists it is not always clear whether they operate against the background of the Modern Picture, and thus conceive of themselves as metaphysical realists, or are rather to be understood as contributing to the project we are interested in here, i.e., the project of providing an alternative to that picture.²⁹

Another difficulty for finding a proper alternative to *Mind-Dependence* is the phenomenon of mis-conception, as we noticed. One way to make sense of this is by construing our faculty of conception to yield *conceptions* which may succeed or may not succeed in capturing the *concepts* operative in reality.³⁰ That is, although we are capable of grasping the wrong concepts (or no concepts at all but merely confused conceptions), we are also capable of grasping the right ones. Obviously, this requires careful unpacking, which might start by taking our faculty of conception to share certain important features with our faculty of perception. The important point is that such an alternative does not locate the conceptual realm within the confines of our human minds, or in some abstract realm disjoint from the external world of concrete objects, but instead grants the conceptual a fundamental metaphysical role in that concrete realm, independently of our minds.

It is important to see that such a mind-independent understanding of the conceptual meshes nicely with the understanding of perception as openness we borrowed from McDowell: we do not take in how things are

²⁹ The work of E.J. Lowe illustrates this difficulty very nicely: to some extent, his metaphysical picture fits into the Aristotelian Picture we are sketching here; but on the other hand several aspects of his philosophy seem to commit him to the Modern Picture. See, e.g., Lowe (2008, 2009). The same holds for Kit Fine's work—see, e.g., Fine (1994, 2003, 2005). A nice example of an essentialist quite explicitly rejecting the Modern Picture in favor of an Aristotelian alternative is Oderberg (2007).

³⁰ Here we draw on David Wiggins's useful distinction between conceptions and concepts; see his (2001, pp. 8–11).

simpliciter, but only insofar as we have grasped the right concepts, insofar as we have the right conceptions within our conceptual repertoire. Whereas perception is, in an important sense, a passive capacity, conception is an active one.

Let us now formulate these two alternatives as principles contrasting those embodied in the Modern Picture to which they are supposed to provide an alternative:

Openness. In our experience of the world we are in direct contact with the world.

Mind-Independence. The concepts which we use to think truly about the world are part of that very world (and not mere products of our minds).³¹

These two principles do not require a separation between reality as it is for us and reality as it is in itself, as *Separation* has it. However, a different separation is still required: a separation of reality itself in its perceptible and its conceivable aspects. Like the alleged separation between reality-for-us and reality-itself, this separation has everything to do with our organization as epistemic subjects aiming at knowledge. The picture is roughly as follows: we have access to perceptible aspects of things, the way they empirically present themselves, via our perceptual capacities (which is not to say that we have access to *all* perceptible aspects of things, of course), while we have access to their conceptual aspects, to what they are (their essences), via our faculty of conception. By combining these two aspects we arrive at reality.

The crucial difference between *Separation* and the separation we have on our alternative, Aristotelian picture is that the latter separation can be

³¹ Again, this principle corresponds in interesting ways to the realist position within the medieval debate on universals—just as its counterpart, *Mind-Dependence*, corresponds to the nominalist position.

overcome through the process of recombination just sketched, whereas the former separation is by definition irreconcilable: reality-for-us contains ingredients that reality-itself *cannot* inhabit, viz., concepts as constitutive of things. The proper alternative to *Separation* for our Aristotelian picture is thus the following:

Combination. By combining the perceptual and conceptual aspects of reality in the right way, we put together what in reality is never separated.

We have arrived at a systematic first delineation of the *Aristotelian Picture*, which we may set against the Modern Picture we examined in the previous section as an alternative.

The Aristotelian Picture, not unlike the Modern Picture, comes with challenges of its own, some of which we have already acquainted ourselves with—to repeat, it is quite impossible to sketch something as general as the Modern or the Aristotelian Picture without already going into details that call for thorough philosophical examination. Yet, the problems that the Aristotelian Picture faces are very different from the problems to which the Modern Picture gives rise, and hence it is likely that the menu of options available for metaphysics against the background of the Aristotelian Picture is different from the menu of options described earlier, too. As already noted, the most difficult task for the proponent of the Aristotelian Picture lies in making sense of *Mind-Independence*, the idea that the concepts we use in thinking about the world somehow *belong* to that world, instead of just being our own creations which merely *correspond* to an utterly unconceptual reality-itself. We have hinted towards an essentialist take on this issue. It should be noted, though, that this task has a counterpart within the Modern Picture as well: to make sense of the idea of a reality that is entirely devoid of concepts. The anti-realist holds that this is one of the main reasons why we cannot coherently state any positive view on reality-

itself, yet she herself is still committed to the existence of such an unconceptual reality-itself, as we have seen. The realist, on the other hand, faces the difficult task of showing how our conceptual knowledge of reality-itself can be true of it even though reality itself is utterly unconceptual.³²

Returning to our observation that metaphysical realism leads to an ever more diverging range of views, we may ask whether the Aristotelian Picture will prevent such divergence to occur. It leaves open many interesting and important issues, of course, on which rival views can be developed—that much is quite trivial. The important point is that the divergence we noted within the realist discussion has a quite specific source: realism’s problematic requirement of providing an account of reality-itself while at the same time urging that reality-itself is both disjoint from reality-for-us and utterly devoid of concepts. There is no such tension within the Aristotelian Picture, hence no reason to expect the realist’s divergence problems to recur.

Combination, Mind-Independence and Openness provide the basis for a philosophical picture, the Aristotelian Picture, that differs fundamentally from the Modern Picture, on many philosophically interesting dimensions. *Pace* McDowell and the later Putnam, who often seem to take a broadly Wittgensteinian, quietistic line, assuming that dissolving the problematic assumptions involved in the Modern Picture will make the philosophical problems disappear, we take the picture to invite a philosophical research program of its own, one which aims to discuss the issues we discerned, and many more. The alternative,

³² This is, very roughly, Rorty’s “sentence-shaped chunks”-objection against realism (Rorty, 1989, p. 5): reality, Rorty thinks, does not speak a language, hence does not contain ready-made chunks to make true our sentences—at best, the world can cause us to believe a certain sentence true (although the truth of this statement about causing beliefs is itself is already problematic for him).

Aristotelian Picture thus promises not to lead us to an irresolvable oscillation between unsatisfactory views, like the Modern Picture does.

Whether or not the Aristotelian Picture can keep this promise depends on whether we have correctly diagnosed the root of the realism/anti-realism dichotomy within the Modern Picture: *Separation*, the assumption that there is a fundamental gap between reality as it is in itself and reality as it is for us. For, once we have the gap, we want to close it, but we cannot really close it without giving up *Separation*—and that amounts to rejecting the Modern Picture. On the Aristotelian Picture, on the other hand, the situation is very different: no gap is being installed, there is nothing in our three principles that will result in an unfortunate oscillation like the one between realists and anti-realists.

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