

Theories of Reality

Once we have a picture of what we understand by existence, and its changing nature and structure, we must decide our attitude to this supposed reality. Most people take physical reality for granted, and may be committed to mental, conceptual or spiritual realities as well. Philosophers, however, have given us reasons to question all of these commitments. The problems come from our attempts at experiencing reality, and attempts to describe it. At the subatomic level we even begin to wonder what 'real' could mean.

If experience directly detects reality, there is no problem, but thinking about dreams, hallucinations, blurred vision, colour blindness, the limited scope of each sense, and other misjudgements, opens a gap between experience and reality. We are confident of our experiences, but lose confidence in their subject matter. An extreme response is to abandon 'reality', and devote our full attention to the experiences. We must use language to describe reality, but similar doubts about our success are raised when we examine truth, reference, predication and translation. A theory expressed in language can be equally consistent even if we have multiple versions of what it is taken to refer to. Again, a temptation is to abandon realistic reference in our descriptions, and focus on success by internal standards, of consistency, local truth and coherence. Both of these views contribute to the attitude called 'Anti-Realism'.

Anti-Realism comes in degrees, from the absolute global view that all talk of reality is pointless, to local anti-realism about particular aspect of reality (such as minds or values), and to a view which accepts some sort of reality (the 'noumenon') but abandons dreams of achieving one true theory which accurately records reality and its structure. In the latter view there is some reality out there, but how we see it, hear it, conceive of it and talk of it is a matter of convention, and relative to the human mind and its background concepts and cultures. The great virtue of such anti-realism is its intellectual honesty, in refusing to commit to something which may not be adequately supported by the available evidence; the down side is a weakening of confidence in our knowledge, which loses all hopes of certainty, and of a realistic anchor that motivates enquiry and suggests that we are making progress.

Realism is the view that what exists, and the way it exists, is independent of any human attempts to experience it or talk about it. For example, realists assume that if we all fell asleep for a few days, the world would probably continue its processes in the same old way. Anti-realists will usually say that this claim has no justification. Supporting evidence for realism is that science seems to converge on agreed truths, that our use of language is very successful, that many ways of measurement produce unified results, that our predictions tend to work, and that reality explains our normal assumptions of continuity. If those were conclusive, anti-realists would have conceded by now, and realists probably have to admit to a leap of faith in their theory. Strong realists may take our language and theories to be gradually delivering the final truth about reality, but cautious realists acknowledge the uncertainties of our concepts and language, and our limited viewpoint on the world. There may be a Reality, but the one true theory looks elusive.

Both realists and anti-realists must still adopt an attitude to their reality or quasi-reality. **Religions** assume that a spiritual realm exists, containing minds, and **platonism** assumes a realm of reality in which pure ideals or abstract objects exist. A doctrine among more cautious thinkers is '**naturalism**', which denies anything 'supernatural', and claims that all existence is a feature of the space-time manifold we call 'the Universe'. That leaves open what sorts of thing are contained within space-time, and a much stronger doctrine is '**physicalism**', which can be expressed as 'nothing exists except the postulates of physics' (which includes space and time, as well as material things). Since physics is an ongoing programme, that leaves the commitments of physicalism unsettled, but it roughly claims that absolutely everything (minds, mathematics, values etc) is made of physical stuff. Weaker physicalism says everything depends on the physical, which might allow for 'emergent' features from a physical base. Physicalism has to account for mathematics, reason, logic, laws of nature, minds and possibilities, as well as every aspect of ordinary objects.

A theory of reality needs some basic components. Substantial objects and processes are the main candidates, but more is needed to describe reality, such as events, facts or states of affairs. Facts and states of affairs are notoriously vague, but are the sorts of elements which drive causation and laws of nature. Realists use '**facts**' to indicate the mind-independent features of reality, but anti-realists say facts are just sentences which we hold to be true. Problems arise from negative facts, overlapping facts, the unity of a fact, and how facts are structured (as subjects with predicates, or some other way?). Is a pair of options a disjunctive fact, and is a danger a conditional fact? **States of affairs** are taken to be small complexes which endure, making up the parts of reality. However, one situation might be described as two different states of affairs, and so both states of affairs and facts are loose concepts.

Loose concepts are a difficulty for all accounts of reality, especially when they count as '**vague**'. When our concepts and words are too vague for a rigorous theory, that has three possible explanations. It may be that reality itself has many vague ingredients. Red and yellow are distinct colours, but one slides smoothly into the other, and there is no fact about where the sea ends and the wet beach begins. A second view is that reality just is exactly as it is, so it can't be vague, and the problem is our lack of exact knowledge; a perfect knowledge of the world would eliminate all vagueness. The third view is that vagueness is all in our language. Our words 'sea' and 'beach' are always imprecise, and we can make them as sharp or vague as we like, according to context. Maybe only logicians worry about vagueness, because the loose scope of our concepts is actually an asset in ordinary language.

A modern linguistic view says that reality is the '**ontological commitments**' of our talk. Superficially this sounds wrong, as we talk about all sorts of nonsense, but the idea is that we first look for the 'logical form' of our sentences, which reveal more precisely what they are committed to. We then eliminate talk of fictional existence by sticking to sentences used in our best theories of science, because they contain our strongest commitment to reality. A more religious culture would make theological sentences central. The logical form is sought in the sentences we take to be true, expressed in standard logic, because that makes the commitments clearest. This approach to reality is highly linguistic, and must filter out background assumptions, and the complex existence assumptions of ordinary talk.