

Lecture 2: Properties I - Realism

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1. Introduction

▪ When we talk about the objects that populate the world we talk about them as being a certain way, as having various traits, feature, qualities or again properties. E.g.:

(1) 'James is tall.'

(2) 'Baboons are vicious.'

This lecture is about what it is, in the world, that makes sentences such as (1) and (2) true. More specifically, it is about whether or not, for these kinds of sentences to be true, the world must contain, in addition to objects, another kind of entity: properties.

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1. Introduction

- Philosophical views on properties follow the schema outlined in Lecture 1, according to how they answer (a) the question of existence, and (b) the question of reduction:
 - (i) Realism. In addition to objects, there are further entities called 'properties'.
 - (i) (a) Non-Reductive Realism. Properties don't reduce to further, more fundamental entities.
 - (i) (b) Reductive Realism. Properties *do* reduce to further, more fundamental entities.
 - (ii) Anti-Realism ('Nominalism'). There are no such things as properties.
- In this lecture, we will be focusing our attention on Realism. This will be followed up, in the next lecture, by an overview of Anti-Realism (focusing on a version of this view known as 'Austere Nominalism') and then Reductive (Set-Theoretic) Realisms.

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2. Realism > 2.1. Motivations

- 'Abstract' singular terms. For each adjective in a predicate one can find a corresponding so-called 'abstract' singular term. These nouns are generally formed by appending a suffix such as -hood (e.g. false/falsehood), -ness (e.g. kind/kindness), -ity (e.g. soluble/solubility), -cy (e.g. decent/decency), etc. (although not always – e.g. hot/heat). Gerundive phrases (e.g. soluble/being soluble) as well as infinitive phrases (e.g. soluble/to be soluble) fulfill a similar purpose. Abstract singular terms can themselves figure as the subjects of predications:
 - (3) 'Courage is a virtue'
 - (4) 'High salinity in water causes crop failure'
- Sentences such as (3) and (4) are the starting point for what is perhaps the strongest argument for Realism....

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2. Realism > 2.1. Motivations

▪ **Argument for Realism from abstract singular terms:** [1] There are true sentences of the form 'F-ness is G', where 'F-ness' stands for an 'abstract' singular term (e.g. (3) and (4) above). [2] Singular terms figuring in true sentences are highly probable to have a referent (i.e. an entity in the world that the term corresponds to). Therefore [3] it is highly probable that there exist referents for a number of abstract singular terms, i.e. properties.

Now... why only 'highly probable to have a referent' in [2]? Because exceptions clearly exist:

(5) 'The average Cambodian earns 60 dollars per year.'

The truth of (5) clearly doesn't commit us to the existence of a person who is the average Cambodian. (5) is indeed correctly paraphrased as:

(5)* 'On average, Cambodians earn 60 dollars per year.'

Opponents of Realism claim that (3) and (4) have similar paraphrases. Realists disagree. More on this later.

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2. Realism > 2.1. Motivations

▪ **Argument for Realism from predication:** [1] For any fact F and any two theories A and B, if A explains F and B does not, we should prefer A to B. [2] Realism offers an adequate explanation of states of affairs picked out by sentences of the form 'x is F'. [3] None of its competitors do. Therefore [4] we should prefer Realism to its competitors.

▪ The 'explanation' that Realism offers for why x is F is the following: x is F iff the object x stands in a certain special kind of relation – called 'exemplification' or 'instantiation' – to the relevant property (more formally: E(x, F-ness)). For instance, according to realists, 'James is kind' is true iff James stands in a relation of exemplification to a property called 'kindness'.

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- Note that this isn't a causal explanation. Rather it is supposed to be a *metaphysical* explanation, of the sort offered when one explains Jones being a bachelor in terms of his being male and unmarried (rather than providing a story about his childhood background, looks, financial situation, etc.).
- Nominalists take various stances on the issue of explanation. For instance, one view - the view that we will be discussing - is that x is F is a metaphysically primitive, unexplainable fact about the world. More on this later.

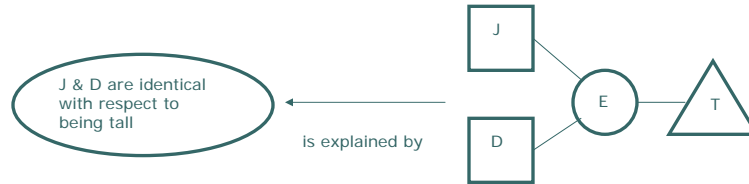
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2. Realism > 2.1. Motivations

- **Argument for Realism from attribute agreement:** [1] For any fact F and any two theories A and B , if A explains F and B does not, we should prefer A to B . [2] Realism offers an adequate explanation of states of affairs picked out by sentences of the form ' x and y are identical with respect to being F ' (e.g. 'Jones and Durand are identical with respect to being tall'). [3] None of its competitors do. Therefore [4] we should prefer Realism to its competitors.
- The proposed explanation: x and y are identical with respect being F iff both x and y bear the relation of exemplification to the entity F -ness.
- Again, we are talking metaphysical rather than causal explanation.
- According to Realism then, the expression 'to have the same property' is to be taken literally: it is to bear a relation of exemplification to the very same entity (because of this, properties are sometimes said to be '*multiply-exemplifiable*' entities or again *universals*).

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2. Realism > 2.1. Motivations

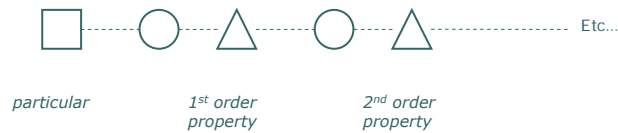


- Note: a number of commentators have (in my view rightly) argued that the argument from attribute agreement adds nothing to the argument from predication: solve the latter and you solve the former (because, essentially, x and y are identical with respect to being F iff x is F and y is F).

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2. Realism > 2.2. More on the Realist Worldview

- Higher-order properties. According to the realist, properties can themselves have or exemplify further properties. E.g.: my car has the property of being crimson, which itself has the property of being my favorite colour.



With this in hand, the realist can offer a preliminary distinction between properties and objects: (i) properties are things that can be had or exemplified by other things, whilst (ii) objects are things that can't be had or exemplified.

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2. Realism > 2.2. More on the Realist Worldview

▪ Relations. So far, we have been talking about one-place ('monadic') predicates. The realist however, wants to extend her account to sentences containing many-place ('polyadic') predicates such as 'being South of':

(6) 'Camberwell is South of the Thames.'

Sentences of the form 'x bears F to y' are analysed in a similar manner to sentences of the form 'x is F': 'x bears F to y' is true, according to the Realist, iff the ordered pair of particulars $\langle x, y \rangle$ stands in a relation of exemplification to the relation of F-ness (more formally $E(\langle x, y \rangle, F\text{-ness})$). Thus (6) comes out true iff $\langle \text{Camberwell, the Thames} \rangle$ exemplify the relation of being South of.

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2. Realism > 2.3. The Question of Location

▪ Very controversial issue. If properties can be said to exist, the immediate question that springs to mind is: *where* do they exist? It turns out that there is a fair amount of disagreement here in the realist camp, some claiming they don't have a location at all, some claiming that they do.

▪ 'Aristotelian' Realism or AR (aka 'Immanent' Realism). Properties are located in spacetime, where their bearers are. On the face of it, this view does justice to commonplace statements such as 'There was anger in the room' and so on. Furthermore:

▪ **Argument for AR from perception.** [1] For any object x , when we perceive x as being F , we perceive this by looking where x is located, [2] if [1] is true, then F -ness must also be located where x is. Therefore [3] properties are located in spacetime, where their bearers are.

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2. Realism > 2.3. The Question of Location

- **Argument for AR from lack of viable alternatives.** [1] Properties are either located where their instances are or lack spatiotemporal properties altogether. [2] They can't lack spatiotemporal properties (see below for arguments). Therefore [3] they are located in spacetime, where their bearers are.
 - AR does however face a number of criticisms, most notably:
 - **Argument against AR from counterintuitiveness of multiple location.** [1] If properties are located where their bearers are, then they can be multiply located (i.e. wholly located in more than one place at one time), [2] Nothing can be multiply located (e.g. something can't be located 23 miles from itself). Therefore [3] properties aren't located in spacetime.
- Defenders of AR reply by claiming that our intuitions here rest on our intuitions about objects. We shouldn't judge properties by similar standards.

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2. Realism > 2.3. The Question of Location

- **Platonic Realism** or PR (aka 'Transcendent' Realism). Properties aren't located in spacetime; they are 'abstract' entities like (arguably) numbers, sets or functions. This might seem crazy, but consider:
 - **Argument for PR from unexemplified properties.** [1] If properties are located in spacetime, where their instances are, then any given property must have instances in order to exist. [2] There are uninstantiated properties (e.g. being half-man half-turkey). Therefore [3] properties aren't located in spacetime.

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2. Realism > 2.3. The Question of Location

In support of [2], proponents of PR offer the following argument:

Argument for the existence of unexemplified properties from abstract singular terms. [1] There are a number of meaningful sentences of the form 'F-ness is G', when it is the case that no x is in fact F. [2] Singular terms figuring in meaningful sentences are highly probable to have a referent. Therefore [3] it is highly probable that there exist referents for the abstract singular terms mentioned in [1] (in other words, that there are unexemplified properties).

Here the critic has two options. She could object to [1] and claim that sentences involving would-be-properties that aren't exemplified (e.g. being a man/turkey hybrid) are meaningless (implausible). Alternatively she could object to [2], pointing out that that this would entail all sorts of ludicrous existence claims, such as the claim that Sherlock Holmes exists (because after all we could meaningfully assert that Sherlock Holmes is a detective).

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2. Realism > 2.3. The Question of Location

▪ **Argument for PR from relations.** [1] Relations don't have locations. (consider: where is the location of the relation 'being south of' referred to in sentence (6)?) [2] Relations are a variety of property. Therefore [3] Properties don't have locations. (by analogical induction)

Opponents of PR will reply that:

- (a) (i) Given that this is merely an analogical inductive argument, it can be overturned if independent reasons for properties having spatiotemporal location can be found. (ii) Such independent reasons can be found (see above).
- (b) The force of this argument hinges on treating prima facie two-place predicates as genuinely two-place. Some claim that apparently polyadic predicates should really be understood as monadic ones (e.g. 'John is taller than Jim' = "John is 6ft 2 and Jim is 6ft 1 or John is 6ft 3 and Jim is 6ft 1 or ...'). Perhaps it is plausible to claim that these monadic properties have a location...

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2. Realism > 2.3. The Question of Location

▪ **Argument for PR from lack of viable alternatives.** [1] Properties are either located in spacetime, where their instances are, or lack spatiotemporal properties altogether. [2] They can't be located where their instances are (see above: argument against AR from the counterintuitiveness of multiple-location). Therefore [3] properties aren't located in spacetime.

▪ Again, PR does however face a number of criticisms, most notably:

▪ **Argument against PR from counterintuitiveness of existence without location.** [1] It is true by virtue of what the word 'exist' means that things that exist have a location in spacetime. Therefore [2] if properties exist, they are located in spacetime.

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2. Realism > 2.3. The Question of Location

▪ A number of nominalists take the lack of settlement over the issue of location to be a reason to reject Realism. As far as they see it, all the options open to the realist have their problems.

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2. Realism > 2.4. Restrictions on Realism

- Let us call 'Unrestricted Realism' (UR) the view that for every predicate in natural language there exists a corresponding property. People have had serious doubts about UR, for a number of reasons...

- **A paradox to do with exemplification** (related to a paradox known as 'Russell's paradox'). [1] UR: for every predicate in natural language there exists a corresponding property. [2] 'Being non-self-exemplifying' corresponds to a property, which we call NSE. (from [1]) (an example of something that is self-exemplifying: being a property, because the property of being a property exemplifies the property of being a property) [3] Either NSE exemplifies itself or it doesn't. (truth of logic) [4] If NSE exemplifies itself, it follows that it doesn't exemplify itself. [5] If NSE doesn't exemplify itself, it follows that it does exemplify itself. Therefore [6] there cannot be such a property as NSE, and hence [2], and thereby [1] (i.e. UR) are false.

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2. Realism > 2.4. Restrictions on Realism

Reply: either argue that there are no negative properties or argue that there are no properties involving exemplification.

- The next two objections are again connected with exemplification, this time in connection with two alleged regresses.

- **'Parmenidean' regress:** [1] According to UR, if 'x is F' is true, there exists an infinite number of numerically distinct properties. [2] It isn't the case that if 'x is F' is true, there exists an infinite number of numerically distinct properties. Therefore [3] UR is false.

Proof of [1]: [i] According to UR, 'x is F' is true only if x exemplifies F-ness. [ii] According to UR, 'x exemplifies F-ness' is true only if x exemplifies the exemplification of F-ness.

Furthermore, F-ness ≠ the exemplification of F-ness. [iii] According to UR, 'x exemplifies the exemplification of F-ness' is true only if x exemplifies the exemplification of the exemplification of F-ness. Furthermore, the exemplification of F-ness ≠ the exemplification of the exemplification of F-ness. [iv] Etc..

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Reply (1): [1] is true, but that's ok, because [2] is false (or at least we have no good reason to hold that it is true).

Reply (2): [1] is simply false, because steps [ii] and thereafter are all false: there is no property of 'exemplification of F-ness' distinct from F-ness itself. 'x is F', 'x exemplifies F-ness', 'x exemplifies the exemplification of F-ness', 'x exemplifies the exemplification of the exemplification of F-ness', etc. are all synonymous and are all simply true iff x exemplifies F-ness.

- The second regress is similar to the first except that here, instead of treating the sentence 'x exemplifies F-ness' as involving 'x' and a monadic predicate 'exemplifies F-ness', we take it to involve 'x', 'F-ness' and the dyadic predicate 'exemplifies'...

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- **Bradley's regress:** [1] According to UR, if x is F is true, there exists an infinite number of numerically distinct relations. [2] It isn't the case that if 'x is F' is true, there exists an infinite number of numerically distinct relations. Therefore [3] UR is false.

Proof of [1]: [i] According to UR, 'x is F' is true only if x exemplifies₁ F-ness, where exemplification₁ is a relation. ('x is F' is true only if E₁(x, F-ness)). [ii] According to UR, 'x exemplifies₁ F-ness' is true only if x and F-ness exemplify₂ the relation of exemplification₁ ('x is F' is true only if E₂(x, F-ness, E-ness₁), where 'E-ness₁' stands for the relation of exemplification₁). [iii] According to UR, 'x and F-ness exemplify₂ the relation of exemplification₁' is true only if x, F-ness and exemplification₁ exemplify₃ the relation of exemplification₂. ('x is F' is true only if E₃(x, F-ness, E-ness₁, E-ness₂)). Furthermore, E-ness₁ ≠ E-ness₂. [iv] Etc.

Reply (1): [1] is true, but that's ok, because [2] is false (or at least we have no good reason to hold that it is true).

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2. Realism > 2.4. Restrictions on Realism

Reply (2): [1] is false because exemplification isn't, strictly speaking, a relation, so step [ii] is false (there is no relation of exemplification¹ for x and F-ness to exemplify). This is the most common response.