

# Realism

## A commentary on Smithin's and Grunberg's Presentation

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Realism is not a theory of truth, it is not a theory of knowledge, and it is not a theory of language. If one insists on a pigeonhole, one could say that realism is an ontological theory: It says that there exists a reality totally independent of our representations.

The Construction of Social Reality, p. 155.

Realism is the view that there is a way that things are that is logically independent of all human representations.

Realism does not say how things are but only that there is a way that they are.

And 'things' in the previous two sentences **does not mean material objects or even objects**. It is, like the "it" in "It is raining," not a referring expression.

The Construction of Social Reality, p. 155.

### *The mistaken hope that truth must mirror reality*

One of the oldest urges in Western philosophy is to think that **somehow** or other **truth and reality should coincide**.

That somehow or other, if there really were such things as truth and reality, as we normally think of them, then **truth would have to provide an exact mirror of reality**.

The **nature of reality** itself would have to **provide the exact structure of true statements**. A classical statement of this position is in Wittgenstein's Tractatus, but I believe the idea is as old as Plato.

When the philosopher despairs of achieving **an exact isomorphism between the structure of reality and the structure of true representation**, the temptation is to think that somehow or other our naïve notions of truth and reality have been discredited. But they have not been discredited. What has been discredited is a certain **misconception of the relationship between truth and reality**.

There is a simple but deep reason why **truth and reality cannot coincide in this way** that many philosophers think that the naïve external realist is committed to their coincidence.

The reason is this: **All representation**, and a fortiori all truthful representation, **is always under certain aspects and not others**.

The aspectual character of all representations derives from such facts as that **representation is always made from within a certain conceptual scheme and from a certain point of view.**

So, for example, if I describe the substance in front of me as **water**, the same piece of reality is represented as if I describe it as **H<sub>2</sub>O**. But, of course, **I am representing the same stuff under a different aspect** if I represent it as water than if I represent it as H<sub>2</sub>O.

Strictly speaking, **there is an indefinitely large number of different points of view, different aspects, and different conceptual systems under which anything can be represented.**

If that is right, and it surely is, then it will be **impossible to get the coincidence between truth and reality** after which so many traditional philosophers seem to hanker.

**Every representation has an aspectual shape.  
It represents its target under certain aspects and not others.**

In short, **it is only from a point of view that we represent reality, but ontologically objective reality does not have a point of view.**

The Construction of Social Reality, p. 175-176.

**Reality just is. Reality is the “being-ness” of things. This is what ontology means.**

**Our representations, views and perspectives on reality is our epistemology of reality.**

**Reality is distinct from our conceptualizations i.e. perspectives or paradigms of it. But as we attempt to make “true” representations of one conceptualization or another, they can approach truth when performing the implicit injunctions of the representations. We learn the connection between a representation and what it reliably produces each time we follow the recipe of representation.**

## Dichotomies

Let me compare and contrast some terminology to help conceptualize the relation between truth and reality; and to compare **critical realism** versus **realism**.

I am listing a series of **eight dichotomies**.

Subject	1	Object
Knowledge thru Representation, including “nominalism”	2	Reality
Epistemology	3	Ontology
Reason	4	Empiricism – what comes to our senses from reality
Mind	5	Body
Idealism	6	Materialism
Metaphorical (ambiguous, overdetermined, underdetermined, indeterminate)	7	Literal, one-to-one, isomorphism
Understanding, meaning, truth	8	Reality

**Realism** holds that **both sides** of each dichotomy are real/can be real (the left side has to be intersubjectively true in order to be real).

**Critical realism** holds that **only those on the right side** (object, reality, ontology, empiricism, body, matter, literalism) are real.

In other words, realism includes what physically exists and includes “objects” that have no physical existence (as identified in our representations) that are abstract (e.g. “gravity”, “force equal mass times acceleration” or “cognitive unconscious”).

Realism holds that:

- Something can be real without existing.
- All things that exist are real.
- But not all things that are real, exist.
- Reality is not exhausted by existence.

Thus, we have true theories of the same physical reality that are incommensurable.

- Newtonian physics
- Thermodynamics of heat and energy
- Electromagnetism of wave forces
- Quantum theory of the very small, atomic spaces
- Relativity theory of the very large, universe-wide spaces.

These are true representations of the same reality. And as true, they are also real.

So, our “laws of nature” “theories” “arguments” “technical vocabularies” “diagrams” and other kinds of representations that have been demonstrated as true, and are our epistemology, must also be part of the ontology of reality.

But how can a concept and representation be real? It is only a non-physical product of our imagination. Nonetheless, how can the law of gravity, for example, not be real? This is the problem of how to validate our knowledge as true.

How we can know “the truth” of how reality is the way it is? This is the problem of epistemology i.e. “the problem” of knowledge. Because representations, including true representations, are always made within a conceptual aspect, perspective or paradigm, and therefore, there are an indefinite number of representations even for the same reality, we can have multiple “truths” of the same reality, how do we distinguish the true ones from the false? And for that matter, after eliminating all the false representations, what is the difference of the many possible true representations that remain?

Only when representations of reality are true, are the representations also part of reality. False representations – i.e. false beliefs – are not real.

First, to test for the truth of a representation, we have a hypothesis and we test it. Many experiments possibly by many experimenters, test over and over the hypothesis. In time, after adjusting the hypothesized representation (or “law of nature”) we begin to converge on the true representation.

Second, as we said, there may be many true representations for essentially the same reality (again, think of the many kinds of “physics” – Newtonian, Einsteinian, Quantum, Thermodynamic, Electro-magnetism, etc.)

What separates these true representations of the same physical reality is based on what kind of outcome we get by performing the action or injunction that is implicit in the experiment. Newtonian physics explains solid body mechanics and movements; Thermodynamics explains the properties of heat dissipation; Quantum theory explains what happen at the atomic level; etc.

Laws of nature – discovered by humans, disclosed to a community of investigators and now becoming true and thereby confirmed as real – are true relative to what can be achieved by performing them.

In general, truths are beliefs and beliefs are not merely static representations, but they are dispositions to behave in a certain way to achieve certain outcomes.

Realism as depicted here is what particularly Aristotle believed, even though failed to provide more cognitive details. Plato did not believe this.

Critical realism is what Bacon, Galileo, Descartes, Newton, Hobbes, Locke, Berkeley, Hume and Kant believed.

### Social facts versus “Brute” facts

Briefly before I close, let me remark on the last points that John and Ronen made about social facts.

Human made institutions can be epistemologically objective but ontologically subjective. That is, they are real, but only because the community believes them to be real.

Here we, so to speak, reverse the process of deriving true beliefs (as dispositions to behave in certain ways) that we discover in physical reality as laws of nature. With social facts and institutions, we declare things to be true and real, then induce into ourselves ways of acting.

Let me quote Searle here:

[There are] several remarkable features of human language. None is more remarkable than this: in human languages we have the capacity not only to represent reality, both how it is and how we want to make it be, but we also have the capacity to create a new reality by representing that reality as existing. [Through public-status declarations] we create private property, money, government, marriage, and a thousand other phenomena by representing them as existing. (Searle, 2010, p. 86)

We are only now learning about this after many centuries of not being aware of the power of language.

One final distinction about reality (ontology) and knowledge (epistemology) as applied to ourselves as individuals.

As we learn new knowledge (new epistemology), we individually alter our own subjective ontology. New perspectives on reality, changes who we are in “identity”. This is the fall out of an ontological understanding of reality, as opposed to an epistemological approach. Piaget was a developmental cognitive psychologist who has described the learning process in this way. But the notion is a core principle of ontological realism and philosophy of such thinkers as CS Peirce, Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau Ponty.

I will speak more about this in my presentation next week, philosophy versus psychology. Embodied Realism and the Economy of Being.

## Conclusion

I agree generally with what John and Ronen said about realism versus critical realism.

But there are four points in their talk with which I do not concur.

- The notion of a philosophical order is a transcendental, critical realist, idealistic argument. The process of “choosing” a metaphysical position is recursive and can start with any of the four topic areas (metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, politics). It is not a linear process from metaphysics first to politics last, as described. The logic that they state is not necessarily wrong, but it does not help to use one kind of metaphysical position to argue against itself.
- The axiomatic approach to realism. Not appropriate. Axiomatic systems are systematic representations of reality and therefore exist within one paradigm or another (again, think of the different theories of physics and their associated axioms which are incommensurable). Put another way, there will never be an all-inclusive theory of everything.
- All three kinds of inference – induction, deduction and abduction (aka making hypotheses) have important roles to play in the inquiry for truth. Not only abduction.

To me, the above three notions that I believe are go to a deeper point: Just because we become aware of how our culture, language and legacy philosophies of reality condition our thinking, does not automatically free us from their influence on our thinking.