

Internal Realism

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Abstract. This essay characterizes a version of *internal realism*. In §1 I will argue that for semantical reasons we should be realists of a strong kind. In §2 I plead for an internalistic setting of realism starting from the thesis that truth is, at least, not a non-epistemic concept. We have to bear the consequences of this in form of a more complicated concept of truth. The ‘internal’ of ‘internal realism’ points to the justification aspect of truth. The ‘realism’ of ‘internal realism’ points to the correspondence aspect. A thesis concerning the irreducibility of the two aspects will be established in §3.

§1 We Should Be Strong Realists

Different labels are used in discussions concerning realism. I will use some of them, but only according to the definitions given. This applies particularly to the expression ‘Internal Realism’. I aim at systematic argumentation and will not give an interpretation of Putnam’s views

Different varieties of realism can be distinguished according to axioms of realism which they support:

(R1) Reality exists independently of our cognitive faculties.

(R2) Independent reality divides into entities, which have structures and stand in relations to each other.

(R3) To some extent we have epistemic access to reality as well as its structures and relations.

(R4) (R3) plus the claim that our access to reality is limited by our cognitive faculties (particularly our linguistic and perceptual faculties).

(R5) Notwithstanding our modes of cognitive access, the structures and relations of reality are represented in our cognitions (particularly in our representations).

(R1) expresses ontological realism regarding the existence of reality; a position that very few have ever seriously doubted. (R2) expresses ontological realism regarding the structures and relations which reality exhibits. (R2) does not entail that we know of these structures and relations.

One can ascribe (R2) to a philosopher if she speaks of a plurality of unrecognizable ‘things in themselves’. (R2) claims that we are not the makers of reality and its structures.

(R3) is stronger than (R2) in professing not only the ontological independence of reality but also epistemic access to these structures. (R3) I call ‘strong realism’. According to (R3), this epistemic access is given ‘to some extent’. The vagueness of this phrase is inseparable from the realist’s epistemological views. The relations of our representations to reality pose the problem of the epistemic gap: our representations shall concern reality but we cannot guarantee this. Therefore we cannot say how much of reality we recognize. Just in case realism is correct, we cannot give an ultimate proof of it, because we can only reason from our side of the epistemic gap. Therefore a realist must be content with epistemic access ‘to some extent’. Often (R3) is simply called ‘realism’. But (R3) is, in my view, only the common ground of two more advanced realistic positions.

I call the first of these, (R4), ‘internal realism’. Thus, on my view, internal realism is a species of strong realism. The second, (R5), is what I call ‘external realism’.¹

Internal realism keeps the possibility of a gap between our opinions and reality (i.e. the possibility that even our best theories may fail to correspond to reality). Even if we assume, with (R3), that this possibility doesn't obtain, there can be no *proof* of this. That we cannot step outside of our cognitive formats and access reality undisguised is the internalistic element of internal realism. The sceptical possibility of even our best theory failing is the other side of the ontological realist’s coin, which stresses the independence of reality from our cognition. To exclude scepticism of this kind threatens to diminish reality to human measure. This over-estimation of our epistemic abilities also threatens the external realist (R4) if he is epistemologically very optimistic (e.g., proposing a picture theory). A quarrel whether internal realism (R4) is, therefore, more *realistic* than external realism seems scarcely productive. It seems more adequate to describe internal realism as less realistic inasmuch as it makes truth an epistemological concept.

(R4), internal Realism, nevertheless, is a version of strong realism, because of the following:

(Thesis 1) Epistemological positions which deny (R3) fail, since they cannot justify any theory of meaning in which the *definiteness* of the meanings of our linguistic expressions is maintained.

¹ (R5) is often referred to as ‘metaphysical realism’. But this name is ambiguous and leads to confusion. For example, (R3) is sometimes referred to as metaphysical realism. If this is so, then (R4), my internal realism would count as a species of ‘metaphysical realism’, a view I reject. To avoid this potential problem, I don't use the phrase ‘metaphysical realism’.

Justification: We make assertions. We use these assertions to describe what is the case. Statements (or sentences) which are claimed to be true are statements of a specific language and use the vocabulary of this language. They describe, by means of the expressions occurring in them, what would be the case if they were true. Statements which use different vocabulary describe, except in some cases of synonymy, different facts. The specific vocabulary, that is to say, the meanings of the words used, makes all the difference and determines which statements we consider true and which not. To illustrate this, consider the following.

Assume the statement 'F(a)' is true. If speaker and audience succeed in intersubjectively referring to *a* as being describable as 'F()', the speaker must have justified the claim that F(a) is the case to his or her audience. Speaker and audience now claim that the thing which they consider to be *F* possesses the features (the *structure* mentioned in (R2)), to which the meaning of the expression 'F()' refers. The realistic interpretation of this procedure is this. Our claims to knowledge of a reality beyond the confines of our representations are expressed. The definitions or conventions by means of which we refer are believed to correspond to the composition of the actual entities. We refer to reality by means of language and try to reach an agreement about what is objectively the case .

This procedure of reaching agreement and the collective and individual practices based upon it are more or less successful. The object *a* might not be exhausted in its features by describing it as 'F()'. But we assume with the truth of 'F(a)' that it has, at least, this feature in reality. Definiteness of meaning is founded on this correspondence. Definiteness of meaning presupposes that different expressions have conditions of application separated by their meanings, and that it is, for example, clearly distinguishable whether to use the expression 'round' or to use expression 'square'. The condition of this possibility is (R3) (strong realism). (R2) as a component of (R3) explains the first aspect of definiteness of meaning as follows: descriptions of facts (sentences) are definite because the expressions composing the description refer to components (parts) of reality. The difference of the reference situations guarantees the difference of the meanings of the descriptions, since an aspect of these meanings is reference. Linguistic expressions are referentially or extensionally definite according to (R2). Assuming referential definiteness we have to endorse (R2). We still have to say something, however, about our ability to use expressions in the appropriate situations. The definiteness of use and application refers us on to (R3). In this respect the intension of an expression (the *meaning* in the narrower sense) consists in instructions for the application of the expression mentioning some decisive features or criteria to be fulfilled. We must in some way or other be able to decide or discriminate the fulfilment or non-fulfilment of these criteria to use the expression definitely. This ability might be instantiated in explicit linguistic reflection or perceptual or sub-doxastic processing (that is, it might be a not directly conscious process of information

processing). We must, however, be able to recognize the structures and relations of reality to some extent, whatever way this happens. □

This is (R3). We intentionally employ specific expressions in distinction to others. That the use of a specific expression makes a difference in what is said and that it is founded on real differences in the situations of application we cannot deny without dissolving our intentional linguistic behaviour in an arbitrary utterance of some expression or other. That is: (R3) must be true if we are able to speak a definite language. For (R3) we can give another short argument:

1. Making statements works (sufficiently well).
(undeniable fact)¹
2. Intentionally stating something implies making distinctions.
(by definition)
3. Non-definiteness of meaning implies inability to make sufficient distinctions.
(by definition)
4. Definiteness of meaning.
(from (1)-(3))²
5. Intentional application of an expression is successful (if and) only if we employ the expression only on a specific occasion to which we have cognitive access.
(Meaning Principle)³
6. We have cognitive access to the situations we make statements about. ■

The consequence, (6), again expresses strong realism. The argument establishes *some* access to reality, but this is enough for (R3) to be true. Given some access and lacking justified doubt we may claim access as an ordinary phenomenon.

Two supplements to these two arguments supporting (Thesis 1):

- (I) If our expressions refer to structures of reality, we shall be able to develop an ontology of facts (states of affairs), facts being the

¹ If you try to deny this, you immediately refute yourself.

² Or, for the intuitionist, Non-Non-Definiteness of meaning.

³ This principle, of course, has to be argued for. I tried to do so in Bremer 2005. Note that this principle and the intuitionistic reasoning employed in the argument should be acceptable to so called 'anti-realists' in the style of Dummett or Tennant.

building stones of reality (the physical correlates of true statements/sentences). Such a robust notion of fact supplies the realist with a relatum for the relation of correspondence.

(II) *Putnam's Theorem* (Putnam 1981, Appendix): Putnam's main argument against a reliable assignment of expressions to their extensions and for his internal realism. Putnam employs the *Löwenheim/Skolem-Theorem* stating that concerning any First Order Language an assignment of expressions to referents can be permuted giving us non-intended models. This application of *Löwenheim/Skolem* to natural languages should be rejected:

- (i) Probably no natural language is a First Order Language.
- (ii) Even if natural language is a First Order Language, the assignment of meaning in a natural language will not be adequately modelled by an interpretation function (Bremer 2005, pp. 241-42).

So Putnam's Theorem should not hinder us from being strong realists.

§2 *We Cannot Be External Realists*

A pure coherence theory of truth, in which sentences are justified *only* with respect to their mutual coherence, violates the realism I have just defended like a 'radical' constructivist position does. A pure correspondence theory, however, makes truth something beyond our cognitive faculties. The epistemological advantage of internal realism consists in avoiding both disadvantages, but external realism (R5) has to be given up.

If truth were a completely non-epistemic concept there could be entities and qualities which *we* talk about without us ever being able reasonably to state this correspondence of language and reality. Truth could not even be *prima facie* established, since there would be no way of introducing any criteria of truth: to introduce such criteria we would have to judge them in their reliability against other candidates, but if we were not able to access truth in the first place, we could not establish anything as being truth conducive. Nevertheless, we keep on claiming things to be true. And to claim that something is true requires justification. If a speaker A asserts that p, she claims that p is the case, that it objectively obtains and is not merely A's opinion. To claim objectivity concerning p makes not only the difference between mere belief that p and p being the case, but also claims that p will be the case for any speaker B of the linguistic community. This is exactly what 'objective' means in contradistinction to '(merely) subjective'. Two questions then have to be answered:

- (I) How is it possible to distinguish mere opinions from opinions to which facts correspond?

- (II) How can one decide between A's assertion that p and B's assertion that non-p?

There must be means to answer these questions if understanding is at all possible. For any attempt of communication about what facts obtain to succeed, these questions must have been answered already. The means sought for are reasons. We accept, ideally, those assertions which have been better justified than their competitors. To give reasons is beneficial to establishing the truth of a statement which claims that a certain fact obtains. We are interested in assertions because we establish by their means that which we shall consider as being the case. To doubt that we are seeking objectivity is a move in the language game that undercuts itself. We call statements 'true' or 'well-founded' to distinguish between mere opinions and facts.¹ We are thus lead to

(Thesis 2) Truth is conceptually tied to justification.

This concept of truth aims at correspondence but connects this idea with criteria of consenting to statements, and reasons. We have, therefore, reached a dual aspect theory of truth which corresponds to internal realism.

The above argument presupposes:

- a) That we take seriously the claim that statements are/can be true (i.e., we should not reinterpret it as actually being assertability, constructibility or some of the kind).
- b) That it must serve a purpose, when we claim truth, and that the purpose of asserting something to be true is truth itself (as an epistemological basic value) or something which we need it for (e.g., successful manipulation of our environment).
- c) That we can realise this purpose; otherwise we would not persist in trying.
- d) That we know about the contrast (merely) *subjective* vs. *objective*.

The acceptance of (d) hinges on conceptual analysis being possible in a minimal extent at least. Accepting (a) expresses a conservative attitude. Whoever wants to substitute assertability for truth can do so, but then he has already incorporated an epistemological feature into the concept of truth. My argument addresses realists who have not yet done this. The acceptance of (b) and (c) depends on taking seriously evolutionary or transcendental functionalism searching for the conditions of possibility of something which

¹ This justification is no final verification in the sense of some absolute external access to truth, which no realist would allow for. What is meant by 'truth conductive justification' and 'verification' in such a narrow sense is to engage in putting forward reasons why some belief is true, and which so long as being undefeated allow for assuming the corresponding facts to obtain.

has worked historically. I take (a) to (d) to be acceptable and rather weak assumptions, indeed.

The above argument centers on the *normativity* of meaning: since we should use an expression only on some occasions, we have to justify that our using the expression concerns an occasion of the appropriate type.

A shorter version of an argument for (Thesis 2) might concern the *felicity conditions* of assertions:

1. I assert p if and only if I claim p to be true.
(definition)
2. For any speaker, sentence, event: if event e consists in A claiming p to be true and e is successful, then it is possible to verify/justify p.
(Felicity Condition¹)

In some steps we get:

C. For any sentence p: if it is not possible to verify/justify p, then there is no event e such that there is a speaker A such that e consists in A's claiming p to be true. ■

This conclusion makes epistemically transcendent statements/sentences *unassertible*. And if external realism depends on sentences which are *unassertible* we should give it up.

§3 *The Concept of Truth that Internal Realists Have to Live With*

The last paragraph set up a dual aspect theory of truth. There is a connection between reference and procedures of our cognitive faculties. Reference takes some of our forms of representation as starting point. Therefore truth - concerning statements referring to facts - entails an aspect of justification, whatever epistemology of justification one prefers. Our ways of speaking, though, do not 'make' reality. Epistemic procedures which are conducive to success mustn't run completely against the data. Rather we adapt our languages and methods. The 'idealistic/constructivistic/Putnam-Goodman-style' inference from the particularity of different modes of representation to the dependence of the concerned structures and entities on consciousness is simply wrong.

The internal realistic concept of truth can be stated thus:

¹ This condition would, of course, have to be argued for. A theory of speech acts might do so. Asserting would lose its *point* if I am not taking responsibility for what I assert. Without the requirement of justification and justification being decidable I could assert just anything.

(TR4) A statement is true if and only if it is an intersubjectively justified agreement that it has to be inserted in our best-founded frame of reference, and this frame of reference corresponds to reality.

An argument (a reason put forth) tries to establish that some statement *has* to be included into our best frame of reference. It forces itself upon us given our other commitments. Therefore somebody made the respective assertion. That some statement *might* be true (*could* be coherent with our best frame of reference) is not enough as it does not force that statement upon us.

To say of a statement that it is true is to ascribe this material quality defined by (TR4). Only statements of languages in which our best-founded frame of reference can be formulated can have this property. ‘Best-founded frame of reference’ is meant to denote a frame/theory that could be formulated in a given language even if we have not yet done so. We might improve our modes of reference, but the best-founded frame of reference is determined whether we know it or not. And whether some statement is part of this frame of reference is decided by its meaning and reality, whether we know this or not. Since even this frame depends on our modes of representation, it is less than ‘God’s point of view’.¹

Characteristic for (TR4) is the following *Thesis*:

(Thesis 3) The two aspects of truth in a dual aspect theory cannot be reduced to one another.

Justification:

- (i) There are statements which might be true in the correspondence sense of truth (like ‘There are *exactly* the unobservable entities which occur in our theories’), but which by their meaning and the existence of the epistemic gap can never satisfy the justification demand in (TR4).²

¹ This idealized notion of frame of reference allows for an idealized notion of verification/assertability: We can postulate that in the best-founded frame of reference each sentence will be decided by making use of *Lindenbaum’s Lemma* for First Order Theories (that if a theory does not include a proof for a sentence p , there is an extension of that theory including *non-p*, which is consistent if the original theory was). This guarantees bivalence. So making truth an epistemic concept does not entail intuitionistic logic. What we need is a revisionist notion of negation: That which cannot be deduced or is needed to enhance explanatory power is said to be *non-true* (Cf. negation in the language PROLOG), so might even be said to be *false*. More needs to be said here, but the separability of metalogical considerations from epistemology should be clear. This position is revisionistic because some statements – even hopefully so – may *correspond to the facts* (like “There are exactly the unobservable entities which occur in our theories”), but are said to be not true, because truth requires more than that correspondence!

² This example statement may well correspond to the facts, We could never – as realists – have it being forced into our best frame of reference, however,

- (ii) On the other hand there might be statements which are part of our best-founded frame of reference but which because of systematic shortcomings of our cognitive faculties do not correspond to reality.¹

The internal realists understanding of truth is no idealism. Being a type of realism an even stronger concept of truth can be taken to be meaningful. This is the concept of truth of (R5), leaving aside the justifiability requirement:

(TR5) 'F (a)' is true-in- L_i if and only if the space time area a has the structure F .

Whether we can recognize (absolute) truth does not matter. Truth in this style can be defined for arbitrary languages. The epistemic gap acknowledged by internal realism allows for this *ex negativo* specified concept of truth: correspondence from an absolute point of view. This external concept can be used by the internal realist to formulate the sceptical possibility.²

The internal realist has, at last, to answer the question how truth can be justified if guaranteed correspondence is impossible because of the epistemic gap. One can appeal here to evolutionary considerations in the context of the internally realistic picture of knowledge. The internalistic truth concept is explanatory: that the orientation on well-founded opinions in our interactions with the world has been successful is explained by their regular dependence on structures of reality. This appeal of a realist to the principle of the best explanation to establish a link between justification and truth has been criticized as being a vicious circle, since it presupposes a link between this very (meta-)justification and truth. Within internal realism, however, this is a virtuous circle: internal realism starts out with a connection between justification and truth and in a further argumentative turn explains why we should believe in this connection. In the absence of justified doubt all that we take to be well-founded might be taken to be true and might well be true.

References

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since part of that frame is allowing for the epistemic gap. That the statement could be true and we may believe it does not make it true in the sense of (TR4).

¹ Even if we have no reason to assume that there *are* such statements, their very possibility undermines the *conceptual* connection that we would need for a reduction of correspondence to justification.

² As shown by (T) (TR5) does not imply (TR4), and vice versa.