

# Anti-Realism

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## Abstract

According to metaphysical realism, we would have to compare our thought with mind-independent reality, if we want to gain knowledge about the world. Such a comparison is impossible. Yet we can gain knowledge about the world. So metaphysical realism is false. — I take this to be the historically most influential argumentative line opposing metaphysical realism. The paper develops this argument, the Main Anti-Realist Argument, in more detail and offers a brief critical discussion of its crucial assumptions.

## Keywords

Anti-realism, correspondence-truth, comparing, Kant, realism.

Consider the following argument; it is an argument against metaphysical realism, and its general drift should seem rather familiar:

We cannot step outside our own minds to *compare* our thoughts with mind-independent reality. Yet, on the realist correspondence view of truth, this is what we would have to do to gain knowledge of the world. We would have to *access* reality as it is *in itself*, to determine whether our thoughts correspond to it. Since all our access to the world is mediated by our cognition, this is impossible. Hence, on realism, knowledge of the world would be impossible. Since knowledge of the world is possible, realism must be wrong.

Metaphysical realism is usually identified as the view that much of the world is mind-independent and that truth is correspondence between thought and the world. Anti-realism is opposed to this view. As I see it, the argument sketched above is (in some form or other) a crucially important motivation driving anti-realist attitudes. The argument says, in a nutshell, that metaphysical realism must inevitably

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succumb to global skepticism about the external world, and must, therefore, be wrong. I will call it the *Main Anti-Realist Argument*.

My formulation of the argument is a bit loose. This is deliberate. I intend it to capture a theme, a *motif*, recurring in anti-realist thought. Anti-realists of all persuasions — pragmatists, positivists, neo-positivists, verificationists, classical idealists, transcendental idealists, existentialists, post-modernists — have aimed versions of this sort of argument, variations on this theme, against their metaphysical realist targets. Actually, I tend to think that this theme is in fact the anti-realist *leitmotif*; that it has been (and still is) the strongest attracting force drawing people away from metaphysical realism and towards anti-realist positions, or making such positions appear tempting. I will not try to argue for this claim here. I hope you find it sufficiently compelling to stay with me.<sup>1</sup>

My aim in this paper is to identify some of the operative assumptions that enter into the Main Anti-Realist Argument. I will raise some pertinent critical questions about these assumptions, but I will not discuss them in very much detail in this paper — that would be on the agenda of a much larger project. Here, I just want to identify some of the main points pertaining to the argument that I suggest need looking after and to comment on them briefly.

I begin with two somewhat preliminary points: one concerns the relation between metaphysical realism and correspondence truth; the other concerns the role played by skepticism, or rather, the denial of skepticism, in the Main Anti-Realist Argument.

The Main Anti-Realist Argument assumes (or maybe better: those who wield the argument assume) that metaphysical realism is tied very closely to the *correspondence theory of truth* — I have deliberately formulated the argument above as incorporating this assumption. The assumption is problematic. It raises a terminological issue, concerning the proper use of the label ‘metaphysical realism’, as well as a substantive issue, concerning the relation between the thesis of

<sup>1</sup> José Zalabardo has pointed out to me that Anthony Brueckner published a paper entitled “The Anti-Realist’s Master Argument” in 1992. The paper is concerned with a Dummett-style anti-realist argument, concerning the theory of linguistic meaning and evidence-transcendent truth-conditions. Times change. From today’s perspective, it seems that the more traditional argument outlined here never lost its title to being the main argument opposing realism.

mind-independence (i.e. the thesis that much of the world is mind-independent) and the correspondence theory of truth. Take the latter issue, the substantive one, first.

Advocates of arguments along the lines of the Main Argument typically treat mind-independence and correspondence-truth as a package deal (if they distinguish them at all), presupposing (or talking as if they presuppose) that one entails the other. Strictly speaking, this is wrong. Mind-independence does not entail correspondence-truth: one can consistently embrace mind-independence and reject any form of correspondence theory. For example, advocates of deflationist theories of truth hold that truth has no nature and reject the correspondence theory, usually on the grounds that the notion of correspondence is redundant or defective in some way, or not scientifically respectable. Advocates of primitivism about truth reject the correspondence theory on the grounds that truth is not definable in any sense of 'definable'. Such anti-correspondence views about truth are not, *a fortiori*, committed to the rejection of mind-independence.

Now for the terminological issue. The label 'metaphysical realism' is often applied to the package of mind-independence and correspondence-truth. If so, the assumption that realism, in this sense, is tied to correspondence truth is of course not problematic, and an argument targeting primarily correspondence-truth, such as the Main Anti-Realist Argument, will obviously be an argument against realism thus defined. However, since mind-independence does not really entail correspondence-truth, the package is, logically speaking, a mere conjunction, hence such an argument, while attacking realism thus defined, will not automatically attack the thesis of mind-independence. This is awkward, because it is the thesis of mind-independence that is the real target of most anti-realist argumentation. If, on the other hand, the label 'metaphysical realism' is applied more narrowly, and by my lights more properly, namely to the thesis of mind-independence only, then the assumption that realism, in this sense, is tied to correspondence truth is false, and the Main Argument, since it proceeds by attacking correspondence-truth, is bound not to reach its intended target.

What to do?

One might look into the question whether there can be (or whether there already is) an argument attacking metaphysical realism that

is recognizably similar to the Main Argument but does not proceed by attacking the correspondence theory of truth. This strikes me as potentially interesting, but I won't pursue it here.

Note that the opponents of metaphysical realism are by no means alone in treating mind-independence and correspondence-truth as a package deal. Philosophers advocating mind-independence (or taking it for granted) have typically also advocated some form of correspondence theory of truth (or have taken it for granted). Moreover, this is hardly a coincidence: mind-independence and the correspondence theory do go together nicely; their logical independence notwithstanding, they make for a very natural package. In view of the historical importance of this combination, it is helpful for certain purposes, I think, to continue this (strictly speaking questionable) tradition and to treat mind-independence and correspondence-truth as a package deal, which is what I am going to do in this paper; and following a closely related (questionable) tradition, I will continue to use the label 'metaphysical realism' for the package deal.

Returning briefly, by way of an afterthought, to the substantive issue, I want to note that the correspondence theory of truth does not entail mind-independence either. This is easy to tell from the fact that one can advocate a position combining the thesis of mind-dependence with a commitment to correspondence-truth, e.g.: 'A judgment (belief) is true iff it corresponds with some fact; and all facts are mind-dependent'. Advocacy of a correspondence theory of truth may carry the (Gricean) implicature of mind-independence (metaphysical realism), but this implicature can be cancelled. Though this is not, strictly speaking, directly relevant to the topic at hand, it is of some interest for a proper understanding of the relation between anti-realism and realism in general.<sup>2</sup>

My second preliminary point concerns the role played by *external-world skepticism*, or rather, *the denial* of external-world skepticism, in the Main Anti-Realist Argument. Note that the argument divides into two stages. The *first stage*, making up the bulk of the formulation

<sup>2</sup> As to realism and the correspondence theory, note that realists have to resist the temptation to build mind-independence into the definition of truth, along the lines of: 'A judgment is true iff it corresponds with some mind-independent fact'. Since mental states are not mind-independent, such a definition would, absurdly, imply that all judgments about mental states are untrue.

above, ends with the intermediate conclusion that, given metaphysical realism, knowledge of the external world would be impossible. The *second stage* comes with the very last sentence, which says that knowledge of the external world is possible, from which it is concluded that metaphysical realism must be wrong.

As far as the first stage is concerned, its import might be entirely skeptical: taking metaphysical realism for granted, one might go on to infer that we cannot have any knowledge of an external world. The first stage leads into an argument against realism only if, and as soon as, one adds, by way of the second stage, the *denial* of skepticism concerning our knowledge of the external world, thus reaching, by *modus tollens*, the rejection of metaphysical realism as the conclusion of the overall argument.

Note that the premise required at the second stage for the turn against realism is *not* that we actually have knowledge of the external world. Since the first stage of the argument claims that, on the realist view, knowledge of the world would be impossible, all that is required for the second stage is: knowledge of the world is possible. The Main Anti-Realist Argument thus takes the form of a transcendental argument against metaphysical realism.

Consider, by way of comparison, the following passage from Kant's *Jäsche Logic* — which I should be quoting in any case, because this passage served to some extent as a model for my formulation of the Main Argument:

Truth, it is said, consists in the agreement of cognition with its object. In consequence of this mere nominal explanation, my cognition, to count as true, is supposed to agree with its object. Now I can compare the object with my cognition, however, only *by cognizing it*. Hence my cognition is supposed to confirm itself, which is far short from being sufficient for truth. For since the object is outside me, the cognition in me, all I can ever pass judgment on is whether my cognition of the object agrees with my cognition of the object. The ancients called such a circle in explanation a *diallelon*. (Kant 1800: Introduction VII).

The passage covers only the first stage of an argument against metaphysical realism: the ground is prepared, but the actual turn against realism is not executed (not yet?). Kant brings up the correspondence theory of truth, and then questions the utility of

correspondence as a *criterion* or *test* of truth (“my cognition, *to count as true* [*um als wahr zu gelten*], is supposed to agree with its object”); and he questions it radically: given that truth is correspondence with the external world, he says, we can’t have any knowledge of the external world. The import of the passage could be entirely skeptical.

As far as Kant is concerned, it is not clear to me whether his overall view might be adequately summarized by saying that he would continue from here by rejecting skepticism, and, consequently, rejecting metaphysical realism, embracing his transcendental idealism instead. Maybe this would be too simplistic, even as a short summary of Kant’s brand of anti-realism. However, I am sure that many other anti-realists will agree wholeheartedly with the passage from Kant and will continue in the manner described, though they might well arrive at a brand of anti-realism different from Kant’s transcendental idealism.

Having distinguished two stages of the Main Anti-Realist Argument, I will focus exclusively on the first stage for the remainder of this paper. The second, anti-skeptical stage of the argument, executing the anti-realist turn, is of course crucial. Nevertheless, I will set it aside. The denial of skepticism is not where the action is in the debate between anti-realists and realists. That debate turns rather on the issues mooted in the first stage of the argument, especially on the distinctive theme of “comparing” cognition (thought, belief) with its object (reality, facts). For ease of reference, I repeat my formulation of the argument here:

We cannot step outside our own minds to *compare* our thoughts with mind-independent reality. Yet, on the realist correspondence view of truth, this is what we would have to do to gain knowledge of the world. We would have to *access* reality as it is *in itself*, to determine whether our thoughts correspond to it. Since all our access to the world is mediated by our cognition, this is impossible. Hence, on realism, knowledge of the world would be impossible. Since knowledge of the world is possible, realism must be wrong.

Focusing on what I called the first stage of the argument (the whole text, minus the last sentence), we can distinguish two aspects or parts within that first stage. One part, call it the *first part*, says

that there is something we cannot do, namely compare our thoughts with reality to ascertain a relevant correspondence relation holding between them (*Can't Compare*). The *second part* says that we have to do it, on a realist correspondence account of truth, if we are to obtain knowledge of the world (*Must Compare*).

I will look at the second part first.

The following line of reasoning seems to figure crucially in this second part: If truth is correspondence with reality, then, since knowledge requires truth, we have to know that our beliefs correspond with reality, if we are to know anything about reality.

A point of clarification. The relevant claim here is *not* that, on the assumption that truth is correspondence with reality, I have to know the general proposition *that my beliefs correspond with reality*, in order to know anything about reality. The intended claim must be, rather, that with respect to any given belief of mine, I have to know *of that belief* that it corresponds with reality, in order for that belief to constitute a piece of knowledge. So, for example, the claim is: given that truth is correspondence with reality, to know that my shirt is grey, I have to know of my belief that my shirt is grey that it corresponds with reality.

But how, one should ask, does knowledge of the nature of truth enter into a necessary condition for knowledge of such humdrum matters as the color of my shirt? There is a double-move being made in the line of reasoning above. It starts, importantly, from the innocuous observation that knowledge requires truth (this brings truth into the picture), and then moves quickly, via assumptions (1) and (2), see below, to a lemma, (3), saying that, given realism, in order to know something, one needs to know of one's belief that it corresponds with reality.

- (1) *S* knows *p*, only if *S* knows of her belief *p* that it is true.
- (2) If truth = correspondence with reality, then *S* knows of her belief *p* that it is true, only if *S* knows of her belief *p* that it corresponds with reality.
- (3) If truth = correspondence with reality, then *S* knows *p*, only if *S* knows of her belief *p* that it corresponds with reality.

The first move is made with assumption (1). It may look innocuous enough, merely reminding us of the initial, the uncontentious clauses in the analysis of propositional knowledge. But note that assumption (1) is not actually underwritten by the analysis of knowledge, whose initial, uncontentious clauses run like this: '*S* knows *p*, only if (i) *S* believes *p*, (ii) *p* is true, (iii)...'. Knowledge does indeed require truth, but this point yields no more than the requirement that your belief has to be true in order to constitute a piece of knowledge (the innocuous point); it does not yield the requirement that, in order for your belief to constitute a piece of knowledge, you also have to know, or even believe, *that* your belief is true.

Three opposing considerations seem especially pertinent concerning assumption (1). First, there are subjects (small children, higher animals) who know things without having the conceptual resources to form meta-beliefs about the truth of their own beliefs. The assumption belongs to an epistemological tradition that tended to over-intellectualize knowledge. Second, acquisition of information comes through perception and reasoning. Even with respect to subjects who clearly are in a position to form meta-beliefs about the truth of their own beliefs, perception and reasoning do not normally deliver, and certainly do not have to deliver, such meta-beliefs. Third, the assumption intimates that knowledge about the world can be acquired only *via* inference from known premises about the truth of one's own beliefs. This is quite implausible. Perceptual knowledge never works that way. Inferential knowledge might, in certain special cases, but usually does not. Note especially that, even when you acquire knowledge through an informant known by you to be reliable, the meta-premise in play would be that *her*, the informant's, professed belief is true, not that *your own* belief is true.

The second move is made with assumption (2). Assumption (1) functioned to pave the way by bringing truth into the picture. Assumption (2) now aims to build on this and to bring in the correspondence account of the nature of truth. Of course, truth and its nature are in the picture already, in one way: since knowledge requires that your belief be true, it requires that your belief correspond with reality, given the correspondence account of truth. But our argument is not satisfied with this innocuous point (though having it in the background may help lending some credibility to the



argument). Our argument wants to bring the nature of truth into the picture in an importantly different way. Assumptions (1) and (2) between them aim to put, as it were, the nature of truth into the *content* of a knower's meta-belief. They aim to require that, in order to know anything,  $p$ , however mundane, the subject must be aware of the correspondence nature of truth; and they aim to put this requirement at the feet of the realist correspondence account of truth.

There are two main opposing considerations that seem especially pertinent here. First, assumption (2) should be charged with committing an intensional fallacy, similar to: If  $a = b$ ,  $S$  knows that  $a$  is  $F$ , only if  $S$  knows that  $b$  is  $F$ . Only in this case the fallacy involves a property identity: If *being*  $F = \textit{being}$   $G$ ,  $S$  knows of  $a$  that it is  $F$ , only if  $S$  knows of  $a$  that it is  $G$ . (That is: If *being*  $\textit{true} = \textit{corresponding with reality}$ , then  $S$  knows of a belief  $a$  that it is true, only if  $S$  knows of  $a$  that it corresponds with reality.) Using this kind of reasoning, one might argue, fallaciously: Since water is  $H_2O$ , our ancestors knew that they were drinking water, only if they knew that they were drinking  $H_2O$ ; and since they didn't know they were drinking  $H_2O$ , they didn't know that they were drinking water.

Second, assumption (2) should be charged with failing to properly distinguish a (proposed) definition or account of the nature truth, on the one hand, from a process or procedure by which one comes to know that something is true, on the other hand.<sup>3</sup> A definition of the nature of  $F$  does not have to, and often will not, provide any sort of procedure for coming to know whether something is  $F$ . Specifically, a definition of the nature of truth, an advocate of the correspondence account ought to insist, does not have to provide a procedure for coming to know whether something is true; and the correspondence

<sup>3</sup> In this context it may be illuminating to take a second look at the beginning of the Kant passage from the *Jäsche Logic*, cited above, where Kant says that, in consequence of the correspondence definition, his cognition "to count as true [*um als wahr zu gelten*], is supposed to agree with its object". Note the neat double function of the phrase 'to count as true'. Looking back at the definition of truth, this can be read in the spirit of 'to count as true by the lights of the definition', that is, as: 'to be true'. Looking forward to his bringing up epistemic matters, it lends itself to be read as: 'to be rationally believed to be true'. Read both ways at once, it serves to make an illegitimate transition from the definition of truth to epistemic matters pertaining to how one comes to know that something is true.

account does not, and is not intended to, provide such a procedure. One can come to know that a liquid is water from the way it looks and tastes (etc.), one does not have to go through its H<sub>2</sub>O-nature, performing a chemical analysis, to come to know that it is water. Similarly for truth. Though, admittedly, there is also a disanalogy, because going through the chemical analysis does provide one good way of coming to know that a liquid is water. This does not seem to be the case with the correspondence theory. How does one come to know of one's own belief *p* that it is true? Here is one good way. First you come to know *p*. Then you reflect (for some reason) on your own beliefs, coming to believe and know that you have the belief *p*, then you infer that your belief *p* is true, exploiting or presupposing your (implicit?) knowledge of the principle that *p* entails that *p* is true.

Much hinges in this connection on the general question of what is required for a definition or account of something to be adequate. A requirement to the effect that a definition of being *F* is adequate, only if it leads directly to a procedure for finding out whether something is *F* would work against the line taken above by the advocate of a realist correspondence account of truth. On the other hand, such a requirement on definitional adequacy seems motivated only on the background of some form of anti-realist position (verificationism, operationalism, pragmatism). Hence, bringing it up at this point would seem to beg the question against metaphysical realism.

Up to now I have deliberately kept at arm's length the crucial theme of *comparing* thought with reality, trying to get an idea about how much ground the Main Anti-Realist Argument will cover without going into it. Now is the point where the comparison-theme has to enter, by way of assumption (4), which leads to the conclusion, (5), of the second part of the argument, saying that, on the realist correspondence theory of truth, one can know something, only if one has compared one's belief with reality:

- (4) *S* knows of her belief *p* that it corresponds with reality, only if *S* has compared her belief *p* with reality.
- (5) If truth = correspondence with reality, *S* knows *p*, only if *S* has compared her belief *p* with reality.

Here is a consideration opposing assumption (4) that builds on a

point made above in the discussion of assumption (2). I said that one good way of coming to know of one's belief  $p$  that it is true is this: First one comes to know  $p$ . Then one reflects (for some reason) on one's own beliefs, coming to know that one holds the belief  $p$ ; then one infers that one's belief  $p$  is true. This, I said *vis à vis* (2), is how one can come to know of one's belief  $p$  that it is true, without knowing of one's belief  $p$  that it corresponds with reality. Now, if one *does* know the correspondence account of truth, if one does know that truth is correspondence with reality, the continuation of the story works against assumption (4). Given one knows of one's belief  $p$  that it is true, and given one knows that truth is correspondence with reality, one can come to know that one's belief  $p$  corresponds with reality without having to compare one's belief  $p$  with reality.

Consider now the consequent of the conclusion (5):  $S$  knows  $p$ , only if  $S$  has compared her belief  $p$  with reality. As a general condition on knowledge, this should strike you as very strange. Much (most) acquisition of information does not proceed by comparing beliefs one already has with anything. Perceptual processes and inference processes do not proceed by comparing beliefs one already has, they proceed by forming beliefs which, under the right conditions, then constitute pieces of knowledge. Talk of 'comparing' drops out of the picture, when one thinks of how perception and inference based on perception lead to the formation of beliefs: for the most part, talk of 'comparing' is just a bad metaphor.

Yet, the second part of the Main Argument nevertheless claims that metaphysical realism, because it takes truth to be correspondence with reality, is committed to the view that one knows something, only if one has compared one's belief with reality. The reason for this claim being mainly assumptions (1), (2), and (4), which harbor an ill-motivated meta-knowledge requirement on knowledge, an intensional fallacy, the failure to distinguish definitions from descriptions of procedures for the acquisition of knowledge, and a bad general picture of the workings of the acquisition of knowledge.

However, the picture of knowing by comparing is not entirely wrong. Sometimes, it seems, we do compare, namely when we *check* the accuracy of beliefs we already have, when we *test* our beliefs or theories. The second part of the Main Argument, then, treats all coming to know as checking, all knowing as having checked. This

is wrong, even if there are cases where one does come to know by checking one's beliefs — even if there are many such cases: their numbers are still small compared to the massive amount of cases where one acquires knowledge without checking.

I turn now briefly to the other part of the Main Anti-Realist Argument, the first part. Remember, it said that we cannot do what according to the second part we have to do, namely compare our beliefs with reality to ascertain that the relation of correspondence holds between them.

The first part of the Main Argument focuses on comparing cognition (beliefs) with reality (facts, things and their properties). But its central claim seems to apply quite generally to comparing anything with anything: beliefs with facts, facts with facts, things with things, beliefs with beliefs (cognitions with cognitions). The central claim made by the first part seems to be:

*Can't Compare:* We can never compare *X* itself with *Y* itself, we can only compare our cognition of *X* with our cognition of *Y*.

Taken seriously, this claim would launch an infinite regress, for obviously my *cognition of X* and my *cognition of Y* will themselves be new items, *X* and *Y*, which, according to the claim, I can't compare directly; instead, I can only compare my cognitions of these cognitions, and so on. If the claim is not to lead to the conclusion that nothing can ever be compared with anything, it has to be restricted. The intended restriction must be to items that are not themselves cognitions, that is *X* and *Y* must not be cognitions; for the Main Argument assumes, apparently, that we *can* compare our cognitions.

Here is a weaker claim, not leading immediately into trouble, which one might grant at least for the sake of argument (keeping in mind that *X* and *Y* are not cognitions):

*Can Compare Only If:* I can compare my cognition of *X* with *Y* only by employing a further cognition, namely a cognition of *Y*.

Say this is true (and let us suppress worries about how, exactly, 'cognition of *X*' is to be spelled out). Say I can compare my cognition of *X* with *Y* only by employing a cognition of *Y*. This does not show that what I end up comparing thereby is merely my cognition of *X* with my cognition of *Y*. But this is the thesis the Main Anti-Realist

Argument would need. It is hard to see where this negative thesis is supposed to come from. The above claim tells me that I can do one thing, A, only by doing another thing, B. Because of just this, I am supposed to accept the strong negative conclusion that I cannot really do A after all, that I can merely do A\*, which is different from A, and which is not what is wanted or needed. Yet, no further reason is provided for this negative conclusion. Even granting the claim above, the alternative hypothesis is still available, namely the hypothesis that I *can* do A, from which it follows, given the claim above, that the way to do A, apparently, is *by* doing B. That is, even granting the claim *Can Compare Only If*, the hypothesis is available that I can compare my cognition of X with Y, namely by employing (among other things) a cognition of Y.<sup>4</sup>

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