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## Realism, Anti-Realism and Truth

**Abstract.** In the article, I argue that semantic considerations cannot provide arguments to solve metaphysical debates. Any potential conclusions would only be possible at the expense of modifying the concept of truth. The results of such attempts, however, prove to be brazenly artificial and inconsistent.

**Keywords:** realism, anti-realism, semantics, metaphysics, truth, existence

### Realizm, antyrealizm i prawda

**Abstrakt.** W artykule uzasadniam twierdzenie, że rozważania semantyczne nie mogą dostarczyć argumentów służących do rozstrzygnięcia sporów metafizycznych. Ewentualne rozstrzygnięcia byłyby osiągalne jedynie za cenę modyfikacji pojęcia prawdy. Rezultaty takich prób są jednak rażąco sztuczne i niespójne.

**Słowa kluczowe:** realizm, antyrealizm, semantyka, metafizyka, prawda, istnienie

In the article I will attempt to demonstrate the lack of any significant correlation between semantics and metaphysics. M. Frapolli (2014) managed it in her own way, I will do the same in mine. And although our theorems are largely convergent, there are certain significant discrepancies in terms of terminology and argumentation.

(MR) Type T objects exist. Object *a* exists.

For instance: material objects exist, spirits exist, gravitons exist, angels exist, people exist, cultures exist, God exists, phlogiston exists, Frodo exists, ADHD exists, I exist.

(MR) will stand for “metaphysical realism”<sup>1</sup> – one could add: limited to objects T or object *a*. “Total” realism could be expressed with the statement “everything exists”. That, however, would either spell tautology (“that which exists, exists”) or require immediate particularisation: *what* everything? And any form of particularisation entails limitation, thus leading to a particular case of (MR).

In (MR), “exists” does not mean “is perceived”, or “is here or there”, or “is a value of a variable”, or anything else a reductionist formula of this sort might stand

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<sup>1</sup> For more on this and other uses of the term “metaphysical (or ontological) realism (anti-realism)” see (Szubka 2001, 22-46; Woleński 2003, 191-194; Horwich 2004, 8-9).

for. It also occurs without the addition of “in that way or another” – e.g. exists “potentially”, “intentionally”, “ideally”, “virtually”, etc. Here, “exists” carries its own, specific meaning, one that is impossible to reiterate in any words other than itself.

(MA) Type T objects do not exist. Object *a* does not exist.

(MA) will stand for “metaphysical anti-realism” which is – much like (MR) – “limited”. Total anti-realism – “nothing exists” – can only be of interest as an element of sceptical experiments, not as a metaphysical theory. Partial metaphysical realisms and anti-realisms are found in deliberately constructed philosophical, scientific, pseudoscientific, and religious theories, as well as in various spontaneously adopted worldviews. Such theories include realist and anti-realist theorems and premises relative to various objects. For instance, in Democritus, Hobbes or Churchland we find realism in terms of material objects and anti-realism in terms of spiritual ones, whereas in Berkeley, Leibniz or Bradley the situation is reversed. Stahl’s theory of combustion included a realist thesis on the phlogiston which was no longer present in Lavoisier’s theorem. In another one of Lavoisier’s theories, however, a realist thesis on the caloric is found, and it was not until Clausius that physics managed to make do without it. Maxwell’s theory included a thesis on the existence of luminiferous ether which was later refuted by Einstein. Pseudoscientific and religious theories are awash with claims on the existence of various objects, such as the psi force, astral bodies, angels or demons. Spontaneous worldviews are a complete mess wherein virtually anything can be included: positive and negative existential statements stemming from either nothing in particular or from philosophy, science, pseudoscience, religion – chaotic, inconsistent, and terribly obscure.

Existential statements are much like football – they are inconsequential and essential at the same time. Inconsequential – because of how non-empirical, impractical and indeterminable they are, because a hundred thalers that exist are no different from a hundred thalers that do not, etc. Scientific equations will not change when we start adding or subtracting theses on the existence or nonexistence of calorics, superstrings, gravitons, or whatever else. We are free to assume the existence or nonexistence of force, mass, or acceleration but doing so will in no way influence the shape of the formula “ $F=ma$ ”. Existential statements do indeed play an important role in science but that role is purely heuristic and does not extend any further. They do not constitute the subject matter of science.

They are essential because without them, we tend to lose interest. As far as philosophy, science, pseudoscience, religion, or worldview can be treated as *cognitive* endeavours, existential statements are indispensable. Without them, any equation of a scientific theory – however useful otherwise – would be cognitively void. Existential statements are necessary in any attempt to construct visions of the world – as comprehensive and comprehensible as possible: ones that also constitute our visions of ourselves and the meaning of our existence.

Naturally, we wish these visions to be true. But that can pose a bit of an issue, more than just an issue in fact, for while establishing the truth of any given statement is not a simple matter, when the same is attempted for existential statements, the difficulty becomes even greater. Do gravitons exist or not? Maybe they are something that physicist just talk about but in reality they are not there? Does God exist or does He not? As philosophers, we are well aware of how difficult it is to do as much as explain the complexity of approaching such questions, not to mention to actually answer them.

(SR) Type T sentences are true or false. Sentence “p” is true or false.

For instance: strictly general sentences are true or false, statements of Newtonian mechanics are true or false, sentences in a Tolkien novel are true or false, “All humans are dead” is true or false, “ $F=ma$ ” is true or false, “Frodo is an Orc” is true or false.

(SR) is known as the “principle of bivalence” (with respect to a somehow limited scope of sentences). Here, I will refer to it as “semantic realism”<sup>2</sup>.

(SA) Type T sentences are neither true nor false. Sentence “p” is neither true nor false.

(SA) will stand for “semantic anti-realism”.

(Problem M) Do type T objects exist? Does object *a* exist?

(Problem S) Are (is) type T sentences (sentence *p*) true or false, or are they (is it) neither true nor false?

One of the ways of tackling problem M is to assume a relation between M and S, in which solving problem S will significantly contribute to the solution of problem M (Dummett 1978, 145–146; 1993, 8-9, 12-13). It is my intention to verify whether such a relationship does indeed occur and, if so, what specifically is its nature. In other words: whether there is – and if so, of what kind – a relationship between metaphysical realism and anti-realism on the one hand, and semantic realism and anti-realism on the other.

The simplest hypothesis is that said relationship is so close that a solution to problem S simultaneously constitutes – “by default” and without the need for additional problems to be posed – the solution to problem M. Hypotheses postulating a more complex relation are possible, but somewhat pointless – they would contribute little except needlessly spinning out the deliberations. The sole candidates for “carriers” of the sought relationship are notions of existence and truth.

<sup>2</sup> The term (as well as “semantic anti-realism”) usually denotes theses pertaining to sentence meaning (Woleński 2003, 193-197; Szubka 2001, 62-91). The gist of the matter, however, is expressed by (SR) and (SA).

(T) Sentence “p” is true if and only if p.

A sentence which is not true, is false. Sentences “neither true nor false” cannot be determined with (T). For instance, the sentence “ $F=ma$ ” is true iff  $F=ma$ , “Frodo is an Orc” is true iff Frodo is an Orc, “All humans are dead” is true iff all humans are dead. On the other hand, contexts in blatant breach of (T), such as “‘ $F=ma$ ’ is true and  $F \neq ma$ ”, “‘Frodo is an Orc’ is true and Frodo is not an Orc”, are distinctly objectionable, which strengthens the appeal of the formula.

No further conditions need be met. In particular, it is completely immaterial whether anyone is capable of verifying a given sentence or even able to attempt the same. If “All humans are dead” is true, there is no-one to even attempt such verification, unless dead people or some non-humans are up to the task. It is equally immaterial whether the objects of a sentence exist. “Frodo is an Orc” is true if Frodo is an Orc, regardless of whether Frodo or Orcs actually exist.

(T) is a demonstration of a particular understanding of the word “true”. The “objectionable contexts” only strengthen said demonstration. I expect that most of my fellow human beings share this point of view, although I have come across some that understand the word “true” differently (or at least claim it to be the case).

Let us assume that (SR) is true with regard to sentence “p”. Would that mean that (MR) or (MA) must be true (or false) in terms of the objects it refers to? No, no such correlation is present. The sentence “Frodo is an Orc” is true if Frodo is an Orc; or false if Frodo is not an Orc, regardless of whether Orcs or Frodo actually exist, i.e. regardless of whether (MR) and (MA) are true (or false) with regard to Frodo and Orcs. It is the same with (SA). Given the understanding of the word “true” as demonstrated by (T), the solutions to problems S and M remain mutually independent.

It could be concluded that this understanding of the word “true” takes no heed of the strong intuitions and the related philosophical tradition of St. Thomas’s “*adaequatio rei et intellectus*”. Said intuitions and tradition tell us that true statements can pertain only to that which exists. If Frodo does not exist then the sentence “Frodo is and Orc” is false not because Frodo is a Hobbit and Hobbits are not Orcs, but because in order to be an Orc, or anything else for that matter, Frodo would have to exist. Consequently, the sentence “Frodo is a Hobbit” is also false for the very same reason. The latter, however, is contrary to our intuitions which tell us that Frodo *is a Hobbit*, but *is not an Orc*, and therefore there is nothing inappropriate in saying that the respective corresponding sentences are either true or false. What these sentences and their negations actually are is a separate problem which in itself has a variety of solutions (Paśniczek 1984, 10-13). The way to avoid it is to apply Frege’s suggestion that: sentences pertaining to things that do not exist are neither true nor false (Frege 1984a, 163, 1984b, 356).

(T1) Sentence “p” is true iff (1) p and (2) the objects that “p” refers to exist.

A sentence is false if condition (2) is met but (1) is not. A sentence is neither true nor false if condition (2) is not met, regardless of (1)<sup>3</sup>.

Given the above understanding of “truth”, the relations between metaphysical and semantic realisms and anti-realisms become apparent. If (SR) is true with respect to particular sentences, (MR) must be true with regard to the objects said sentences pertain to. The same can be said for (SA) and (MA). If the sentence “Frodo is an Orc” is either true or false, both Frodo and Orcs must exist. And if “Frodo is an Orc” is neither true or false, then either Frodo or Orcs do not exist, and vice versa. At this point the metaphysical discussion could evolve into a dispute about sentences, but that would be immaterial.

Since condition (2) constitutes the solution to problem M, it cannot constitute a premise in the solution to problem S, therefore the latter would have to be solved in a very particular way indeed. Specifically, one would have to conclude that sentence “p” is either true or false, or none of the above, without any consideration to the question of whether the conditions of its truth (or falsehood, etc.) have been met. If we were able to determine whether a given sentence is true or false by considering the sentence alone, regardless of our knowledge of the objects it refers to, we would arrive at a realist solution to problem M. Analogically, if we were able to establish that it is neither true nor false, we would obtain an anti-realist solution.

But we can do none of the above. It would be like saying that the sentence “Sophie smells nice” is true after smelling the sentence, rather than Sophie herself. With the exception of analytical statements, we are unable to determine truth (etc.) by focusing on a given sentence alone and neglecting its objects.

(T1) combined with the determination of “neither true nor false” creates the basis for generating the following contexts: “sentence ‘p’ is neither true nor false, and p”. For instance: “‘Frodo is a Hobbit’ is neither true nor false, and Frodo is a Hobbit”, from which we can derive: “‘Frodo is a Hobbit’ is not true, and Frodo is a Hobbit”. These are consistent with (T1) while at the same time being nearly as objectionable as the abovementioned contexts inconsistent with (T).

The failure of (T1) suggests that the issue of determining or - less strongly - justifying the truth of a sentence is of key importance. And since we have already departed from (T), there is nothing to stop us from going even further.

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<sup>3</sup> The sentence “Every maiden is a woman” is analytically true. Random circumstances - including the existence or non-existence of women - should in no way impact the truth of this statement. I would not cease to be true even if a plague of some sort wiped out the entire female population. Analogically, “Frodo=Frodo” is analytically true regardless of whether Frodo does or does not exist. In order to maintain (T1), one could exclude such sentences from the categories of truth and falsehood, or lift the requirements of condition (2) in their context. We believe that “Francis believes in God” is either true or false regardless of whether God exists or not. To reconcile (T1) with the above belief, one could analyse such sentences as a subordinate clause (e.g. “Francis believes that God exists”) and apply condition (2) to each respective clause independently. Either way, analytical statements and intensional contexts are problematic for any existentially involved concept of truth.

(T2) Sentence “p” is true iff (1) p and (2) all the objects referred to by “p” exist and (3) it is justified that “p” is true.

A sentence is false if (1) is not met while (2) and (3’) are ((3’) to replace (3), stating that: “it is justified that ‘p’ is false”). A sentence is neither true nor false if (2) and (3) or (3’) are not met, the satisfaction of (1) is inconsequential.

(T2) is not an effective improvement of (T1). It generates equally questionable contexts and is equally inapplicable to solving problem M. In order to take advantage of (T2), one would need to have abilities that we do not possess: to determine the truth (falsehood, neither truth nor falsehood) of a sentence irrespective of our knowledge of whether conditions (1), (2), and (3) have been met.

Condition (3) may stir some confusion here. One might give in to the illusion that it offers a way out of this conundrum. It could be assumed that if one were able to establish that it is justified that “p” is true, it would be inescapable that “p” is true. Consequently, one could proceed to infer about the satisfaction of the remaining conditions. However, *this* particular inference would be conducted on the strength of (T2) or any other formula comprising the other conditions (other than (3)), while the inference of the truth of “p” would have to rely on a certain (TX) wherein (3) would be the *sole* condition. The argument is equivocal. (T2) is inexecutable: “p” is true when all three of the conditions are met. One condition will not suffice, even when the condition in question is the “justification of truth”.

(T2) also displays another curious quality (characteristic of so-called “epistemic concepts of truth”). Let us ask if “true” on the left carries the same content as “true” on the right (under condition (3)). If so, one ought to input the entire content of the right side – all the conditions – in lieu of “true” under condition (3) and proceed to continue the operation indefinitely. This is the consequence of defining an expression by means of said expression itself. If “true” on the left carries different content than “true” on the right, (T2) assumes a determination of truth different from what it aims to express. An additional “benefit” of such an assumption is the fact that any reasoning which includes (T2) as its premise must by default contain equivocation. The above becomes apparent when we remove conditions (1) and (2) from (T2).

(T3) Sentence “p” is true iff it is justified that “p” is true.

This will invariably lead to either *idem per idem* regress into infinity or a two-fold understanding of the word “true”. The situation is not improved even if the word “true” is removed on the right.

(T4) Sentence “p” is true iff it is justified that p.

By doing so, we would only exclude certain wording, while the ultimate understanding of (T4) would either be the same as (T3) or none at all. It is we who need

justification for our sentences (statements, opinions, beliefs, etc.), not the objects that the sentences describe. The context of “it is justified that Frodo is an Orc” either constitutes the epistemic wording of “it is justified that ‘Frodo is an Orc’ is true” or an empty rhetoric as neither Frodo nor the Orks or the relations between them can in any way constitute objects of justification, much like parallel lines can never be objects of commerce.

- (T5) (1) If it is justified that “p” is true, then “p” is true.  
 (2) If it is justified that “p” is false, then “p” is false.  
 (3) If it is not justified that “p” is true and it is not justified that “p” is false, then “p” is neither true nor false.  
 (4) Sentence “p” is true iff (4.1) p and (4.2) all the objects “p” refers to exist. Sentence “p” is false iff (4.1) is not met while (4.2) is met; it is neither true nor false iff (4.2) is not met, in which case (4.1) is immaterial.

Thus the effect of *idem per idem* is avoided. And although (T5) seems somewhat monstrous, it is in principle no more complex than the following:

- (K) If x crows at four, it is a rooster.  
 X is a rooster iff x is a male chicken.

If one could determine that Jones crows at four, one could infer – by virtue of (K) – that Jones is a male chicken.

It is similar with the potential uses of (T5). Whoever could determine that the truth or falsehood of particular sentences is justified, or that no such justification exists, would – through (1), (2), and (3) – be able to arrive at the solution to problem S and infer from (4) the realist and anti-realist solutions to problem M.

The justification of particular sentences is a matter that could be disputed to no apparent end – is it really justified, or not justified, or not justified enough, etc, etc. – and solving such problems would hardly be easier than solving problem M itself. There is, however, a way to partially circumvent the difficulty. It has been claimed that certain types of sentences *cannot* be justified (Dummett, 1978, 147–153). And if they cannot, they are not – consequently (T5) can be employed. The circumvention is only partial as it can be applied solely to arguments in favour of anti-realism. Demonstrating particular justifications rather than activating (T5) opens a debate on whether they are justifications at all.

(T5) allows one to create contexts no less objectionable than those under (T1) – it is after all the very same formula only complemented with conditions of justification. The addition is artificial; to the same effect we might – following analogical reasoning – add further conditions, e.g. the condition of succinctness: “if a sentence is not more than three words, it is true” (or length, what is there to stop us?).

The reproach of artificiality might be dismissed on the grounds of subjectivity. Should one understand “true” in accordance with (T5) rather than, say, (T), one

would see the latter as “artificial” (artificially stripped of content). And that would effectively end the debate – each participant holding on to their own understanding of “truth” and each with their own “semantic postulates”. But the semantic strategy was supposed to provide the solution to a metaphysical problem. Meanwhile, when it is itself opened with “postulates”, it cannot provide a solution but, at best, postulates of one. And this would spell failure for the strategy as it is not the purpose for which it has been devised.

And so, it seems that the problem to be posed and solved is the following: which understanding of our words – the word “true” above all – is correct? (What do they really mean?) Once we have the Answer to that, they true metaphysical vision will become apparent of its own accord. We should therefore strive for the Semantic Absolute, the Giver of Meanings, the Template of Understanding<sup>4</sup>. Said Absolute is a theory (true in the sense concurrent with its own understanding of “true”) describing the correct (according to its own understanding of “correct”) understanding of our utterances. To comprehend the theses of such a theory one cannot require an additional theory to determine how said theses are to be understood. The theory must be, under pain of infinite regression, directly intelligible: self-explanatory. Its owner will – as is normally the case with Absolute – attain Enlightenment. And so, while trying to arrive at metaphysics via semantics, one becomes a mystic.

For someone who understands “true” in accordance with (T) and makes no effort to force anything more into it, the determinations of (T1) – (T5) are inconsistent. All of them are consistent with objectionable contexts – analogous to those that disagreed with (T) thus strengthening its appeal. This is the price of abandoning bivalence. Moreover, (T2) results in infinite regression – which is only emphasised by (T3) and (T4) – while (T5) is but an artificial medley created *ad hoc* to tackle an entirely different issue.

None of the above – (T) included – is capable of bridging the gap between semantics and metaphysics. Semantic considerations are of exactly as much value to metaphysics as they are to physics – no more and no less so. In order to solve physical problems, one should focus on physics, not semantics. The same goes for metaphysics.

Being the true followers of Descartes, modern philosophers shrink from the very suspicion that their theses may not prove true, as there is no way – no “method” – of finding out whether they will be true when uttered. Even though they could actually be true, or indeed would be if the principle of infinite-valence were to apply as it would be enough for truth to be one of the values. Before you get married, make sure your marriage will be a happy one. This clearly impossible marital strategy is stubbornly being applied to metaphysics. And the result is what it inescapably must

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<sup>4</sup> This is what the “theory of meaning” - as Dummet calls it - will be if it is proposed. Its development is currently considered the “the most pressing task of contemporary analytical philosophy” (Dummett 1993, 13–18).



be: there is no such thing as modern metaphysics, all we are left with is museum exhibits.

And we can afford it – in the same sense that we can *not* afford to refrain from marriage, delving into physics, chemistry, biology, or mathematics. We are aware of the risk that our marriages may not turn out well, that today's scientific theories may one day be refuted. But it is a risk we accept out of necessity – for strictly practical reasons. The lack of metaphysics – at least as far as our short-sightedness allows us to see – does not threaten our wellbeing, much less our existence. We can afford to make attempts – infinitely many attempts – at finding back doors into metaphysics, doors such as semantics, which would liberate our metaphysical endeavours from the threat of error. Metaphysics will remain non-existent as long as we insist on continuing on this ridiculous path. There are no back doors to metaphysics, just as there are none leading to happy marriages, mathematics, physics, chemistry or biology.

The concept of truth doesn't favor any of the parties to the metaphysical disputes. We can use the concept and accept Metaphysical Realism or Metaphysical Anti-realism. Default Realism (Frapolli's term) is an attitude (not theory) which we can have and simultaneously use the concept of truth and accept Metaphysical Realism or Metaphysical Anti-realism (they are theories, not attitudes). Truth, attitudes and theories are independent matters. Could Default Realism be replaced with Default Anti-realism in this story? No, because there is not Default Anti-realism – no anti-realism is default.

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