

Realism and anti-realism

University of London Philosophy B.A.

Intercollegiate Lectures

Logic and Metaphysics

José Zalabardo

Autumn 2009

What is the issue?

- Whether the way things are is independent of our beliefs about how things are, our procedures for finding out how things are or our doxastic inclinations in this area.
- Realism defends independence. Anti-realism defends dependence.

Dependence is more plausible for some domains than others

- It is the default position for, say, what's funny, tasty, polite or chic.
- It is an option for, say, what's beautiful or morally good.
- It is a radical proposal, say, for the fundamental description of physical reality.

The shape of the dispute

- Anti-realists argue that dependence should be applied to domains where that's not the intuitive option.
- Realists reject this.

The main motivation for anti-realism

- A felt tension between independence and knowability.
- If reality really is independent in the relevant sense, then we can have no knowledge of it.

Protagoras

Socrates: He says, you will remember, that ‘man is the measure of all things—alike of the being of things that are and of the not-being of things that are not.’

He puts in this sort of way, doesn’t he, that any given thing ‘is to me such as it appears to me, and is to you such as it appears to you,’ you and I being men?

Sometimes, when the same wind is blowing, one of us feels chilly, the other quite cold.

Theaetetus: Certainly.

Socrates: Well, in that case are we to say that the wind in itself is cold or not cold? Or shall we agree with Protagoras that it is cold to the one who feels chilly, and not to the other? (*Theaetetus* 152 a-b)

The view

- It is a version of anti-realism. There is no such thing as the way things are over and above the way they seem to us.
- Relativism is a consequence of this reduction of reality to appearances, since appearances vary from person to person: the way things seem to you might not be the way they seem to me.

The argument

- It is based on the epistemological difficulties faced by the realist position.
- Suppose we want to say that there is an objective fact as to whether the wind is cold or not cold. How do I find out which it is? Suppose that the only way to find out is how it feels.
- But how can this be a way of finding out about an objective fact? The problem is that the same wind feels cold to some people and not cold to others. If there is an objective fact, then one party is right and the other is wrong. How do you know which party you are in? Of course you think you are right, but so do the others.
- If there was an objective fact that your beliefs try to represent, then you would be inevitably in the dark about this. You would never know whether or not things are as you believe them to be.

The skeptics' modes

- This form of reasoning was central to a philosophical sect or movement in ancient Greece whose members referred to themselves as skeptics.
- The sceptics developed a collection of argumentative techniques aimed at the suspension of judgment (modes).
- Sextus Empiricus's *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*.
- Most of the sceptics' modes take the same form as Protagoras's reasoning: two subjects in different situations form contradictory beliefs about a certain subject matter, and it's not possible to adjudicate the disagreement.

Two possible reactions to the sceptical predicament

- A. Conclude that we are ignorant about the relevant domain.
- B. Construe the domain in terms of our methods for forming beliefs about it.
 - B, Protagoras's line, can be defended as a way of avoiding A.
 - If we say that there is no objective fact about whether the wind is cold or not cold, then there is no objective standard against which our beliefs have to be assessed—nothing for us to be in the dark about.

Should we agree with Protagoras?

- How good is his argument?
 - There might be other ways of adjudicating the dispute.
 - We might have knowledge even if we can't convince our opponent.
- How plausible is his view?
 - One problem here is self-refutation (*Theaetetus* 171 a-c)

Scepticism rediscovered

- The writings of Sextus Empiricus were not widely known in the middle ages.
- They came to prominence again when the *Outlines* were published in Latin in 1562.
- They had an enormous influence on the intellectual processes that lead to the rise of modern philosophy from its medieval scholastic origins.
- All the major philosophers of the modern period were concerned to some extent with the epistemological difficulties manifested by the sceptics' modes.
- Anti-realism was once more defended as a reaction these difficulties.

Idealism

- The Greeks didn't think of appearances as a region of reality, a realm of facts.
- Modern philosophers, starting at least with Descartes, did think in these terms. Appearances were construed in terms of how things stand in a region of reality—the inner, mental world.
- Access to facts of this kind was considered unproblematic. What was regarded as a problem was how to gain knowledge of the external, physical world. The epistemological difficulties that the Greeks had identified acquired the form of the problem of the external world.
- Where Protagoras said that there was no more to how things are than how they appear to you or me, modern philosophers tempted by this move would say that all reality is mental. Anti-realism became idealism.

References

- Burnyeat, Myles. "Idealism and Greek Philosophy: What Descartes Saw and Berkeley Missed." *Philosophical Review* 91 (1982): 1-40.
- Plato. *The Collected Dialogues. Including the Letters*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987.
- Popkin, Richard H. *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979.
- Sextus Empiricus. *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*. Translated by R. G. Bury. Buffalo, New York: Prometheus Books, 1990.