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Reality Check: On the Solvability of the Realism/Constructivism Dispute in Ontology

Abstract

In the introduction the paper presents, based on the work of Michael Devitt, the conflicting ontological positions of Realism and Constructivism. The former insists on the independence of the nature of the world from our conceptual apparatus, language or scientific theories, whereas the latter affirms its dependence. The central part of the paper is concerned with showing that the Realism/Constructivism dispute is unsolvable by way of a thought experiment followed by refutation of the arguments of key constructivists (Kant, Goodman) and realists (Devitt, Boghossian). The views of Hilary Putnam are also briefly assessed and rejected. In conclusion it is argued, partly with recourse to Carnap's arguments, that the dispute cannot be resolved, that it is a kind of Kantian antinomy, and that being a realist or a constructivist is therefore a matter of decision. In the course of the article a view is also expressed with regard to the nature of philosophy.

Key words

Realism, Constructivism, Worldmaking, reality, solvability, ontology, semantics, Michael Devitt

1. Introduction[1]

This paper is inspired by the work of Michael Devitt, and in two respects at that. In the first place, I adopt from Devitt, one of the most prominent contemporary realists, the general framework in which to discuss the issues raised by the Realism/Constructivism dispute. Devitt defines Realism thus:

"*Realism*: Tokens of most current common-sense, and scientific, physical types objectively exist independently of the mental." (Devitt 1984: 22; 1999: 2; 2006a: 4; in the last two *loci* the word 'current' is missing.)

Devitt attaches importance to each part of the definition. First, his Realism (and therefore the specific doctrine among many that bear the same name that I will discuss) is essentially about *tokens*, whereas "the apparent commitment to types is not necessary, only convenient" (1984: 19; the method for disposing of types is outlined in the succeeding paragraph on the same page). These

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tokens are *physical*, that is, material entites. Next, the Realism that Devitt advocates does not claim that *all* such entites posed by common sense and science exist, yet neither does it claim that only *some* of them exist:

"The realism that is worth fighting for holds that we are *more or less* right in the physical entites we posit. It is committed to the existence of *most* of those entites." (1984: 16, Devitt's italics)

Third, since the realist shouldn't commit himself to future entities, and since it would be absurd to commit himself to past ones unless they are also present ones, the realist is commited to *present*, that is, *current* entites (whenever this present might be). Finally, the realist according to Devitt claims *objective* existence for these entities, and since it is possible to claim objectivity, that is, independence of opinion or knowledge, even for mental entites, the qualification is then added that the entites that the realist believes in exist not only objectively but non-mentally or externally: *independently of the mental.*

Now, Realism thus defined can be split up into two more specific doctrines, one that concerns *observable* entites posited by common sense and science, and another that concerns *unobservable* ones posited by science. Devitt calls the first doctrine *Common-Sense Realism* and the second one *Scientific Realism* (1984: 22; 1999: 2). I will be more concerned here with the first doctrine, although most of the time the distinction won't be of importance; therefore, I will mostly just talk of "Realism".

The doctrine that is according to Devitt the main opponent of Realism is the one he calls *Worldmaking*, and defines it in the following fashion:

"*Worldmaking*: The only independent reality is beyond the reach of our knowledge and language. A known world is partly constructed by our imposition of concepts." (2006a: 4)

According to Devitt, Worldmaking, as a form of Idealism (or Anti-Realism),[2] is based on two ideas of Immanuel Kant: one is that the known world is partly constituted by the cognitive activites of the mind, by our imposition of concepts; the other, that there are things-in-themselves, objects as they are independently of our knowledge, which are forever to remain unknowable. Now, a more contemporary brand of Worldmaking embraces a third idea: relativism. Whereas Kant was a universalist with regard to the concepts we impose, that is, he believed that all mankind was endowed with the same "conceptual equipment", relativistic worldmakers as characterized by Devitt believe that different conceptual schemes, languages and scientific theories create different worlds for the (groups of) people that employ them. This brand of Worldmaking is called by Devitt (and others) *Constructivism*. Among the constructivists Devitt lists the linguist B. L. Whorf, the philosophers of science Kuhn and Feyerabend, the whole structuralist movement (including post-structuralism) and the analytic philosophers Dummett, Goodman (originator of the term "worldmaking", cf. Goodman 1978) and Putnam.

I said at the beginning that this paper is inspired by Devitt's work in two respects. Up to now the first one has been exemplified: I adopt from Devitt the identification of the central problem and the relevant definitions. I was also inspired by Devitt in a different, and, in lack of a better term, inverse, way: I was prompted to disagreement. I will argue, against Devitt, not in favour of Constructivism, but in favour of the view that the Realism/Constructivism dispute can never be settled, that the problem is unsolvable. In the course of my argument I will also try to show that metaphysics on the one hand and epistemology and semantics on the other cannot be as clearly separated as Devitt would want them to be. Complex relations actually obtain between

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ontology and, in particular, semantics with regard to the issue at hand: the dispute can be interpreted as a semantic one, and also a position on the dispute can be arrived at via semantic considerations (both of this is acknowledged, and criticised, by Devitt).

Before I proceed, I would just like to add a remark on the character of this paper, that is, on the way it might irritate the reader. As will soon emerge, the paper is for the greater part negative, that is, the arguments presented are aimed more at refuting certain views or theories than at offering a well-developed positive theory in their place. I believe, however, that this method of operation is not at all alien to philosophy. To the contrary, criticism of a philosophical conception, even if it is not followed by some kind of a positive account, can be, in my opinion, in itself enlightening. And then, of course, there is joy to be had from destruction.

2. Realism vs. Constructivism

2.1. The Red Room Example

I begin my discussion with a thought experiment. Here it is.

Imagine you woke up one day in a room where absolutely everything you could see, including you own body, was red. You have acquired the concept RED from your earlier life in a multi-coloured world; now, however, it is the only colour you can see, wherever you should direct your gaze. My question is: how would you ever know, in such a situation, whether the redness was a real property of all the contents of the room or just a property of your vision? Perhaps some aliens have abducted you and inserted a red filter into your visual system, and later they erased your memory of the whole incident; you are not in a position to perform surgery on yourself in order to find out. Perhaps, on the other hand, these aliens have inserted nothing, rather, they just placed you in a room where everything was without exception red, and they coloured your body accordingly (the colouring is non-removable). How would you decide, then, if redness is *what* you see or *how* you see?[3] I say: there is no way to decide.

We could take the example, the metaphor, a bit further. What if you were to exit the room somehow (you managed to escape your captors!)? If upon exiting you should encounter a multi-coloured world, this would prove that redness was a property of the contents of the room. If, however, everyting was again red, then again you wouldn't know (perhaps the aliens live on a red planet, or they just have a special penchant for red, so they coloured absolutely everything that way, and actually had no intention of torturing you with the redness). It is imaginable that walking around this strange planet you encounter some intelligent creature. Would the encounter help you in your quest for answers? If it turned out that the creature, for example, saw everything green, then this would prove that the redness was a property of your vi-

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Devitt also identifies a doctrine he calls *Weak*, or *Fig-Leaf, Realism,* according to which *something* objectively exists independently of the mental. Yet, since it is compatible with (and actually part of) this doctrine that the known world is partly constructed by us, Weak Realism can be and is subsumed under Worldmaking.

3
Of course, redness is a "secondary" property, so it always, in a sense, belongs to the *how*. But, normally, it is based on something extra-perceptual (wave length of the light hitting your retina).

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sion (provided you were able to communicate on this; it is not relevant to the purposes of this metaphor to engage the problems in the philosophy of mind that are looming here). If, on the other hand, the creature also saw everything red, then you would still be in the predicament we began with.

The reflections of the last paragraph don't make much difference, however – we cannot "exit" reality in order to examine "the outside" (some people claim they can, such as mystics and proponents of Far Eastern meditation techniques; but, of course, their claims are devoid of intersubjective testability and can therefore not be considered as epistemically relevant). So the situation in the Red Room is enough to make my point: from "the inside", we have no way of determining whether the world/reality[4] has the properties it has by virtue of how it is in itself or if we play a part in the creation of these properties.

2.2. Against Constructivism

As my targets in this part of the paper I choose Kant and Nelson Goodman. The former is, according to Devitt, the founder of the doctrine of worldmaking and thereby of constructivism (although his position lacks its relativist aspect); the latter is one of its foremost representatives.

2.2.1. The Aporias of Apriorism: Kant

Kant's philosophy is rather well known, even though it is, as Devitt puts it, "deep, dark and difficult" (1984: 59). Kant's Copernican Turn consists in the contention that "the objects must conduct themselves in accordance with our cognition" (Kant 1976: 25, B XVI, XVII; trans. mine), instead of vice-versa. The earlier, simpler view, and one that is always tempting, sees knowledge as more or less passive reflection of mind-independent reality. Kant claims the opposite – reality is partly constituted by our cognitive equipment: by our pure intuitions of space and time and by the concepts of the understanding. The objects affect our sensible nature; however, knowledge is only possible under the condition that we supply the forms of the intuitions and the concepts that then form reality as we know it. These intuitions and concepts are pure, that is, they are a priori – they are not themselves products of experience, for it is only with their help that we come to acquire experience.

What led Kant to this counter-intuitive view? It was the insight due to Hume that, if all we have to go on is experience, than there can be no necessary and objectively valid knowledge. If there is to be necessity and objective validity in cognition, reasons Kant then, it must be in virtue of the fact that they are *a priori* – they stem from us. When we have necessary and objectively valid knowledge of the world, what we know this way is what we ourselves have put there.

Kant's position, notwithstanding the enormous influence it has had on philosophical discussion ever since, faces many difficult problems.

First of all, his central aprioristic claim rests on extremely controversial ground. The major premiss of the argument is this:

If there is necessary and objectively valid knowledge, then the objects of knowledge must be partly constructed by imposition of a priori forms of our intuition and understanding (and it is this a priori aspect that we know necessarily and in an objectively valid fashion).

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However, we can only draw the conclusion that
>   objects indeed are partly constructed in this way;

if we grant the minor premise that
>   *there is necessary and objectively valid knowledge*.

It is not my intention to discuss this exceptionally far-reaching and conse-
quence-loaded latter claim within the confines of this paper. I would just like
to point out again its extremely controversial character. And until it is un-
controversially established as true (or at least as not-too-controversially ac-
ceptable), the conclusion that follows in the above argument, and that is the
key point of Kant's whole position, cannot be established as true or acceptable
either.

Kant's position is not only very controversially grounded, it is also quite bla-
tantly incoherent (this is also pointed out by Devitt, cf. Devitt & Sterelny
1999: 250, Devitt 2006a: 7, and was first noted by Jacobi). Causality is, ac-
cording to Kant, one of the concepts of pure understanding, which serves as
our "tool-box" for constructing reality; therefore, causality applies only to
appearances, that is, objects as known/constructed by us. However, Kant also
claims (cf. 1976: 69, B 33,34/A 19, 20) that, whereas it is us who supply the
form of phenomena, the *matter* on the other hand is supplied by the objects
themselves (the *things-in-themselves*) – and it is supplied by their affecting
our sense-organs *causally*. So we have a classical "p and not-p": Kant claims
both that causality applies and does not apply to things-in-themselves. Of
course, Kant could, like the German Idealists after him, dispense with the
things-in-themselves altogether; but then, as he himself puts it, there would
be nothing in the appearances that *appears*. Then again, if the things-in-them-
selves *are* retained, I agree with Devitt that they are explanatorily useless,
since their role as constraints on our theorizing is made completely ineffective
by Kant's view that we can know nothing about them whatsoever. I conclude
that Kant's position – powerful, complex and influential as it may be – is
untenable.

2.2.2. The Weaknesses of Worlds: Goodman

Goodman's (1978) main argument, very briefly summarized, runs as fol-
lows:

P1: A world is given only by description.[5]
P2: There are many world-descriptions and they are mutually untranslatable
     and irreducible.
C: Therefore, there are many worlds.

"If I ask about the world", says Goodman (3),

"… you can offer to tell me how it is under one or more frames of reference; but if I insist that
you tell me how it is apart from all frames, what can you say? We are confined to ways of des-
cribing whatever is described."

And also (20):

4
These are not synonyms, of course, but I will
not make a significant difference between
them in the context of this article. Cf. Abel
(2004: 25) for discussion.

5
By other means as well (cf. 109), but I am
avoiding unnecessary complications.

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"Shouldn't we stop speaking of right versions as if each were, or had, its own world, and reco-
gnize all as versions of one and the same neutral and underlying world? The world thus regai-
ned, as remarked earlier, is a world without kinds or order or motion or rest or pattern – a world
not worth fighting for or against."

Let's consider Goodman's argument back to front. Its problem lies not in
the logical relations between the premises and the conclusion; there isn't a
non-seqitur here.[6] It lies rather in the premises and conclusion as individual
statements (of course, the conclusion gets into difficulties because there is
something wrong with one of the premises it is based on).

The conclusion is in two ways problematic. First, talk of many worlds obvi-
ously presupposes some kind of meta-world of the speaker. Is Goodman's po-
sition just one instance of worldmaking, so that there could be such a world-
making that sees worlds as *not* made, or is he arguing from a position that is
logically on a higher level than the worlds he is describing and has nothing to
do with worldmaking? The first option is self-refuting and the second one is
not allowed by his general view. Second, giving any kind of exact criteria for
identifying one world among many is virtually hopeless, so that Goodman's
position is irredeemably vague.

The second premiss is, if understood as claiming *partial* untranslability/ir-
reducibility (as Godman does understand it), tenable. As is mostly accepted
today, a literal translation of a metaphor never captures *exactly* its meaning,
biology cannot be type-reduced to physics, nor can the mental to the physical,
etc. However, the central fault lies with the first premiss: it claims something
that, again, we can never know. There could in fact be a ready-made world out
there waiting to be described, and there is no way to disprove such a view. If
we are faced with two conflicting views, one that claims that a world is given
only by description and the other that claims that there is an objective world
independent of our descriptions, we can decide the issue only by a leap of faith
– that is, irrationally. With this I conclude my case against constructivism.

2.3. Against Realism

2.3.1. Die-hard Realism: Devitt

Devitt is a staunch realist. I have identified five principal arguments that De-
vitt offers in defense of this doctrine. There are a few others, which I will set
aside in my discussion: the one that the arguments against Realism and in
favour of alternatives fail (Devitt 1984: 48), which is purely negative; the one
that Realism helps explain human linguistic and non-linguistic behaviour and
the success of that behaviour (1984: 102), which is just a corollary of Devitt's
arguments for the need for the notion of truth; the one that it "lends itself to
a plausible epistemology" (1984: 68), which is just about mutual support of
suspicious doctrines; finally, there are Devitt's arguments in favour of Scien-
tific Realism to the effect that it gives, by recourse to unobservables, a very
good explanation of the behaviour of observed entities and that it explains
theoretical success (1984: ch. 7; 1999: part 3), but I will set these aside as
well due to lack of space and also because I am more concerned with Realism
in its common-sense form. Anyway, it seems to me that the question whether
we should accept the existence of unobservable entites posited by science
could in fact be treated completely independently of the central Realism issue
(independence), in the sense that one could be an anti-realist and still argue in

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favour of the unobservables – argue, that is, in favour of including them in our conceptual scheme without difference of status with regard to observables.

So, here are the arguments. I discuss each one immediately after stating it.

1. Realism is a compelling doctrine and it is universally held (outside intellectual/philosophical circles); it is central to our whole way of viewing the world (1984: 47; 1999: 8; 2006a: 6).

All of this is actually irrelevant. Many a view can be compelling and universally held and still be *wrong*. Also, a belief can be central to our "whole way of viewing the world" at some point in history and still turn out to be wrong or in some way irrational – for example, the belief that the Earth is flat or that the Church is infallible. Devitt makes a classical fact-to-norm mistake: that it is a *fact* that we (most people) believe something doesn't entail that we *should* believe it. Devitt might challenge the distinction, but it seems very reasonable and useful to draw one. I believe that he is aware of the weakness of this kind of argument, but cannot provide a better one because there isn't really such a thing as a serious *argument* in favour of Realism (or Constructivism) – the dispute is undecidable (more on this in the conclusion).

It is true that it is an important part of a child's (innately channeled) cognitive development (hinted to by Devitt) that it acquire an understanding of the fact that that material objects are *stable,* that is, independent in their existence of whether they are perceived by it or not. However, this does nothing to prove the *philosophical* point of independence – we could all still be dreaming.

Devitt seems particularly suspicious of intellectual/philosophical circles ("Antirealism about the physical world is an occupational hasard of philosophy", 1999: 1). I am suspicious of this suspicion.

2. Realism (about ordinary objects) is confirmed day by day in our experience (1984: 63, 1999: 12; 2006a: 6). Realism is an overarching empirical hypothesis (1984: 43).

This is plainly false. Whatever can be said in favour of Realism, it is not a belief that is confirmed by experience. As I said above, *we could still be dreaming*. Experience confirms the distinction between imagined and real objects, but this is a distinction drawn *within* the whole of experience – this whole could still be fake, that is, the result of a dream or a super-scientist feeding the stimuli to our brain. Devitt actually does acknowledge this – he claims that scepticism is ultimately unanswerable, but uninteresting. I agree. However, the constructivist arguments that bear a relation to it *are* interesting.

Whatever Realism is, it is not an empirical hypothesis. What experiment could ever prove or disprove it? Its utter generality makes it immune to testing.

3. Realism is the core of common sense (1984: 47; 1999: 9; 2006a: 6).

It might be my partly continental education, but I am quite suspicious towards common sense. Common sense is both non-universal and doubtful. It is non-universal, since it seems quite obvious that some (presently existing) tribe

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It has actually been called into question – during the discussion in Dubrovnik – whether the argument is valid. I believe that it certainly is. The first premiss, in a more developed and precise form, claims that we only have a world by being presented with a certain description, and also that every "right" description constitutes a world. So it in effect claims the identity of (right) descriptions and worlds: every such description is a world and every world is nothing but a description. It follows that if there is indeed a multitude of mutually irreducible descriptions, then there is also a multitude of worlds.

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living at stone-age level[7] will not have the same common sense we do: they will, for example, tend to explain various events by reference to spirits. And it is doubtful: it tells us, for example, that the Sun revolves around the Earth.

It was pointed out to me in discussion that I am myself relying on common sense when speaking of such a tribe. This is not the same thing, however. I do not deny that we must rely on many linguistic and non-linguistic assumptions in order to be able to communicate at all; yet this common ground is again just a *fact,* it is not a *norm*. Though we cannot, for logical reasons, challenge all of it at once, we can in principle challenge any part of it at some point. What I am saying is that we cannot call upon it for justification – it is just there, it justifies nothing.

4. It would be crazy to claim otherwise (Devitt & Sterelny 1999: 250; Devitt 2006a: 8).

Devitt says that it would be crazy to claim, contrary to Realism, that there would not have been dinasours or stars if there had not been people to think about them, a view he sees as essential to Worldmaking. Methinks that the insanity-charge is not really a valid argument. Anyway, Goodman can reply thus:

"Talk of unstructured content or an unconceptualized given or a substratum without properties is self-defeating; for the talk imposes structure, conceptualizes, ascribes properties." (1978: 6)

5. We should "put metaphysics first", embrace naturalism and reject anti-realist arguments starting from epistemology or semantics (1999: 12–14; 2006a: 9–11; also Devitt & Sterelny 1999: 233–235, 241–244).

Devitt sees Kant as proceeding from a priori considerations about what knowledge must be like to conclusions about what the world must be like. In a more contemporary form, in Dummett and Putnam[8] for example, the argument starts from semantic considerations. Devitt objects, on the one hand, that epistemological and semantical hypotheses are much more poorly based than realist metaphysical ones, and that we should therefore begin our argument from metaphysics instead of vice-versa; on the other hand, he rejects the aprioristic type of reasoning employed by Kant, Dummett and Putnam and favours naturalism, the view that "there is only one way of knowing, the empirical way that is the basis of science" (1999: 12; 2006a: 10). "The (…) theory [of knowledge and reference] has no special authority", says Devitt (1984: 194), "it is just one theory among many of the world we live in".

Now, putting metaphysics first and separating it clearly from semantics would be the right way to proceed if metaphysics were an objective, empirical enquiry such as physics. Obviously, semantics cannot have a say in deciding issues in physics. However, metaphysics is *not* such an enquiry – for, if it were, how would it be different from physics? Its generality and the complexity of the issues it treats of cannot be its distinguishing characteristic since physics can obviously also be very general and complex. Metaphysics is, in my view, an investigation of conceptual possibilities, of our mind as much as (or even more than) of the world – and therein lies the legitimate link to semantics (and epistemology). Realism is just such a conceptual possibility,[9] and it is not and cannot be an object of hard-science investigation.

The theory of knowledge and reference does indeed have special status, I believe, and for two reasons: first, it concerns all other theories (since they are *in* language and *seek* knowledge); second, it is auto-referential (since it is itself in language and seeks knowledge).[10] Devitt is aware of this (cf. 1984: 190).

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Now, the theories of knowledge and reference can be of two sorts: a) empirical-scientific – in that case they are called (cognitive) psychology and linguistics, respectively; or b) normative and conceptual-developing – in that case they are called philosophy. In this second case they are not just some theories among many, they do have special, quasi-a priori status. They have this status not in the sense of being unrevisable, obligatory for science or "the foundation"; rather, they are abstract discussion of principles, that which philosophy is all about. They have more to do with the trying out of conceptual possibilities than with empirical explanation of phenomena; and they are more normative than descriptive, the aim in doing them is to *come to agreement* on a view, a principle or a standard that cannot really be empirically tested.

Is there only one way of knowing? Perhaps, if knowledge is considered in a rather narrow sense. But there are many ways of *understanding*, of cognitive modelling, and among them are the conceptual-developing and normative (perspective-offering) ways that are characteristic of philosophy (including Devitt's philosophy).

I do not think that Kant or Dummett or Putnam are right. My point is here just this: their views cannot be discredited simply by considering where they choose to start their argument.

2.3.2. Trouble with Facts: Boghossian

Boghossian's (2006) recent book, despite the subtitle which includes the word "constructivism", has much more to do with epistemology than with metaphysics. It mostly deals with justification and rational explanation, problems that needn't have immediate metaphysical consequences. The first part of the book, however, is very much metaphysical, though this isn't admitted by Boghossian. It has to do with the construction of *facts*.

In contrast to Devitt, who rejects facts as "mysterious entites" and shows that Realism coupled with a correspondence notion of truth can do quite well without them, Boghossian subscribes to the world conceived as consisting of facts. He believes these facts to be objective, that is, mind-independent, and criticizes the constructivist view that it is constitutive of facts that they are socially (that is contingently) constructed. Here is a quote:

> "If we want to have a true conception of the way the world is, our beliefs need to accurately reflect those mind-independent facts." (58)

This view is very much early-Wittgensteinian (cf. Wittgenstein 1958): we have a world consisting of objective facts and if we want to be right in de-

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I have seen material on such tribes confirming that they do exist, in South America to be specific; but even if they do not, or not any more, this does not affect my argument – I can just go historical.

8

Dummett (1978), Putnam (1992, 1998). I will briefly discuss Putnam's views in section 2.4. I will omit discussion of Dummett because I generally agree with Devitt's criticism of his verificationism and implicit behaviourism and positivism (cf. especially Devitt 1984: ch. 12; of course I disagree with many of

Devitt's views expressed in the course of this criticism).

9

By "investigation of conceptual possibilities" I mean simply the investigation of the way ideas can be coherently developed.

10

Attempts have been made towards a Tarski-style autoreferentiality blocking with regard to these theories (cf. Dummett 1992); however, I believe that they are very implausible and unsuccessful. How could a theory of language be "beyond language", so to speak?

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scribing it, our language/thought needs to mirror these facts correctly. And it
is just as unfortunate.[11] For, how could facts be *objective*? We can't just count
the facts in a room, as, perhaps, we can objects. There will be as many facts in
a space-time region as there are true sentences (more precisely, propositions)
describing that region – and we can reshuffle the sentences/propositions to
get a different set of facts. Facts can be nothing other than linguistic/cognitive
constructs, dependant completely on a sign-system, and such that contains
some kind of assertion sign (a linguistic system in contrast, for example, to a
pictorial one). Whenever I use the word "fact" in this article, it is always meant
in a "redundancy" sense – it is eliminable. So, one might make a case for the
objectivity of *objects,* as Devitt does; but facts are completely hopeless.

2.4. The Case of Hilary Putnam

I have great sympathy for Putnam's complex, far-reaching and, in lack of a
better word, *humane* philosophy. However, I will have to disagree with him
on both of his key contributions to the present debate. The first is his brains-
in-a-vat argument; the second his internal realism.

The brains-in-a-vat example is a contemporary, sci-fi version of the tradi-
tional Cartesian Deceptive Demon-argument. What if we are just brains in a
vat being kept alive by a super scientist? We believe that we are experiencing
the world; however, it's just the stimuli being fed to us by the scientist's super
computer.

Putnam rejects this hypothesis as *wrong*, and bases this conclusion on his
semantic externalism. According to externalism, what needs to be present in
order for there to be full-blown language and thought is the right kind of inter-
action between us and the world, real transaction including perceptual contact
between us and the objects. Now, so the argument, this is precisely what is
missing in the case of a brain in a vat. So it cannot really think (or say) that it
is a brain in a vat, even by thinking that very thought. Putnam concludes from
this that we cannot be brains in a vat.

This is obviously a non-sequitur (therein I agree with Devitt, cf. Devitt &
Sterelny 1999: 254–256). It *could* be correct to say that the poor brain couldn't
really think or refer under the conditions it is in (I am wary of this, however).
Yet it doesn't follow from this that it couldn't *be* in those conditions. Putnam
then asks: from whose point of view would the story be told in case we (and
all other sentient beings) are the brains? The lack of a God's Eye point of view
makes, however, the problem unsolvable, it doesn't prove the falsity of the
hypothesis.

Putnam is famous for his internal realism, the view that is best expressed by
this quotation:

"(…) it is characteristic of this view that *what objects does the world consist of?* is a question that
it only makes sense to ask *within* a theory or description." (Putnam 1998: 49, italics his)

And this one:

"'Objects' do not exist independently of conceptual schemes. *We* cut up the world into objects
when we introduce one or another scheme of description." (52, italics his)[12]

This view is also defended by the contemporary German philosopher Günter
Abel (2004) who claims that there is no such reality that is not already sub-
ject to and dependant upon some sign- and interpretation-system of ours, that
performs the functions of specification and individuation, division and cat-

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egorisation. So there is, according to Abel (a fan of Putnam) no prefabricated, ready-made world (which doesn't, on the other hand, imply that everything is simply to be equated with signs).

This doesn't work, unfortunately. It is conceivable that *one* of these classifications actually "mirrors" the world in its essential nature correctly, and we can never refute such a claim with regard to any system that is picked out for that purpose. It could be claimed that, for example, the Greek language, or the German language, or the paintings of Ruebens actually "get things right", and we have no way of disproving this. So this view is also, no matter how attractive and reasonable it sounds, unacceptable.

3. Conclusion (in Carnap's footsteps)

It seems, then, that we are faced with a stalemate, a kind of Kantian antinomy. Neither Realism nor Constructivism can get the upper hand.

The charge has famously been brought against Realism (by Putnam) that it requires a God's Eye View. However, the same charge can be found as a critique of Constructivism (Dummett 1992: 131):

"Conceptual relativism is the doctrine that (…) we are trapped inside our language, or our conceptual scheme, and cannot survey it as from the outside. The weakness of this view is that, if it were correct, it is hard to see how we could so much as be aware of our entrapment: not only could we not step out outside what encloses us, but we could not so much as form the conception that it had an exterior."

This goes to prove my point: the two positions are in a sense equivalent and neither can demonstrate its superiority. This brings us to the views of good old Carnap. In an early paper (2004) he claimed that both positions (Realism and Idealism, as he terms them) are cognitively *meaningless,* since neither one can be tested by science, that is, by experience. Whichever position is assumed, this in no way adds to our empirical claims, the only ones that are meaningful according to Carnap. In a later paper (1967) he introduced the distinction between internal and external questions. The former concern the existence of certain entites posited within a linguistic framework; the latter concern the existence of the system of entites posited by the framework as a whole. Whereas the first kind of questions is answered by means of empirical investigation, the second kind, according to Carnap, can only be meaningful[13] if it is regarded as a question of choice between languages: the language of material things or the language of sense-data. The issue is resolved, according to Carnap, by considering the "efficiency, fruitfulness, and simplicity" (74) of the competing languages. No language is theoretically superior to the other, they are intertranslatable/equivalent; it is just a matter of practical utility.[14]

11
I will not in the context of this paper discuss the correspondence theory of truth, but I disagree with that also.

12
Putnam denies, however, that we, our language or our culture *make* the world. He says, somewhat enigmatically: "*But the world isn't a product. It's just the world*" (1992: 28, italics his). I'm not sure how exactly this fits with the statements quoted above.

13
Since "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" (73).

14
A more recent interpretation of the dispute as semantic comes from Dummett (1978). However, he sees the dispute as solvable, and bases his anti-realist solution on his verificationism. I disagree with him and therein support Devitt (cf. 1984: ch. 12; Devitt & Sterelny 1999: ch. 11.3, 11.4).

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Now, I agree with early Carnap that the dispute between Realism and Constructivism (Idealism) is unsolvable; however, I do not regard the theses as meaningless. The logical positivist criterion of meaning is much too restricted and has since, with good reason, been rejected. And I agree with later Carnap that it is ultimately a matter of choice whether we are realists or constructivists; nevertheless, it is not a choice between languages, since it has been quite persuasively shown that the languages are *not* equivalent (cf. Devitt 1984: 56). It is a choice between *positions* (that are, of course, linguistically expressed).

Let me make myself perfectly clear: ontogenetically, we all start out as realists. This is the "natural" position (its "naturalness" has a lot to do with its rarely being made explicit). If and when, however, we encounter the *philosophical* problem of realism we get Wittgensteinian bumps on our understanding. There can be no resolution of the problem, I claim, other than in the form of a choice, a decision.[15] For reason of simplicity we can choose realism (although we can also follow Putnam in seeing the objects and the signs alike as internal to the scheme, cf. 1998: 52). Most of the time, though, we can avoid making the decision altogether – we have no need to commit ourselves on this issue. It can make for an interesting inquiry to examine *semiotically* the different systems of objects posited by different sign-systems and theories; we needn't, at any rate, tackle the ontological issue while engaging in this sort of enquiry.

Realism, in a philosophical sense, as well as Anti-Realism, has, I conclude, always been no more than a decision[16] – my goal here was just to make this explicit.

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Joško Žanić

**O rješivosti spora između realizma
i konstruktivizma u ontologiji**

Sažetak

U uvodu članak predstavlja, na temelju djela Michaela Devitta, sukobljene ontološke pozicije, realizam i konstruktivizam. Prvi insistira na nezavisnosti prirode svijeta od našeg pojmovnog aparata, jezika ili znanstvenih teorija, dok drugi tvrdi da takva zavisnost postoji. Središnji dio članka teži pokazati kako je spor između realizma i konstruktivizma nerješiv, i to pomoću misaonog eksperimenta na koji se nadostavlja pobijanje argumenata središnjih konstruktivista (Kant, Goodman) i realista (Devitt, Boghossian). Također se ukratko razmatraju, te odbacuju, gledišta Hilaryja Putnama. U zaključku se tvrdi, pozivajući se djelomice na Carnapova shvaćanja, da se spor ne može razriješiti, da se radi o svojevrsnoj kantovskoj antinomiji, te da je biti realistom ili konstruktivistom stoga stvar izbora. U okviru članka iznosi se također i gledište o prirodi filozofije.

Ključne riječi

Realizam, Konstruktivizam, Svjetotvorstvo, stvarnost, rješivost, ontologija, semantika, Michael Devitt

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15

Obviously, the choice or decision in question is not one that is made on the basis of the apparent truth of one of the two positions (coupled with the attitude to prefer truth); it is arbitrary, a matter of taste and personal preference. On the other hand, this doesn't entail that making the decision is a process devoid of cognitive factors: we have to *think* about which position fits better with our more general leanings.

16

Compare the Devitt-Busch polemic in the *Croatian Journal of Philosophy* (Devitt 2006a, Busch 2006, Devitt 2006b). At one point Devitt (2006a: 17) says this: "So Global Response-Dependency of Properties does indeed lead to Worldmaking (…) And for that very reason [Global Response-Dependency of Properties] should be rejected." This conclusion sounds to me very much as if based on a *decision* against Worldmaking and in favour of Realism (I have not, in this article, considered the Response-Dependency issue because it is very complicated but doesn't really bring anything new to the discussion).

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Joško Žanić

Über die Lösbarkeit des Realismus-/ Konstruktivismusstreites in der Ontologie

Zusammenfassung

In der Einführung präsentiert der Artikel, basierend auf dem Werk von Michael Devitt, die widerstreitenden ontologischen Positionen des Realismus und Konstruktivismus. Ersterer besteht auf der Unabhängigkeit der Beschaffenheit der Welt von unserem begrifflichen Apparat, der Sprache oder wissenschaftlichen Theorien, während der andere eine solche Abhängigkeit affirmiert. Der Hauptteil des Artikels versucht darauf hinzuweisen, dass der Realismus-/Konstruktivismusstreit unlösbar ist, und zwar wird das durch ein Gedankenexperiment gemacht, dem die Widerlegung von Argumenten der Hauptkonstruktivisten (Kant, Goodman) und Hauptrealisten (Devitt, Boghossian) folgt. Die Ansichten von Hilary Putnam werden auch kurz berücksichtigt und zurückgewiesen. Im Schlussteil wird, teilweise unter Rückgriff auf die Argumente Carnaps, behauptet, dass der Streit nicht aufgelöst werden kann, dass er eine Art kantischer Antinomie ist und dass es deswegen eine Entscheidungssache ist, ob man ein Realist oder ein Konstruktivist ist. Im Laufe des Artikels wird auch eine Ansicht zum Wesen der Philosophie dargelegt.

Schlüsselbegriffe

Realismus, Konstruktivismus, Welterzeugung, Realität, Lösbarkeit, Ontologie, Semantik, Michael Devitt

Joško Žanić

Sur la solubilité du différend entre réalisme et constructivisme en ontologie

Résumé

Dans l'introduction l'article présente, basé sur l'œuvre de Michael Devitt, les positions ontologiques opposantes, réalisme et constructivisme. L'un insiste que la nature du monde soit indépendante de notre appareil conceptuel, du langage ou des théories scientifiques, tandis que l'autre affirme qu'elle en soit dépendante. La portion centrale de l'article essaie de montrer que le différend entre réalisme et constructivisme est insoluble, au moyen d'une expérience de pensée suivi par la réfutation des arguments des constructivistes (Kant, Goodman) et des réalistes (Devitt, Boghossian) les plus importants. Les vues de Hilary Putnam sont pareillement brièvement examinées et rejetées. En conclusion on soutient, se référant partiellement aux arguments de Carnap, que le différend ne peut pas être résolu, que c'est une antinomie à la Kant, et que être un réaliste ou un constructiviste est par conséquent une question de décision. En course de l'article une vue est aussi exprimée sur la nature de la philosophie.

Mots-clés

Réalisme, Constructivisme, Faire des mondes, réalité, solubilité, ontologie, sémantique, Michael Devitt