

PHIL 4603: Metaphysics
Prof. Funkhouser
Alston, “Yes, Virginia, There is a Real World”

I.

- ‘Realism’, in part, is the thesis that the world is (largely) mind-independent. A couple interesting consequences immediately follow from this. First, Alston claims that realist *truth* is the primary goal of thought and discourse. Second, it is possible for there to be a mismatch between our best theory of the world (as evaluated by “internal” criteria) and reality. This second point, in particular, contrasts with Putnam.

- Various 19th Century Idealists and Pragmatists denied Alston’s conception of Realism.

These philosophers would make the truth of the statement that snow is white to consist in something other than snow’s *being* white. (622)

II.

- Alston considers various arguments that have been offered in favor of anti-realism:

A. *Quinean indeterminacy of translation and inscrutability of reference*: But Alston responds that these theses, if correct, instead show that our utterances do not express something with a determinate content. The realist asserts that *if* something has a determinate content, then it is either true or false according to how the world is in itself. The anti-realist denies this. So, these Quinean theses can only argue against a presupposition that is common to both realists and anti-realists.

B. *The argument from “fixed intuitive certainties”*: This epistemically-motivated argument, associated with Rorty, is presented on the right hand column, p. 623. Alston replies:

... this first stage of the argument is one form of the old contention that “we can’t get outside our thought and experience to compare it with reality.” Therefore we had better renounce

any ambition to make our thought conform to “reality” and concentrate instead on tidying up its internal structure. But from a realist point of view this picture of being trapped inside our own thought, unable to get a glimpse of what it is like outside, is radically misleading — even if we do lack fixed intuitive certainties. For whenever we have knowledge, that is *ipso facto* a case of getting a glimpse of the reality “outside.” However we get this knowledge, it wouldn’t be knowledge unless the belief in question were conformed to its referent(s). It is unfortunate picture-thinking to suppose that only some specially direct or intuitive knowledge constitutes finding out what something is really like. (624)

Also, this argument relies on verificationism, which Alston finds disreputable.

C. *Pluralistic language-game approaches*: These arguments rely on a strong form of verificationism, which Alston challenges.

Even if we can’t integrate agency and physical causation in a single “space”, they may, for all that, be what they are apart from our attempts to conceptualize them. The argument suffers from a grievous lack of ontological imagination. (625)

D. *Extreme relativism — incompatible language games*: This is another epistemological argument for anti-realism, which again relies on a form of verificationism.

E. *Justification is equivalent to truth*: Verificationism again.

III.

- The anti-realist’s best hope, Alston suggests, is to define ‘truth’ in terms of justification (or else eliminate the concept of truth altogether).

A common thread in the arguments we have been considering is the verificationist objection to the idea that there is something involved in a statement’s *being* true over and above the grounds we can have for regarding it as true. (626)

- But Alston thinks that the realist conception of truth is assumed in our interpretation of ordinary statements:

If what I did in a certain utterance was to refer to snow and say of it that it is white, what alternative is there to holding that my statement is true *iff* snow is white? (627)

Q: But does the anti-realist really deny this?

- Why not embrace verificationism?

For each statement, S, we will choose conditions the satisfaction of which will guarantee that the statement has the desired epistemic status; but we will construe S not as the statement that S has that status, but rather as the affirmation of those conditions. (629)

Alston responds:

But in giving it this new content, are we not thereby committed to realistic truth-conditions for *that* content as firmly as we were with the earlier one? (629)

- Alston's anti-realist holds:

We can only pick out a referent, identify a property predicated, and adjudge truth by the standards internal to that language-game. There is no way in which we can raise the question, absolutely, as to what is referred to in that statement, or as to the conditions under which it is true. (630)

- Alston provides his objections to this relativized notion of truth on the right hand column, p. 630.

- The anti-realist's task:

If the non-realist is to make her position stick, she will have to find some adequate non-referential account of statemental discourse. (631)