

The Metaphysical Conception of Realism*

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Themes from the Work of Allan Gibbard,

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1 Preliminaries

Whether we should be “realists” about a particular subject-matter is one of the central questions of philosophy: the issue arises in debates about morality, numbers, material objects, and consciousness, just to name a few. There is, however, a prior question, which is the question of what the realist view *is*. Perhaps one of the most serious challenges to any attempt at an answer to this question comes from Allan Gibbard’s development of expressivism about normativity in Gibbard (2003), and his subsequent extension of the view to expressivism about meaning in Gibbard (2013). Gibbard rigorously develops a “quasi-realist” view of these domains, which captures many of the the claims traditionally associated with realism while appealing only to the distinctive explanatory resources of expressivism. The expressivist, Gibbard shows, can allow that there are normative truths, facts, beliefs, and properties (among other things), but explains this with a purely naturalistic story about what state of mind is involved in accepting such claims.¹

As he notes at the outset in Gibbard (2003), this raises questions for traditional taxonomies in meta-ethics. The realist view about normativity is supposed to be a view about its metaphysical status, but the expressivist seems to agree with all of the metaphysical claims the realist might make. As Gibbard says at the outset in Gibbard (2003), “In many ways, I’ll end up sounding like a non-naturalist, and in some ways, like certain kinds of naturalists. Am I, then, really a descriptivist in disguise, a moral realist?”² He then asks, “How does my position fall short of full ethical realism?”³ but declines to give a definitive answer. Instead, he goes on to

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¹See also Blackburn (1993) on quasi-realism, and Dreier (2004) for discussion.

²Gibbard (2003: 18)

³Gibbard (2003: 19)

note how his expressivist view of normative judgment merely makes additional claims over what the realist claims—for instance, that normative concepts are planning concepts—but goes out of his way to avoid asserting that this amounts to a *denial* for realism. Instead, Gibbard simply points out that this “would contrast with a standard realist’s mode of explanation”.⁴

In this paper I will suggest an answer to Gibbard’s question. My primary aim is to characterize realism in a way which does not leave it susceptible to quasi-realist accommodation. The strategy is to argue that there is a genuine metaphysical component of realism, beyond what the quasi-realist accepts. In short, my thesis is that the properties which play the realist’s explanatory role are, to some extent, *fundamental* in the metaphysician’s sense. This notion of fundamentality is, I claim, the central component of realism.

To argue for this thesis, I will not start with the hard case, namely the contrast between realism and Gibbardian quasi-realism. Instead, I will argue for the thesis on the basis of straightforward examples. For instance, most will not hesitate to label Berkeley’s idealism an irrealist view of material objects, to be contrasted with our ordinary, pre-theoretic realist view. Or again, the realist about the unobservable posits of our scientific theories is easily distinguished from the irrealist Instrumentalist. And in ethics, most will not hesitate to label Subjectivists as irrealists, distinguishing them from the realist Moorean non-naturalist.⁵ It is examples like these, I argue, which suggest that a substantial metaphysical notion such as fundamentality is central to realism.

If this argument is successful, we will have a metaphysical characterization of what realism amounts to. Showing that Gibbard, or other expressivists, cannot adopt the quasi-realist program to accommodate this claim is a further task. I will not attempt it here, but will gesture at how the issue should be viewed in the conclusion.⁶

Before proceeding, a few caveats are in order.

First, we need to be careful to distinguish the present project from that of performing conceptual analysis on a term of art. ‘Realism’ in the relevant sense belongs almost exclusively to the lexicon of philosophers, and bears no straightforward connection to our pre-theoretic vocabulary. All we have to guide our use of the term is our own dispositions and intuitions, which we learned as we became fluent with a term by imitating the usage the term of art by others in the philosophical community. An account of realism which simply describes

⁴Gibbard (2003: 187)

⁵To fix ideas, I understand these versions of irrealism in roughly the following way. The idealist, following Berkeley (1710), holds that material objects are nothing more than collections of ideas. Instrumentalists such as Duhem (1954) hold that scientific statements are shorthand for statements about the actual or counterfactual properties of instruments of measurement. A Subjectivist, as I will use the term, holds that ethical statements report on some agent’s attitudes of approval and disapproval. One example is the Emotivist view in Stevenson (1937), but the more canonical version of Subjectivism I will have in mind throughout hold roughly that ‘it is wrong for S to Φ ’ is true just in case S disapproves of Φ -ing.

⁶For a more detailed treatment, see Dunaway (2016).

community-wide usage is nothing more than a redescription of the linguistic habits of a relatively small community. That might be of some sociological interest, but is of no direct philosophical significance.

The project here is importantly different in a number of respects. There is a possibility of failure—there might not *be* a theoretically interesting natural kind that plausibly counts as the referent of ‘realism’.⁷ We aren’t prejudging the question of whether we will be successful in finding an analysis by embarking on the investigation. An attempt at an analysis in terms of a joint-cutting natural kind, moreover, allows for some divergence from our intuitive judgments. If, in our final analysis, there is a highly natural kind that provides a close-but-not-perfect fit with our intuitive use of ‘realism’, we might well say that the views properly called “realist” differ from those we initially applied the term to.

The second caveat is that, in what follows, I will be assuming that a view is realist (or not) primarily in virtue of its *metaphysical* consequences. This is a natural idea—Berkeley’s idealism seems irrealist precisely because of its consequences about the nature of material objects since they are, according to Berkeley, merely collections of ideas. Similarly for realism about scientific unobservables: part of what makes the realist view objectionable to some is that it takes a stance on the metaphysics of unobservables which makes them unknowable. Moorean non-naturalism about ethics is often claimed to be metaphysically extravagant. So it is quite natural to take one interesting project to be one of asking which metaphysical consequences of a view are necessary and sufficient for realism.⁸

Such an understanding of realism is not the only one available. Many claim to find additional, non-metaphysical aspects to realism. Some are *epistemic*: Boyd (1988: 181-2) takes realism to imply that our cognitive faculties afford us a means of “obtaining and improving” knowledge in the relevant domain. Dummett (1982: 55), on the other hand, claims to find in realism a distinctive commitment to the truth of claims “independently of whether we know, or are even able to discover”

⁷Crispin Wright (1987: 3-4) indicates sympathy with this pessimistic conclusion: “The fact is that realism, as implicitly characterized by the opinions of writers, in whatever area of philosophy, who regard themselves as realists, is a syndrome, a loose weave of separable presuppositions and attitudes.”

⁸Lewis (1984) echoes this idea when he objects to Putnam’s own characterization of the model-theoretic argument in Putnam (1981: Ch. 2) as suggesting the denial of the core thesis of realism. Lewis explicitly says this is because it leaves the metaphysics of traditional realism unscathed:

[E]ven if the model-theoretic argument worked, it would not blow away the whole of the realist’s picture of the world and its relation to theory [...] There would still be a world, and it would not be a figment of our imagination. It would still have many parts, and these parts would fall into classes and relations [...] There would still be interpretations, assignments of reference, intended and otherwise. (Lewis (1984: 231))

See also Miller (2003). For a dissenter from this idea, see Dummett (1977: 383), and other citations in Miller (2003: 196).

their truth.⁹ Other characterizations of realism involve *semantic* properties like truth, literalness, etc.¹⁰

I will proceed in what follows by ignoring these non-metaphysical dimensions to realism. The most straightforward motivation for this is methodological—insofar as it is clear there is some metaphysical component to realism, a characterization that posits additional epistemic or semantic dimensions to realism will thereby be less natural and more gerrymandered. A search for the natural kind underlying talk of ‘realism’ then does best by beginning with a purely metaphysical characterization; other dimensions should be added only if a purely metaphysical conception of realism is unavailable.

The final caveat is that there may well be specific domains in which use of ‘realism’ has spun off from its general philosophical use, and in these contexts has a specialized meaning. So we should not be that surprised if, for instance, ‘legal realism’ turns out to denote a kind that has little to do with the general philosophical sense of ‘realism’. Of course this is not an argument that it is impossible to assimilate the subject of these specialized uses to a core property of realism that applies across domains. The present point is just that we should be prepared to admit the existence of such specialized uses, and that this would not amount conceding defeat in the project of giving a purely metaphysical characterization of realism.¹¹

The aim of the present paper, then, is to find a metaphysical characterization of the natural kind picked out by our general use of ‘realism’ (if any such kind exists). §2 outlines three popular accounts of realism in the literature: these are the *Existence View*, the *Mind-Independence View*, and the *Fundamentality View*. §3 argues that there are structural features of realism that cannot be accommodated by these views. These objections together are, I think, decisive against the Existence and Mind-Independence views. But the situation with respect to the Fundamentality View is different: these objections only cause trouble for views which take give an account of realism in terms of *absolute* fundamentality, which is the standard approach in the literature. There is, however, another approach

⁹Strictly speaking, Boyd’s and Dummett’s claims are consistent: we might have good cognitive resources for arriving at knowledge of a most claims in a domain, while *some* of its claims are nonetheless in principle unknowable. Nevertheless, a tempting diagnosis of these divergent emphases is that Boyd and Dummett are latching onto merely accidental features of different realist views.

¹⁰See Miller (2003) for a discussion of the relationship between semantic and metaphysical characterizations of realism.

¹¹Wright points to the same phenomenon, but is not very optimistic about the prospect for separating specialized uses of ‘realism’ from its common core. He says:

Of course, if there ever was a consensus of understanding about “realism”, as a philosophical term of art, it has undoubtedly been fragmented by the pressures exerted by the various debates—so much so that a philosopher who asserts that she is a realist about theoretical science, for example, or ethics, has probably for most philosophical audiences, accomplished little more than to clear her throat. (Wright (1992: 1))

in the neighborhood, which instead characterizes realism in terms of *degrees* of fundamentality. §4 sketches how an account along these lines yields a promising account of the structural features of realism outlined below. I conclude by showing how the Existence and Mind-Independence accounts, though inadequate, are in many cases good heuristics for settling questions of realism. The quasi-realist explanatory strategy appears to preclude the kind of explanatory role for normative properties which would make them highly fundamental.

2 Three conceptions of realism

There are three main metaphysical conceptions of realism: Existence, Mind-Independence, and Fundamentality views. In this section I introduce and elaborate on each.

2.1 Existence views

Existence views hold that a theory is realist just in case it entails that entities of an appropriate kind exist. What *kind* of entity is required is variable: some versions hold that realist theories entail that *properties* of the relevant kind exist; other versions hold the same for the relevant kind of *facts*. Existence views are prominent in the literature on ethical realism.¹²

One instance is found in J. L. Mackie (1977), where he intends his metaethical view, which he calls “moral skepticism”, to be the denial of ethical realism. He characterizes this view in the following way:

[W]hat I have called moral skepticism is a negative doctrine, not a positive one: it says what there isn't, not what there is. It says that there do not exist entities or relations of a certain kind, objective values or requirements, which many people have believed to exist.¹³

Mackie's “negative thesis” is a denial of an existence claim—namely, the claim that certain “entities or relations” exist, and is supposedly in conflict with standard realist conceptions of ethics on this count. This presupposes that the realist view entails the existence of certain things—“values,” as Mackie says.

Another case is found in Shafer-Landau (2003), which offers a broad taxonomy of metaethical positions. The first position is the eliminativist view, which “is represented by error theorists and non-cognitivists. Such philosophers do not

¹²See also one disjunct of the definitions in Cameron (2008), Devitt (1991), and Miller (2003). Pettit (1991) is more coy: “Realism in any area of thought is the doctrine certain that entities allegedly associated with that area are indeed real.” (Pettit (1991: 588)) He is explicit that *one* way of rejecting this thesis is to deny existence to the relevant entities (pp. 589-90). But he subsequently discusses other ways to deny realism, which suggests that he would not consider a bare existence claim to be adequate to characterize realism.

¹³Mackie (1977: 17)

believe that there are any moral properties, and believe that all appearances to the contrary are either founded on error, or can be otherwise explained away.” (p. 66) The other options are reductionism, which holds that “moral properties, if they are to exist, must be (in the sense of be identical to) one of these kinds of natural property” (pp. 66-7), and non-naturalism, which rejects “the identity of moral and descriptive properties.” (p. 72)

On a standard classification, only the last two views—the reductionist and non-naturalist views—are the views that are consistent with realism. The eliminativist view, represented by error theorists and noncognitivists, is not. What separates these realist views from others in Shafer-Landau’s taxonomy is that they entail the existence of moral properties. This strongly suggests that Shafer-Landau takes the existence of these properties to be the key ingredient for realist views about ethics.¹⁴

These existence-based conceptions of realism about ethics can be thought of as generalizations on a standard characterization of realism about unobservables in scientific theories. In van Fraassen (1980), the characteristic claim of realism is that *there are* electrons and other unobservables posited by scientific theories. This makes sense in the context of realism about unobservables: the primary motivation of the irrealist is to avoid what she believes to be an unwarranted ontological commitment to an unobservable world of electrons, and the way to avoid this commitment is to decline to believe that they exist.¹⁵ Existence views of realism in other areas are then natural extensions of this idea. In some cases there are no prosaic entities that are the subject-matter of a theoretical enterprise. In these cases, the Existence View makes realism a question of whether the relevant

¹⁴Elsewhere, he says that what is definitive of realist views is that they entail the existence of moral *facts* (see for instance Shafer-Landau (2003: 15)). Shafer-Landau may either be undecided between one of two Existence views, or may think that they amount to the same thing. The latter view would make sense if one thought that facts are structured set-theoretic entities with properties (among other things) for constituents. Then, the failure of ethical properties to exist would by itself give rise to a lack of existence in ethical facts. I won’t work with these distinctions in the main text, since it will not matter for much of what I say whether the Existence View is primarily concerned with properties, facts, or similar entities.

¹⁵In the case of van Fraassen’s irrealist alternative, the irrealist doesn’t take on the contrary commitment by denying that there are electrons. Rather, she withholds belief and (in van Fraassen’s terms) merely *accepts*, rather than *believes*, scientific theories for the purposes of carrying out scientific investigation. I take this to be an instance of the Existence View of realism, even though van Fraassen nonetheless recommends *acceptance* of an existence claim. This is because the difference between acceptance and belief concerns whether bearing the relevant attitude to the claim that electrons exist brings along an ontological commitment to the existence of electrons. van Fraassen recommends mere acceptance over belief precisely because it does not bring about this kind of commitment.

properties exist.¹⁶

2.2 *Mind-Independence views*

Another common way to characterize realism about a domain is to claim that all realist views hold the domain to be *independent* of the mental. Examples of mind-dependence (and accompanying irrealism) are familiar from the history of philosophy: think of Berkeley's claim that ordinary objects are collections of ideas, or a version of the Humean view of causation on which it consists in nothing more than constant conjunction plus expectation on the part of observers.¹⁷ This thought seems especially apt when considering irrealism the ethical domain, as many paradigmatic instances of irrealist ethical theories enlist mental states of approval, disapproval, and the like, to play important explanatory roles.

One way to articulate this approach is found in Sharon Street (2006). She says:

The defining claim of realism about value, as I will be understanding it, is that there are at least some evaluative facts or truths that hold independently of all our evaluative attitudes.¹⁸

For Street, then, metaethical theories are realist just in case they entail that ethical facts are independent of certain attitudes. (Admittedly, Street suggests her characterization should be taken as "stipulative". But it wouldn't be a natural stipulation if there weren't some plausibility to the claim that realism—in a non-stipulative sense—requires Mind-Independence. It is this latter claim, not any stipulated definition, that will be the focus of the following discussion.) Similarly, Brink (1984: 111) characterizes moral realism as a view which entails that the moral truths are independent from "those beliefs which are our evidence" for them.¹⁹

A Mind-Independence View can be extended to other domains in various

¹⁶We might worry about this motivation: not all metaphysical commitments are *ontological* commitments in the sense that they are commitments concerning which objects or entities exist. Theories can contain unwanted metaphysical commitments by including an unnecessarily complex primitive *ideology* as well—see Sider (2012: Ch.6). Much of Lewis (1986), for instance, is motivated by the desire to eliminate any primitive modal ideology in the form of terms like 'possible', and Lewis is willing to pay a high ontological cost to do it. One might also think of Moorean non-naturalism as sacrificing ideological simplicity, by retaining an unanalyzed normative notion, in order to achieve greater explanatory power. The Existence View, on the other hand, locates the distinctive metaphysical commitments of the non-naturalist in her ontological (and not ideological) commitments.

¹⁷See Goodman (1955: 59-65) for an interpretation along these lines.

¹⁸Street (2006: 110)

¹⁹For more discussion of Mind-Independence and realism, see in other contexts Cameron (2008), Devitt (1991), Jenkins (2005), Pettit (1991), Putnam (1981), and Wright (1992).

ways.²⁰ The basic idea is that just as facts about value are mind-dependent if they depend on our evaluative attitudes, so likewise other domains are mind-dependent if they depend on attitudes in some way.

2.3 *Fundamentality-based views*

A final metaphysical approach to realism proceeds in terms of the notion of *metaphysical fundamentality*. There is a family of related notions in the literature; these include “Reality” in Fine (2001); “Structure” Sider (2012), “perfect naturalness” in Lewis (1983). Ralph Wedgwood (2007) articulates the relationship between this idea and realism in the following passage:

What exactly is realism? Following Kit Fine (2001) I shall suppose that a realist about the normative is a theorist who says that there are normative facts or truths—such as the fact that certain things ought to be the case, or that it is not the case that certain things ought to be the case—and that at least some of these normative facts are part of reality itself.

The notion of *reality* invoked here is a notion that has its home within a certain sort of metaphysical project—namely, the project of giving a metaphysical account or explanation of everything that is the case in terms of what is real [...] [I]f certain normative facts are real, then [...] these normative facts, properties or relations may also form part of the fundamental account or explanation of certain things that are the case.²¹

Wedgwood—and his predecessor Fine—primarily use the term ‘Reality’ to signify the metaphysically privileged layer at which gives “a metaphysical account or explanation of everything that is the case”. For terminological uniformity, I will instead use the term ‘fundamental’. In the sense in which I intend it, then, it is a blanket term for the family of notions employed by Fine, Sider, and Lewis. It stands for a metaphysically privileged or basic category that stands in a privileged, explanatory relationship to other non-basic facts.

This implies a distinction between “everything that is the case” and what is fundamental in the relevant sense. In most cases something that is the case will *not* be fundamentally the case. Hence there is a straightforward difference between a conception of realism that appeals to fundamentality and the Existence View, since simply existing does not guarantee fundamentality.

²⁰The “various ways” of spelling this out can be obtained by either (i) specifying different *kinds* of mental states for the purportedly dependent domain (beliefs, desires, etc.); (ii) specifying *whose* mental states are at issue (the speaker’s, the ascriber’s, etc.), or (iii) specifying *how* the dependence relation is to be construed (*viz.*, the difference between modal and essential dependence in Jenkins (2005)). Of course these options aren’t mutually exclusive, and one might combine (say) an ascriber-dependence view with the claim that the dependence is mere modal independence.

²¹Wedgwood (2007: 1-2)

Realism about the ethical, as Wedgwood describes it, is the view that the most fundamental explanation of everything that is the case makes reference, in part, to ethical facts or properties. The ethical features in basic metaphysical explanations of the relevant kind. This conception of realism generalizes easily to other domains: realism in general is the view that the domain in question is fundamental. This is the Fundamentality View.²²

3 Realism and reduction

§2 outlined three prominent metaphysical approaches to realism. In this section I will present some arguments against each view. In keeping with the methodology set out at the beginning of this paper, I will not simply cite intuitive counter-examples to each view. Rather, I will outline plausible and general structural features which are characteristic of realism. Any account that does capture all of these features will have a good claim to not achieving the right results in particular cases by objectionable gerrymandering. Each of these structural features, however, can be motivated and illustrated by reference to particular examples. In particular, each of these examples is a case of a reduction which intuitively is (or is not) consistent with realism about the reduced domain. For example we can compare the structural features with intuitive judgments about whether the Russellian reduction of physical objects to logical constructions of sense-data,²³ the Lewisian reduction of modality to quantification over maximally complete chunks of concrete spacetime,²⁴ and the Logician's reduction of mathematics to logic.²⁵ The concern here will not be with whether reductions like these are correct; the purpose of these alleged reductions—correct or not—is to illustrate some structural features of realism.

3.1 Structural features

The structural features in question are the following:

TRUTH INDEPENDENCE Irrealism about a domain D is compatible with the existence of substantive truths about D .

DOMAIN NEUTRALITY For any domain D , 'realism' and 'irrealism' can apply non-trivially and univocally to D .

²²Fine does not appear to accept the position suggested by the Wedgwood quote above. Fine's view on Fine (2001: 28) allows that some non-fundamental truths may also be Real, although there is a presumption in favor of their not being Real. Fine also allows that there may be some basic truths that are not Real because they are "non-factual", though he is explicit that these non-factual truths are also no fundamental. I will work with the simpler version of the Fundamentality View from Wedgwood.

²³Russell (1912)

²⁴Lewis (1986)

²⁵Whitehead and Russell (1910)

REDUCTION COMPATIBILITY For some domains D , some reductive views are irrealist about D while other reductive views about D are realist.²⁶

TRUTH INDEPENDENCE says that irrealism is compatible with the existence of substantive truths. Just because it is *true* that Jane is in pain, realism about mental states doesn't follow. We can adopt an irrealist understanding of Jane's pain. DOMAIN NEUTRALITY requires that there is a sense of 'realism' which applies across domains: one can be realist (or not) about physical objects, mental states, and God. According to DOMAIN NEUTRALITY there is something each of these positions has in common. (This is not to say that in addition to this univocal sense of the term, there are other distinct and domain-specific senses as well.) Finally REDUCTION COMPATIBILITY says that a reduction of a domain does not thereby imply irrealism. Given a proposed reduction, it is a further question whether the denial of realism follows.

The three prominent characterizations of realism outlined above have difficulty accounting for all of these structural features.

3.2 *Existence is futile*

Begin with the distinction between reductions that have been labelled "vindicating" versus those that are "eliminative". At a first pass, the difference is something along the following lines. Vindicating reductions give an informative characterization of the reduced property or domain—they tell us something about the nature of the reduced thing. Other reductions—the eliminating reductions—show us that what we thought we were talking about isn't really there. A scientific reduction of water to H_2O is a vindicating reduction; someone who claimed to have a "reduction" of God to a naturally occurring phenomenon would hold a view on which God does not exist. This would be an eliminating reduction of the theological. I return to this example in the concluding section.

Railton (1989: 161) discusses another alleged instance of this contrast:

The successful reduction of H_2O reinforces, rather than impugns, our sense that there really is water. By contrast, the reduction of "polywater"—a peculiar form of water thought to have been observed in scientific laboratories in the late 1960's—to ordinary water-containing-some-impurities-from-improperly-washed-glassware contributed to the conclusion that there really is no such substance as polywater. Whether a reduction is vindicative or eliminative will depend on the specific character of what is being reduced and what the reduction basis looks like.

This is an intuitive difference—it really does seem like, upon learning of the relevant reductions, beliefs about polywater are discovered to be mistaken, while

²⁶These structural features are also discussed in Dunaway (2017).

no widespread error is revealed for beliefs about water. The Existence View would hold that, on discovering these facts about polywater, we would be irrealists about polywater because we accept an eliminating reduction of polywater. Irrealism about polywater can be read off from ordinary claims about whether polywater exists. Thus the Existence View denies TRUTH INDEPENDENCE.

But *prima facie* this difference is superficial at best. It would be quite natural to go on, after learning of the relevant discoveries, to speak as if polywater *does* exist, but only fails to be the natural kind we thought it to be. We could say things like the following:

P1 There is polywater in this glass, since it contains water-plus-impurities-from-improperly-washed-glassware;

P2 Polywater is a very unnatural, gerrymandered chemical kind, and does not have any place in good chemical explanations.²⁷

This, in broad outline, is a problem for the Existence View. For we are clearly not realists about polywater, even if we accept **P1** and **P2**. Their intelligibility is a consequence of the TRUTH INDEPENDENCE feature outlined above. But the Existence View is incompatible with it.

It is worth digging deeper into whether proponents of the Existence View can mount a defence. The terms ‘water’ and ‘polywater’, like many terms with a life in a theoretical discipline, are associated with a “theoretical role” that determines as referent the property that best satisfies a set of theoretical constraints. These constraints include the observed properties of the relevant substance (that it is wet, clear, drinkable, etc.), the role it plays in explanations (that salt dissolves in it), among other things. While these theoretical constraints tolerate *some* divergence in a candidate referent, if the best candidate strays too far from the intended role, the term fails to refer.²⁸

This observation gives us an existence-based explanation of the difference between the water and polywater reductions. The water reduction supplies a property (H₂O) that sufficiently approximates the theoretical role associated with ‘water’; the polywater reduction supplies a property (water-plus-impurities) that, we might claim, does even approximate the theoretical role associated with ‘polywater’. TRUTH INDEPENDENCE is still false on this revised version of the Existence View—irrealism about polywater can be read off from the falsity of statements associated with the theoretical role for ‘polywater’.

Some care is needed in making the case that water- and polywater-reductions do differ in the truth of associated role-statements. Railton notes that even the water reduction doesn’t provide a *perfect* satisfier for the relevant theoretical role— “[e]ven the reduction of water to H₂O was in part revisionist . . . of both common-

²⁷I do not claim that we *do* speak this way, only that we easily could make these claims using our word ‘polywater’.

²⁸See Lewis (1970).

sense notions and previous chemistry"²⁹—the difference is, the polywater reduction is much *more* revisionary.³⁰ There must be some leeway for a theoretical term to have its role imperfectly satisfied, and still refer, but not too much leeway—if the theoretical role is almost entirely unsatisfied, then we will have to say that it does not refer. Wherever this cut-off point lies, it will spell trouble for the Existence View. If the theoretical role associated with ‘polywater’ goes unsatisfied, ‘polywater’ does not refer, and hence it isn’t true that it is in a glass containing water-plus-impurities. **P1** and **P2** are, despite surface appearances, incoherent. If, on the other hand, we concede that the polywater-role is satisfied enough, to secure a referent for ‘polywater’, then the Existence View will have to concede that polywater is real.³¹

The point can also be extended to other domains. Mackie, for instance, is naturally interpreted as claiming that there are no properties that come close to satisfying the theoretical role for ‘wrong’. This is because the theoretical role for ‘wrong’ requires that its satisfier be objectively prescriptive, and nothing (according to Mackie) comes close to satisfying that role. But the consequences of this claim for the reality of ethics should be kept separate from questions of whether ethics exists *at all*. Mackie goes to an extreme in committing to an irrealist view of ethics by going in for moral skepticism. In short, realism should be *independent* of truth, in the sense that there are some truths which are about the real, but not all truths are about the real.

There are additional examples which illustrate this structural problem for the Existence View. A Vitalist view of living organisms (such as can be found in Bichat (1801: §1)) is substantially revisionary in view of the theoretical role we at present associate with ‘life’. Quite plausibly, the role actually associated with ‘life’ is one that includes the claim that life is explained by biological and chemical processes. Hence the life-role requires that its satisfier not be an unexplained, primitive life force, as the Vitalist view holds. Thus it fails to qualify as realist according to REALISM-TRUTH CONNECTION, since some core role-statements associated with ‘life’ are false on this view. But the view *is* realist; its vices stem in part from the fact that it is unnecessarily realist about life, giving it a basic explanatory role when none is needed.

Similarly, a Thomistic view about value identifies goodness with metaphys-

²⁹Railton (1989: 161)

³⁰Here is a sketch of a story about why the reduction is too revisionary. Presumably those who originally introduced the term thought they discovered a new, interesting form of water with a molecular basis similar to that of water. This supplies a theoretical role for ‘polywater’, one which places requirements on the molecular structure of its referent. (Compare, for instance, the difference between the gerrymandered molecular basis for polywater, and $^2\text{H}_2\text{O}$, or “heavy water”. This has a molecular basis similar to that of water; scientists presumably thought they were discovering a similar molecular variant of water when they coined ‘polywater’.) But upon discovering that the “substance” in question was really just water-plus-impurities, we learn that the theoretical role isn’t even close to being satisfied; a substance that is water-plus-impurities does not have molecular basis similar to that of water.

³¹Thanks to David Manley for suggesting this reading of the Existence View.

ically foundational facts about teleology (in this case, with facts about the ends necessarily sought by members of a kind).³² It is another highly realist but—judged by our modern non-teleological picture of the cosmos—is a substantially revisionary account. In short, whenever the revision goes in the direction of giving a too much of a fundamental explanatory role to the reduced property, we will have a case of a revisionary view which is nonetheless realist. Such views suggest that an understanding of realism tied to substantial satisfaction of the associated role-statements is bound to fail.³³

To sum up: the question of whether realism about a domain holds cannot be answered simply by looking at ordinary claims about the existence of the domain (or from the truth of the associated role-statements). Given Truth Independence, the project of finding general connections between ordinary claims and realism fails; it is possible to adopt an irrealist construal domains that exist (e.g., polywater), and realist views might entail radically false claims about a domain (e.g., life).

3.3 *Too much Mind-Independence*

On the Mind-Independence View, only views that entail that a domain is mind-independent are realist. This view violates the DOMAIN NEUTRALITY constraint. The violation is most obvious when we consider the reductive Behaviorist view of mental states, which is a paradigmatically irrealist view of the mental. Mental states, according to the Behaviorist (as I will understand the view) are just disjunctions of behaviors or dispositions to behave. The mental state *pain* on this view reduces to either clutching one's arm, or screaming, or . . . (the disjunction of behaviors will need to go on for quite some time in order for the Behaviorist view to be truth-conditionally adequate). Similarly for other mental states. Again, the resulting view is intuitively an irrealist one.

But it also satisfies the conditions imposed by any reasonable construal of Mind-Independence. That Jane is exhibiting the behavior of clutching her arm doesn't depend on the mental—arm-clutching is just a movement of the body.

³²Aquinas (1920: 1a 2e Q. 1 A. 8).

³³Quine (1960: 265) appears to raise a different worry when he suggests that the distinction between vindicating and eliminating reductions itself fails to be substantive:

For a further parallel consider the molecular theory. Does it repudiate our familiar solids and declare for swarms of molecules in their stead, or does it keep the solids and explain them as subvisibly swarming with molecules? [...] The option, again, is unreal.

We might explicate Quine's thought as follows: it is indeterminate whether we associate with 'solid' a theoretical role that is adequately satisfied by subvisible swarms of molecules. What exists isn't in question: it is swarms of molecules. But whether this is sufficient for the truth of the sentence 'solids exist' is just a matter of whether we choose to associate a more or less strict theoretical role with 'solid'. The truth (or falsity) of this sentence doesn't reflect a deep metaphysical fact; just a choice about our language.

On this way of explicating Quine, his comments suggest that talk of existence isn't sufficiently metaphysically robust to capture the metaphysical dimension to realism.

And on the Behaviorist view, Jane's pain just is an occurrence of the behavior of arm-clutching. So on the Behaviorist view, Jane's pain is an occurrence that is as objective and mind-independent as any, since the fact that Jane is moving her body in a particular way is objective and mind-independent. The Mind-Independence View makes Behaviorism a realist view about the mental. The Mind-Independence View is highly questionable on this score.³⁴

This is a rejection of DOMAIN NEUTRALITY, since Behaviorism must be treated differently from other irrealism about other domains, on the Mind-Independence View. Failures of DOMAIN NEUTRALITY will arise for other broadly mental phenomena.³⁵

Some authors such as Miller (2010: §1) claim that the Mind-Independence conception of realism cannot fail to account for realism about psychological phenomena precisely *because* the dependence is trivial. The Mind-Independence View, these authors claim, should be understood as holding that what makes theories irrealist is that they entail that their domain to be (i) mind-dependent, but (ii) not *trivially* mind-dependent. But adding a non-triviality constraint for irrealism doesn't, in the first instance, make Behaviorism out to be irrealist: the view is a non-trivial claim that mental states depend on non-mental phenomena. Second, it threatens to make 'realism' apply with different senses to different domains. A standard realist view of ethics holds that ethical facts obtain independent of what we think about them, and so, (according to the Mind-Independence View) it entails that ethics is real. A non-reductionist view of belief, by contrast, makes belief trivially dependent on other beliefs, and thereby counts as a realist theory on these grounds. In order to use Mind-Independence to adequately characterize these views, we would need to violate the univocality condition in DOMAIN

³⁴Cameron (2008) defends Mind-Independence views from objections from realism about the mental. Following a distinction from Jenkins (2005), he says that realism should be understood in terms of "essential dependence": irrealism about a domain holds that its "existence or essence is constitutively dependent on mental activity." (Cameron (2008: 7)) As Cameron notes, this distinction helps with avoiding the allegation that realism about the mental is trivially false, since it is trivially true that the mental depends on the mental. Cameron's point is that this doesn't follow when 'depends' is glossed as essential dependence: a mental entity can essentially depend on a non-mental event.

But the problem posed by the Behaviorist remains, even with this distinction in place. If we explicitly add that, according to the Behaviorist view, the mental constitutively depends on non-mental behaviors, the view remains intuitively irrealist. The true worry for Mind-Independence accounts applied to the mental, then, isn't that realism is too hard to come by; rather, it is *too easy*, letting even the Behaviorist in. See also Reynolds (2006: 481) and Rosen (1994: 286-9) for more discussion of the relationship between Mind-Independence and realism.

³⁵Consider the account of syntactic principles, or "grammars", in Noam Chomsky's *Knowledge of Language*, which is one on which they are accurate descriptions of a psychological state realized in the brains of competent language-users. Grammars are, in Chomsky's terms, "psychologically real". This is a distinctive and (strikingly) realist position about grammars; its competitors include views on which grammars are merely the simplest set of axioms whose theorems are all and only the grammatically acceptable sentences making no claims about psychological reality in the process. (See Chomsky (1986: 39), and Soames (1989) for competing sides of the debate.) The Mind-Independence View fails to find any relevant difference between these views, since both views make grammars mind-dependent.

NEUTRALITY.

Others construe the Mind-Independence condition to be a condition on the mental states of an assessor, rather than the mental states of the subject of the assessment.³⁶ On these views, the fact that Jane is in pain, if it is not a real fact, depends on what *we* believe about Jane, and not on Jane's beliefs or other states. Behaviorism, then, won't count as irrealist simply because it holds that the reduction base for pain includes non-mental behaviors only. If Behaviorism is an irrealist view, it must be because it entails that whether Jane is in pain is in pain depends on what we think about Jane's pain-states. But Behaviorism doesn't entail this. Instead, Jane is in pain according to the Behaviorist if she is clutching her arm, even if as assessors of whether Jane is in pain, we never know, or believe, or have evidence that Jane is clutching her arm. Understanding the Mind-Independence View in terms of independence from the assessor's states fails to accommodate the irrealism of Behaviorism.

3.4 *Fundamental failings*

The Fundamentality View holds that realist views about a domain are just those that take the domain to be fundamental. This view nicely accommodates our first two structural features. It retains TRUTH INDEPENDENCE because ordinary claims about a domain do not entail whether the domain is fundamental or not. It is an ordinary, prosaic fact that Sally is in pain, but whether this fact is part of fundamental reality is not settled by ordinary claims about pain alone. And it accepts DOMAIN NEUTRALITY since any domain (including the mental) might, or might not, be fundamental. These structural advantages are bolstered by reflection on certain examples. By analyzing mental states in terms of behaviors, the Behaviorist view entails that mental states are not most fundamental. And, by analyzing wrongness in terms of speakers' attitudes of disapproval, the Subjectivist view entails that wrongness is not most fundamental. Something is more fundamental than each, namely behaviors or attitudes of disapproval. They are both irrealist views, as the Fundamentality View predicts.

But this way of getting the right results in some cases for the Fundamentality View gets them for the wrong reasons: *any* analysis of a domain will entail that it is not fully fundamental, and hence will be an analysis that entails irrealism about the analyzed domain. There are plenty of examples of analyses that are consistent with realism.

Here are two. An Identity Theorist such as Place (1956) reduces mental states by identifying them with neurophysiological states. Hence, according to the Identity Theorist, pain is not most fundamental; some neurophysiological state is more fundamental than it. Likewise, the view of moral properties like wrongness presented in Railton (1986) is one on which they reduce to facts about what

³⁶This kind of assessor-sensitivity is present in the formulation of Mind-Independence from Brink in §2.

promotes human interests from the “social point of view”. Hence human interests are more fundamental than moral properties. But both views are intuitively consistent with realism—Railton even presents this view in a paper called “Moral Realism”.³⁷

These examples illustrate the failure of our third structural feature of realism on the Fundamentality View: it cannot accommodate REDUCTION COMPATIBILITY. Any reduction of a domain will, by the logic of fundamentality, entail that the domain is not fundamental. The Fundamentality View will classify the domain as irrealist. This is a rejection of REDUCTION COMPATIBILITY, and as this structural feature is quite plausible, alternatives to the Fundamentality View should be considered.

It is worth mentioning as an additional point that certain moves to avoid this result will be unhelpful to the Fundamentality theorist. It might seem promising to adopt a different approach to the relationship between reduction and fundamentality. For instance: begin with the idea that there are some fundamental terms: perhaps those standing for basic entities and properties such as ‘quark’, ‘spin’, etc. A *fundamental fact*, we can then say, is one which can be specified with fundamental terms only. Facts about the Identity Theorist’s reduction basis will, presumably, be fully fundamental since they can be specified using the relevant microphysical terms. The Fundamentality theorist might then add that reductions are identities—to reduce the fact that Sally is in pain to the fact *F* is just to claim that the fact that Sally is in pain is *identical* to *F*. It then follows that facts about mental states are, according to the Identity Theorist, fundamental.³⁸

This approach to reduction is available to the Fundamentality theorist and, if she adopts it, she can claim that some reductions *are* compatible with realism. The problem, however, is that a fourth structural feature on realism is just as plausible as REDUCTION COMPATIBILITY. We can call this fourth feature REDUCTION INDEPENDENCE; according to it, a reduction of a domain does not *entail* realism about the domain, some reductions in fact imply irrealism about the reduced domain. REDUCTION INDEPENDENCE is quite plausible; Behaviorism as sketched above provides one example of a reduction of mental states is not realist about mental states. But the revised version of the Fundamentality View captures REDUCTION COMPATIBILITY at the expense of REDUCTION INDEPENDENCE. For the revised logic of reduction will apply to any reduction and, as a result, realism will follow for any reduced domain—including the Behaviorist’s mental states.

³⁷Readers familiar with that paper will note that Railton acknowledges on pp. 200-1 that his view lacks some of the characteristic features of realism (though he nevertheless claims that it resembles realism enough to deserve the name). I will return to the question of *how* realist Railton’s view is in later sections. But as a purely structural point, it would be highly surprising if Railton’s view failed to qualify as realist simply because it is reductive in character.

³⁸See, for instance, Sider (2012: Ch. 7) for a similar idea.

4 Relative fundamentality and realism

The best solution requires a distinct metaphysical category: *degrees* of fundamentality. For instance: it is entirely natural to say that if acids are electron-pair acceptors, then there is something that is more fundamental than acidity, namely electrons. Likewise, if gravity is curvature in spacetime, then spacetime points are more fundamental than gravity. And if galaxies are collections of stars and other celestial objects surrounded by an interstellar medium, then stars are more fundamental than galaxies.

I will call these claims of the form ‘*A* is more fundamental than *B*’ claims about *relative* fundamentality, or claims about *degrees* of fundamentality.³⁹

For the sake of clarity, I will briefly sketch a theory of relative fundamentality which can then be put to use in giving an account which captures all of the structural features of realism. However, it is important to note that other understandings of relative fundamentality are available, and can in principle be adapted to providing an account of realism along the lines sketched here. Much of what we said by way of introducing the notion of absolute fundamentality in §2.3 applies to relative fundamentality as well: electrons, for example, provide a kind of “metaphysical explanation” for facts about electron-pairs; stars provide the same kind of explanation for facts about galaxies, and spacetime points provide the same kind of explanation for facts about gravity.

Two clarifications are in order here. We can understand the absolutely fundamental with a helpful slogan from Fine (2001); it is that which provides the “most satisfying” metaphysical explanation for some fact. Obviously this kind of gloss applies to that which is absolutely fundamental, and cannot be applied directly to explain relative fundamentality. Since electrons have further explanations in terms of the subatomic, electron-pair acceptors do not provide the most satisfying metaphysical explanation of acidity. Still, we can say that what is more fundamental provides the same *kind* of metaphysical explanation; it simply need not provide the most satisfying version of this kind of explanation. Thus, the electron-based explanation of acidity is still a metaphysical explanation of the same kind, even if it isn’t the final explanation.

An analogy with causal explanation may be helpful here: one can causally explain the breaking of a window in terms of the fact that the ball that was thrown, its trajectory, the fragility of the glass, etc. This is a perfectly legitimate causal explanation if filled out appropriately. But it isn’t the *final* causal explanation: that would make reference to the causal precursors of the throwing of the ball, and the causal precursors of the precursors, and so on, perhaps only terminating in a description of the Big Bang. A most satisfying causal explanation of this kind

³⁹Strictly speaking, these do not amount to the same thing: it could be that *A* is more fundamental than *B*, while there are no specific *degrees* of fundamentality, d_A and d_B , such that *A* is fundamental to degree d_A , *B* is fundamental to degree d_B , and $d_A > d_B$. At times, I will speak as if these degrees exist, but much of what I say below can be rephrased (albeit in somewhat more complicated language) using only the comparative ‘more fundamental than’ and without reference to degrees.

doesn't preclude the existence of more proximate, non-final causal explanations. That which is *more* fundamental similarly provides more proximate non-final metaphysical explanations.

The second clarification is that the examples of differences in relative fundamentality mentioned above all represent discoveries from the physical sciences—in particular, chemistry, physics, and astronomy. This might be thought to distinguish relative fundamentality, as I have described it here, from the notion of absolute fundamentality as developed by Fine and others. On these approaches, the absolute notion is approached through metaphysical or philosophical theorizing—and not through empirical science. The relative notion of fundamentality, as described here, appears not to be well-suited to feature in a metaphysical account of realism.

The appearance of an important difference may, however, be misleading. There are some approaches to absolute fundamentality where empirical science does play a central role, but in which the notion of fundamentality retains its metaphysical character. Lewis's conception of "perfect naturalness" (his terminology for what amount to absolutely fundamental properties) also assigns a central role to empirical science. He says:

To a physicalist like myself, the most plausible inegalitarianism seems to be one that gives a special elite status to the 'fundamental physical properties': mass, charge, quark colour and flavour (It is up to physics to discover these properties, and name them; physicalists will think that present-day physics at least comes close to providing a correct and complete list.)⁴⁰

Lewis thus gives physics (or something close to it) a close relationship to the absolutely fundamental. But the "close relationship" isn't one that undermines its metaphysical character. Lewis isn't proposing to *define* the absolutely fundamental in terms of the practices of physicists. Instead, this picture is one on which physics provides at best an epistemology of absolute fundamentality. That physics makes reference to quarks doesn't make quarks most fundamental; rather, it is simply the means by which we know that they are. Similarly, then, for other sciences and relative fundamentality: these sciences provide an epistemic window into the facts about relative fundamentality, but do not constitute them. Once we separate the epistemic from the metaphysical dimension to fundamentality, the relative version is in no worse shape to feature in a metaphysical account of realism.⁴¹

We can extend these ideas to degrees of fundamentality: by engaging in the right kinds of first-order inquiry in science, philosophy, and elsewhere, we can come to learn about what is fundamental, and to what degree. But these degrees

⁴⁰Lewis (1984: 228). See also Schaffer (2004) for an extension of this position to sciences beyond physics.

⁴¹For more on the epistemology of non-absolute fundamentality, see Dunaway and McPherson (2016), Dunaway (forthcoming: Ch. 5).

of fundamentality are, metaphysically speaking primitive: they are not grounded in, or determined by, facts about first-order inquiry.

With these clarifications in place, we can investigate a positive proposal concerning the natural kind that underlies our talk of ‘realism’. The account begins by introducing a new resource: relative fundamentality. I will argue that this resource is more promising than the existing alternatives, as it has additional structural features which allow it to capture the TRUTH INDEPENDENCE, DOMAIN NEUTRALITY, and REDUCTION COMPATIBILITY features of realism.

4.1 Accounting for the structural features

I will focus here on developing a relative fundamentality-based account to deal with the most difficult feature, REDUCTION COMPATIBILITY. Then I will note in closing how the resulting account also handles TRUTH INDEPENDENCE and DOMAIN NEUTRALITY.

Begin with the difference between an Identity Theorist about mental states (a realist) and a reductive Behaviorist (an irrealist). It is very natural to say that the difference between the two views lies in how fundamental, according to each view, mental states are. If pain is a particular neurophysiological state, it is a fairly natural psychological kind and hence is more fundamental than it is if it is a disjunction of behaviors. Pain, if it is metaphysically explained by a highly disjunctive state (such as the Behaviorist’s disjunction of behaviors) is thereby not very fundamental. This suggests that the difference between Identity Theory and Behaviorism is that pain, on the Behaviorist view, fails to meet a particular *threshold* of fundamentality. A crude account of realism about mental states runs as follows:

MENTAL STATE REALISM (MSR) There is a degree of fundamentality d such that a theory T is realist about mental states just in case T entails that mental states are fundamental to (at least) degree d .

The assumption behind MSR is that only the Identity Theorist’s view is realist because only it entails that pain meets some threshold of fundamentality. Note, however, that this threshold needn’t require a very *high* degree of fundamentality. Identity Theory might imply that mental states aren’t very fundamental at all. All MSR requires is that competing irrealist views, like Behaviorism, imply that mental states are even less fundamental.

In order to maintain DOMAIN NEUTRALITY, we should adopt analogues of MSR for other domains. The question arises of whether the threshold for realism is the *same* for each domain. That is: is it the case that there is a single degree of fundamentality d such that realist views about *any* domain entail it to be fundamental to degree d ?

Here is a simple argument that the answer is ‘no’. An Identity Theory of mental states holds that mental states are neurophysiological states. A number-theorist might identify numbers with similar entities—perhaps the synaptic firings that correspond to counting operations in normal human minds. Thus, the number 2 on this view reduces to the neurophysiological state that occurs when normal humans count to the second item in a normal counting sequence. The reduction base for pain and the number 2 are then very similar in kind according to these views; plausibly pain and numbers are, on these views, fundamental to the same degree. But Identity Theory seems clearly to be a realist view of pain, while our psychological reduction of numbers entails an irrealist view about numbers. So the threshold for realism about numbers and mental states must be set at different points on the scale of degrees of fundamentality. (Perhaps even for a single domain the threshold can be set at different levels in different contexts. I won’t take a stance on this question here.)

If there is variability in where the threshold for realism is set, one approach to accommodating it is to take another aspect of the analogy with gradable adjectives seriously. For ‘loud’ and other gradables, the threshold is set by conversational context. Exactly what features of context are relevant, and how they conspire to set a standard for loudness is a tricky matter. But it is clear that my coffee grinder counts as loud in some contexts and not others, and that the difference between these contexts in part has to do with the *comparison class* at issue.⁴² The comparison class contains contextually and conversationally salient objects, and determines in some way where on the scale of volume the threshold for loudness is to be set. In contexts where the comparison class contains only chirping crickets, my coffee grinder counts as loud; in contexts where the comparison class contains only train whistles, it does not.

The comparison class in a discussion of realism is naturally taken to include other salient views about the domain in question. Thus, when realism about mental states is at issue, the comparison class includes theories of mental states that conversational participants take to be relevant. This comparison class then sets a threshold for fundamentality. Quite plausibly, the salient views about mental states will constitute a comparison class that determines a degree of fundamentality more demanding than the degree to which mental states are fundamental on the Behaviorist view. There are many salient and plausible theories of mental states that make them out to be more fundamental than the Behaviorist does.

The story about realism in other domains is a variation on this theme. When domains other than the mental are at issue, the comparison class is different as well: if we shift to a discussion of realism about numbers, then salient theories of numbers populate the comparison class, not theories of mental states. This shift may well determine a different threshold for realism. Without taking a stand on

⁴²See Klein (1980) for discussion of the notion of a comparison class, and Ludlow (1989) for more on the ways in which comparison classes are fixed.

the exact mechanisms by which competing views populate a comparison class, and the precise way in which a comparison class determines a threshold, the account of realism is, in general form, as follows:

REALISM For any domain D , the comparison class for D determines a degree of fundamentality d such that a theory T is realist about D just in case T entails that D is fundamental to (at least) degree d .

REALISM is natural as an account of what makes the Instrumentalist an irrealist about the unobservable entities of scientific theories, and what makes the Vitalist view of life highly realist, to take a few examples. The Instrumentalist is plausibly construed as holding that instruments of measurement are more fundamental than unobservables, since on her view, facts about the reading of instruments *explain* facts about unobservables. And the Vitalist is plausibly construed as holding that biological processes are *not* more fundamental than life—and hence that the latter is highly fundamental since they are not explained by biological processes at all. With a normal comparison class for each domain, **REALISM** entails that the Vitalist has a realist view of life, while the Instrumentalist does not have a realist view of unobservables.

4.2 *Return to the structural features*

I have sketched how **REALISM** plausibly categorizes some examples of realist and irrealist views. We could run through more examples, asking (for example) whether Moorean non-naturalism and Thomism imply that ethics is highly fundamental, or whether Subjectivism implies that it is not. Instead of doing this, however, I will turn to the structural features of realism from §1. **REALISM** is well-suited to accommodating all of these; I will briefly sketch how.

Some reductions imply that a domain is not very fundamental at all—for example, this is true of the reduction of polywater. But not all do. Many settings of a threshold for realism will result in a classification of some, but not all, reductive views of the domain as realist. Thus **REALISM** plausibly implies **REDUCTION COMPATIBILITY**.

REALISM is consistent with **TRUTH INDEPENDENCE**. Some theories will entail truths about a domain, but make these truths out to be not-very-fundamental and hence not reaching the threshold of fundamentality required for realism. The same truth might be very fundamental according to one theory, and not-very-fundamental according to another. So ordinary truths by themselves won't settle questions about realism.

Finally, **REALISM** can accommodate **DOMAIN NEUTRALITY**: the mental might, just like any other domain, be more or less fundamental according depending on which theory of the mental is in play. The same considerations will then apply in assessing the realism of a particular theory, *viz.*, whether the mental meets the required threshold for realism according to the theory. In each case, it is a

comparison with the degree of fundamentality of the relevant domain according to other salient theories that settles the question of realism.

5 Conclusion

REALISM, I have argued, represents a much-improved attempt at an account of the metaphysically natural kind that underlies philosophical talk about ‘realism’. Whether it provides a fully satisfactory account, given the parameters set out in §1, can be debated.

It is worthwhile to recall the desiderata set out in §1: we want a single metaphysical kind that plays the structural roles distinctive of realism. I have argued that REALISM gives an account which entails all of the structural features outlined in this paper. There are substantial questions to be asked concerning whether REALISM articulates a *metaphysical* kind, and whether there is a *single* kind underlying the account. These are worthwhile questions to ask but in the interest of space I will not address them here. Instead I will only note that REALISM seems to be the best approximation of the realism-role on offer, as it does better than the other conceptions of realism from §2.

To close, I will mention one more point in favor of the account presented here. Many philosophers have found the Existence, Mind-Independence, and Fundamentality views to be very compelling accounts of realism. But, if the objections of §§3-4 are correct, these views fail for very straightforward reasons. What can explain their appeal? The REALISM-based account has a simple answer: existence, Mind-Independence, and absolute fundamentality often stand proxy for a greater degree of fundamentality.

Take Existence views first. There are some cases where we, with good reason, restrict the theoretical roles we associate with a term to require that its referent be highly fundamental. One example is found in Schroeder (2005): with theological terms like ‘God’, one doesn’t count as holding that God exists if one accepts a reductive account of their referents. If one identifies the referent of ‘God’ (as in Schroeder’s example) with the strong nuclear force that holds positively charged protons in atomic nuclei together, one does not thereby count as someone who holds that God exists. Finding just *any* existing referent for ‘God’ does not suffice for theological realism.

But this is not obviously a failure of the reductive account to give a truth-preserving interpretation of the theoretical claims associated with ‘God’. If the reductive account starts by assigning the strong nuclear force as the referent of ‘God’, it can go on to give interpretations of ‘God is a person’, ‘God created the universe’, ‘God loves humankind’, etc. on which these sentences are true.⁴³ Why then does the reductive account fail to be theologically realist? The problem is

⁴³More generally, permutation arguments inspired by Hilary Putnam (1981) claim to show that there will be many truth-preserving interpretations of a language. See also Button (2013: Chs. 1-4) for more detail on Putnamian permutation arguments.

that, by beginning with an assignment of the strong nuclear force as the referent of 'God', its interpretation of theological language will be highly gerrymandered and contrived elsewhere. (Consider the interpretation of 'person': it must be a property that applies to not only the strong nuclear force, but also to the referent of 'human', but not to the referent of 'rock', 'planet', or 'number'. Such maneuvers will inevitably require a significant amount of gerrymandering in order to preserve the truth of many ordinary claims.) This suggests that theological terms are not only connected via theoretical role to claims expressed by 'person', 'create', 'love', etc.; the theoretical role attached to theological terms in addition requires that the properties of personhood, creation, love, etc. be *highly fundamental*. Since any interpretation that starts by assigning the strong nuclear force as the referent of 'God' will end up with not-very-fundamental referents for other terms that are closely connected to the theoretical role for 'God', the reductive view does not count as holding that there is a God. 'God exists' only comes out as true when the relevant terms are assigned sufficiently fundamental referents.

The question of theological realism then goes hand-in-hand with the question of the existence of the theological. But this is only because the theological and associated subject-matters can be expected to be fundamental, if they exist at all. This needn't, however, be true for every domain for which the question of realism can arise. Discovering the constitution of polywater needn't show that polywater doesn't exist, as there need not be an expectation that any referent for 'polywater' is a highly fundamental one.⁴⁴ More generally, once the domain in question isn't one that can be expected to be highly fundamental if it exists at all, it can still be properly said to *exist* even if it turns out to be highly gerrymandered and unnatural. In these cases, mere existence won't be sufficient for realism about the relevant domain. From the perspective of REALISM, the existence conception provides a sometimes (but not always) useful heuristic for when a view is realist.

REALISM also explains why the Mind-Independence and Fundamentality accounts are tempting. Often, something that is mind-dependent is thereby not-very-fundamental: after all, the mind-dependence claim itself is a claim that there is something more fundamental, namely the mind. Views which entail the mind-dependence of a domain will, in general, also fail to be realist views in the sense REALISM. But there are exceptions: when the domain in question is explicitly mental, correlations between mind-dependence and comparatively lower degrees of fundamentality go out the window.

Finally, absolute fundamentality will always imply realism—views on which

⁴⁴Note that there *might* be such an expectation: as we filled out Railton's example earlier, one might, prior to the relevant discovery, associate with 'polywater' a theoretical role that requires it to be of the same kind of molecular constitution as ordinary water. But, we emphasized, this isn't required: one might also continue to use the term 'polywater' with the same meaning after the discovery. One can consistently do this so long as one associates a less strict theoretical role with the term. This kind of case shows how, at least in principle, discovery of a not-very-fundamental reduction basis need not require a denial of the existence of the reduced domain or property.

a domain is absolutely fundamental are guaranteed to be views on which the domain meets the contextually set degree of fundamentality required for realism.⁴⁵ The converse need not hold: some views which meet the contextually set degree of fundamentality required for realism need not be views on which the domain is absolutely fundamental. The Fundamentality view, like the Existence and Mind-Independence views, provides in some cases a useful proxy for what is at issue in discussions of realism. But none of these views provide a complete picture; for this we need relative fundamentality.

The result is a plausible, metaphysically substantial, conception of realism. I have not attempted to show in this paper that a Gibbardian quasi-realism is not a genuine version of realism. Rather, all I have shown is that there is more to realism than the claims that quasi-realists have explicitly shown that they can accommodate. Quasi-realists have shown that they can accept that there are normative facts and properties. And they have shown that they can coherently accept that murder is wrong, no matter what we happen to think about it. But these are claims about the existence and Mind-Independence of the normative. These are not, I have argued, the core commitments of realism.

Instead, the core commitment of realism concerns the degree of fundamentality of the relevant domain. It is, of course, possible that quasi-realists can show that this is also something which they can coherently accept. But perhaps not: Gibbard, along with other quasi-realists, acknowledges that how the quasi-realist *explains* paradigmatically realist claims will differ from how the typical realist explains the same claims.⁴⁶ I will leave the details of the quasi-realist explanations to the side, but for the expressivist these are at bottom explanations which interpret the realist-sounding claims to be expressions of plans, and then go on to show that it is coherent to plan in the relevant ways. But fundamentality is, at bottom, an explanatory notion: something is fundamental when it features in a “metaphysically satisfying” explanation of why something is the case, in Fine’s language. So, perhaps, the expressivist has already implicitly denied a significant degree of fundamentality to the normative, by appealing to naturalistically acceptable planning-states to do all of the explanatory work.⁴⁷

I will not pursue this argument here.⁴⁸ But, at the very least, the discussion of realism here leaves an explanatory challenge to the quasi-realist, by giving a metaphysically robust conception of realism.

⁴⁵Moreover, it will always imply bivalence if there is no indeterminacy at the fundamental level. So given this assumption the Dummettian view always correctly categorize views that are realist by virtue of taking their domain to be fundamental.

⁴⁶Gibbard (2003: 187)

⁴⁷Gibbard (2003: Ch. 10) discusses normative explanations, but is primarily concerned with causal explanation.

⁴⁸See Dunaway (2016) for one way of developing the argument.

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