



Reconsidering Devitt on Realism and Truth

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Abstract

Michael Devitt tells us that metaphysical realism has a kind of immunity from considerations concerning the nature of truth. Part of this immunity comes from Devitt's insistence that realism is a metaphysical issue, not a semantic one. Most of Devitt's critics have focused on this point, arguing that a proper understanding of the realism question necessarily involves semantic considerations (Appiah in *Philos Stud* 61(1):65–74, 1991; Miller in *Synthese* 136(2):191–217, 2003; Putnam in *Comments on Michael Devitt's 'Hilary and Me'*, in: Baghramian (ed) *Reading Putnam*. Taylor and Francis, Hoboken, 2012; Taylor in *Models, truth, and realism*. Oxford University Press, New York, 2006). But Devitt also argues at length that semantic considerations should not lead us to give up on realism regardless of whether we admit that the correct characterization of realism is metaphysical in character or not. Devitt's view hinges on the viability of a strategy which he calls *Putting Metaphysics First* (Devitt in *Putting metaphysics first*. Oxford University Press, New York, 2010), which essentially involves giving "a certain temporal and explanatory priority to metaphysical concerns" (1998, p. 499). Fully explicated, Devitt's strategy is seen to be based on an epistemological naturalism in the vein of Quine. The main idea is that if we assume a naturalism according to which the only way to know anything is empirically through experience, then we will be able to establish a version of metaphysical realism early on in our investigations. According to Devitt, the empirical evidence for this realism is much stronger than the empirical evidence for the numerous semantical and epistemological views which are put forward in favor of antirealism. So, Devitt argues, we should hold on to the realism that we establish first and build our other theories on top of it. After detailing Devitt's approach, I offer two objections. The first problem for Devitt is that in the process of putting metaphysics first, he puts epistemological naturalism first. This fact is in tension with his claim that epistemology is a weak starting place and a poor basis of theoretical revision. The second problem is that while our experiences of objects give us evidence that those objects exist, our experiences do not tell us that the objects exist mind-independently in all the ways required for metaphysical realism, or so I contend. Thus, I argue, even if we do put naturalized metaphysics first as Devitt recommends, realism is not secured as a starting point.

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1 Introduction

During the last half-century, a number of prominent philosophers have made theories of truth the centerpieces of their arguments against *realism*, whether that general view be construed as “metaphysical realism” (Putnam 1978, 1981) or “semantic realism” (Dummett 1978, 1991; Wright 1992, 1993), the basic anti-realist idea being, in either case, that there must be some sort of epistemic constraint on the nature of truth and therefore on the sorts of truth-conditions that our sentences can have. Yet Michael Devitt, perhaps the most stalwart contemporary advocate of realism in the face of anti-realist arguments of all sorts, tells us that realism has a kind of immunity from considerations concerning the nature of truth. Part of this immunity comes from Devitt’s insistence that realism is a metaphysical issue, not a semantic one. Most of Devitt’s critics have focused on this point, arguing that a proper understanding of the realism question necessarily involves semantic considerations (Appiah 1991; Miller 2003; Putnam 2012; Taylor 2006). But Devitt also argues at length that semantic considerations should not lead us to give up on realism regardless of whether we admit that the correct characterization of realism is metaphysical in character or not. Devitt’s view hinges on the viability of a strategy which he calls *Putting Metaphysics First* (Devitt 2010), which essentially involves giving “a certain temporal and explanatory priority to metaphysical concerns” (1998, p. 499). Fully explicated, Devitt’s strategy is seen to be based on an epistemological naturalism in the vein of Quine. The main idea is that if we assume a naturalism according to which the only way to know anything is empirically through experience, then we will be able to establish a version of metaphysical realism early on in our investigations. According to Devitt, the empirical evidence for this realism is much stronger than the empirical evidence for the numerous semantical and epistemological views which are put forward in favor of anti-realism. So, Devitt argues, we should hold on to the realism that we establish first and build our other theories on top of it. After detailing Devitt’s approach, I offer two objections. The first problem for Devitt is that in the process of putting metaphysics first, he puts epistemological naturalism first. This fact is in tension with his claim that epistemology is a weak starting place and a poor basis of theoretical revision. The second problem is that while our experiences of objects give us evidence that those objects exist, our experiences do not tell us that the objects exist mind-independently in all the ways required for metaphysical realism, or so I contend. Thus, I argue, even if we do put naturalized metaphysics first as Devitt recommends, realism is not secured as a starting point.

2 Devitt on Realism and Truth

Devitt erects two distinct lines of defense in an effort to protect realism from truth. The first line involves insisting that realism is a metaphysical thesis, rather than a semantic one (1997, p. 3, 40). If Devitt is right about this, then settling on a theory of truth would not immediately show realism to be false by definition—some sort of further inference would be required. His second line of

defense involves conservatively circumscribing the relevance of the truth debate to the realism debate even when some theory of truth is merely being used as evidence for some realism thesis. In this way Devitt intends to limit the inferences we might reasonably make from a particular theory of truth to metaphysical anti-realism.

Devitt offers his own characterization of realism as a metaphysical thesis. Devitt's realism, which he calls "Realism," (with a capital 'R'), is stated as follows:

Realism: Tokens of most current common-sense and scientific physical types objectively exist independently of the mental. (1997, p. 23)

As he explains, he includes the word 'most' to indicate that he is not committed to all of our current theories being one-hundred percent accurate, though he thinks "we are *more or less right* in the physical entities we posit" (1997, p. 303). The reader should note that Devitt's Realism has an *existence dimension*, according to which the posits of our theories exist, and an *independence dimension*, according to which they do so mind-independently (1997, Ch. 2). Later in this essay I will argue that while Devitt may have made the existence dimension irresistible, he leaves us without adequate reason to accept the independence dimension, and hence without adequate reason to accept Realism as a whole (Sect. 3.2).

Devitt has intentionally worded his version of realism so that it is metaphysical in nature (because it is chiefly about existence) and does not, at least not on the surface of it, involve any particular notion of truth. This should not distract us from the fact that he takes the actual issue of realism, by any name, to be a metaphysical issue. In what follows, I will often quote Devitt using the term 'Realism' because he is talking about his particular view. The points made about the relationship between realism and truth, however, should be understood to apply generally to metaphysical characterizations of realism, and not just to Devitt's statement of his own view.

While Devitt does not deny that there are interesting connections between the debate over the nature of truth and the debate over realism, he only admits the existence of two possible routes from a theory of truth to metaphysical anti-realism. One of these routes goes from "relativism about truth" to "relativism about reality," but Devitt doesn't think there are good reasons to endorse either form of relativism, and so he maintains that realism is not threatened on this score, saying that the connection "is not very significant" since what matters "is the reason, not the link" (1997, p. 46). If there were good reasons to accept relativism about either truth or reality, then Realism would be in trouble, but Devitt argues at length against attempts to establish relativisms of either the semantic or metaphysical variety (1997, Chs. 9 and 13).

The other route from truth to anti-realism that Devitt considers involves an inference to the best explanation, and it goes as follows: Assume that an epistemic theory of truth is correct and that all instances of the equivalence schema ('S' is true if and only if S) obtain. The best explanation for why these instances hold, given the epistemic theory of truth, would be that metaphysical anti-realism

holds. Hence, anti-realism holds (1997, pp. 44–45). Devitt says that “this abduction is the only significant respect in which a doctrine of truth is relevant even to the assessment of *Realism*” (p. 95). Yet Devitt does not think that this is an abductive inference we should actually make, because he does not think that we should decide on a theory of truth until we have first settled the question of realism. Devitt’s approach here is an example of his putting metaphysics first.

Devitt’s metaphysics is a naturalized one, that is, he takes the evidence for it to come from our empirical observations. For him, naturalism is “the view that there is only one way of knowing, the empirical way that is the basis of science” (2010, p. 110). He is very clear about this, emphasizing that “knowledge can be *justified* only by experience...the *evidence* for it must be experiential” (2010, p. 254). Devitt is also clear that he is a naturalist in two senses: He is a metaphysical naturalist, one who endorses materialism/physicalism, and he is an epistemological naturalist, one who, like Quine, claims that the only way to know anything is empirically (2010, pp. 254–255).

Drawing on the work of Quine, Devitt says that “everything in the web [of knowledge/belief] can make a difference to everything else” (Devitt 1991, p. 75). This Quinean holism commits him to the view that, in principle, “evidence on the metaphysical issue of realism could come from anywhere, including from semantics,” though he includes the important qualification that, “the empirical case for realism is much stronger than that for any epistemological or semantic thesis” (2010, p. 111n). Recall that Devitt takes realism to be a metaphysical issue. He thinks that we should settle the realism question first since, “we know far more about the world than we do about meanings” (2010, p. 163n) and, “...it is much easier to argue for realism than for any semantic doctrine” (1997, p. viii). Accordingly, he says, “the support for [realist] metaphysics outside semantics is so strong that it is scarcely conceivable that a semantic theory should overturn it” (1998, p. 500).

Devitt’s maneuver at this point is essentially Moorean.¹ His naturalism leads him to metaphysical realism via experiential evidence, and then, given the much weaker naturalistic evidence available for anti-realist theses in semantics and epistemology, he takes the established truth of Realism to speak against those anti-realist theses. As he says,

Realism about ordinary objects is confirmed day by day in our experience. It is central to our whole way of viewing the world, the very core of common sense. A Moorean point is appropriate: *Realism* is much more firmly based than the epistemological theses...that are thought to undermine it. We have started the argument in the wrong place: rather than using [those epistemological theses] as evidence against *Realism*, we should use *Realism* as evidence against [those epistemological theses]. We should, as I like to say, “put metaphysics first”. (2010, p. 62).

¹ Great thanks to an anonymous referee for *Erkenntnis* for helping me to disentangle what is Moorean about Devitt’s approach from other aspects of Moore’s commitment to common sense which Devitt would not countenance.

Devitt's focus in the passage just quoted is about threats to metaphysical realism from epistemology, but his remarks elsewhere make it clear that he takes the same attitude toward semantics (1999, p. 97). And of course, given his naturalism, "the only way of knowing *anything* [including semantics] is the empirical way of science" (2010, p. 64). The general strategy here is to establish a realist metaphysics first, through empirical methods, and then, in the spirit of G.E. Moore, deny that philosophical conclusions reached in other areas could pose any conceivable threat. Devitt repeatedly emphasizes the point, as when he says, "Given this strong [empirical] case for *Realism*, we should give it up only in the face of powerful arguments against it and for an alternative" (2010, p. 104).

Devitt's naturalism and holism fit together in such a way that the set of all of our interconnected theories about the world "is tested against experience as a whole" (Devitt 1997, p. 77). In this way, each element of the web of belief is reconciled with experience in virtue of the whole web being reconciled with experience. When it comes time to revise our beliefs in light of the empirical evidence, Devitt gives metaphysics a privileged place. He evokes Quine's use of an image of Neurath's, of a ship which the sailors must rebuild while staying afloat on it. The metaphor is intended to convey the idea that our theories are all revisable though they are not all revisable at once (2010, p. 110). Devitt claims that we should not rebuild our metaphysics while standing on the semantic and epistemological parts of the boat because, "epistemology and semantics are among the weakest places to stand" (p. 111). Devitt is completely insistent that we put metaphysics before semantics and epistemology; he repeatedly insists that the latter two areas of inquiry are much more questionable and less secure from an empirical, naturalistic point of view. As he puts it,

The argument for *Realism*, independent of semantics, is very strong. The argument for verificationism, independent of metaphysics, is very weak... I take the theory of language to be an empirical, conjectural, theory like all others. So there is no question of giving semantics an unearned privileged position in deciding what there is and what it is like. (2012, p. 109)

So Devitt insists that we begin with metaphysics. He also insists that when,

we go on to seek empirical answers [to the questions of epistemology and semantics]... the theories that result have no special status. Indeed, given our lack of confidence in these areas, the theories should have rather a lowly status. To suppose that we can derive the right metaphysics from epistemology or semantics is to put the cart before the horse. (2012, p. 110).

Establishing that realism is a metaphysical thesis is not sufficient to deflect arguments against it from other areas of philosophy, including semantics and epistemology. In order for his defense of Realism to work, Devitt needs to be correct about the priority of metaphysics and the way that we learn about metaphysical facts.

I have attempted to cull from Devitt's writings a substantial reconstruction of his philosophy of putting metaphysics first in relation to his Realism. Here is perhaps Devitt's most concise statement of his view about the priority of metaphysics:

We should approach epistemology and semantics from a metaphysical perspective rather than vice versa. We should do this because we know much more about the way the world is than we do about how we know about, or refer to, that world...my view here reflects, of course, my epistemological naturalism. The metaphysics I want to put first is a naturalized one. (2010, p. 2)

The reader should recognize the theme concerning how much more we know about metaphysics than we do about epistemology and semantics from the various bits of Devitt quoted above. I have attempted to give an account which brings out exactly how epistemological naturalism and a tactic reminiscent of Moore function in Devitt's argument for the view that we should put metaphysics first. I have also attempted to explain how the priority of metaphysics is supposed to support his Realism. In the next section, I will detail some problems with Devitt's approach.

3 Problems for Devitt's View

I will now investigate two major concerns with Devitt's defense of Realism based on the strategy of putting metaphysics first. The first issue is that while Devitt urges us to put metaphysics first, he actually puts epistemology first when he endorses the epistemological naturalism on which he attempts to base his realist metaphysics. This is problematic because central to Devitt's position is the claim that epistemology is a poor starting place and an unsatisfactory basis of revision. Therefore, there must be limits to Realism's immunity from epistemological attack, lest Devitt's naturalism turn out to be as insecure a foothold as the rest of epistemology. The second, more troubling concern is that Devitt's naturalism does not support a realist metaphysics the way that Devitt says it does, or so I will argue.

3.1 Devitt Puts Epistemology First

As we have seen, Devitt wishes to start with metaphysics. He tells us that "we use our view of what is known to arrive at our view of the knowledge process. In this way metaphysics is put before epistemology, and the latter becomes, like everything else, empirical" (1997, p. 79). One wonders how Devitt can claim that epistemology and semantics are weak starting places while telling us that his naturalism, on which he bases his metaphysics, is itself a piece of epistemology (2010, p. 64, p. 77n22). And in fact his naturalism is an epistemological doctrine, as it has to do with the kinds of justification we can have for our beliefs. So it seems that in arguing for the view that we should put metaphysics first, Devitt has put epistemology first.

The fact that Devitt does his epistemology first has not gone entirely unnoticed. Devitt admits outright that "the defense of realism depends on distinguishing it from other doctrines and on choosing the right place to start the argument. And the defense of that choice depends on naturalism" (1999, p. 90). Indeed, the reason Devitt thinks we should be so confident in realist metaphysics is he believes our experiences constantly confirm Realism (1997, p. 75; 1999, p. 96). Andreas Karitzis notes that to the extent that Devitt's defense of Realism is based on epistemological

naturalism, “realism cannot be taken to be primarily an ontological issue” (2011, p. 65). My concern here is more with how Devitt’s invocation of an epistemological thesis in his argument for the priority of metaphysics may undermine his attempt to defend Realism from epistemological attack. If the whole of epistemology stands on weak footing under the assumption that the only way we can know anything is through experience, then so does the thesis that the only way we can know anything is through experience. Given that the naturalistic perspective provides the motivation for putting naturalized metaphysics first, Devitt cannot have it that epistemological naturalism is impugned along with the rest of epistemology.

The naturalism Devitt endorses “is an overarching epistemological doctrine claiming that the only way of knowing *anything* is the empirical way of science: for each area of knowledge x , naturalized x ” (2010, p. 64). It is a meta-philosophical, methodological thesis.² The key is to notice that Devitt first endorses this general epistemological naturalism, according to which every area of inquiry is rooted in experiential justification, and then argues that a Realist naturalized metaphysics is much better supported by experience than any given anti-Realist thesis in naturalized semantics or naturalized epistemology. It is the anti-realist epistemological theses in particular which have almost no support according to Devitt (1999, p. 98; 2010, p. 64), not epistemology generally, and certainly not epistemological naturalism.

In the epistemological case, the threat to Realism is thought to come from a priori reactions to skeptical doubts in the tradition of “First Philosophy” (Devitt 1997, pp. 61–65; 1999, pp. 94–96; 2010, pp. 58–62).³ The threat of skepticism itself can be seen as stemming from a priori “epistemological speculations about what we can know and how we can know it” (Devitt 1999, p. 96). Devitt also explains, however, that the skeptical doubt can be framed in terms of naturalistically acceptable facts concerning the science of perception. The evidence we receive from our senses is compatible with the world being other than the way it appears to be, and so we seem to have no way of excluding skeptical hypotheses from the realm of possibility (Devitt 1997, pp. 62–63). A traditional way of reacting to the skeptical challenge involves an attempt to save the existence dimension of realism by giving up on the independence dimension. This tradition of “First Philosophy” takes the skeptical challenge seriously and attempts to rescue our knowledge of the world by either putting the world inside the mind, or by claiming that our minds help to constitute the world in some way or another (Devitt 2010, pp. 61–62).

Devitt, for his part, endorses epistemological naturalism and argues that from the empirical, naturalistic perspective, the anti-realist answers to skepticism based on a priori speculations about the nature of knowledge are highly implausible (1997, pp. 79–80; 1999, p. 98; 2010, p. 64). Indeed, he ultimately takes the naturalistic evidence to speak against the skeptical hypotheses which were supposed to throw

² Thanks to two anonymous referees for *Erkenntnis* and James Beebe for pushing me to consider this way of understanding Devitt.

³ Many thanks to an anonymous referee for *Erkenntnis* for making clear to me the significance of the threats to Realism from the a priori tradition in the context of Devitt’s view that we should put naturalized metaphysics first.

our knowledge into doubt in the first place, saying that, “the strength of the case for *Realism* counts against them,” and further that, “the practices of science count against them” (2010, p. 65). So while Devitt does think that the skeptical challenge can be posed naturalistically, he also thinks it can be met naturalistically.⁴

Thus, Devitt does ultimately put epistemology first, but not in a way that directly contradicts his insistence that we put naturalized metaphysics before the naturalized versions of semantics and epistemology. A general immunity from a priori epistemological “speculations” (1999, p. 98) may be had once we reject the a priori in favor of naturalism, but a general immunity from epistemology does not come with Devitt’s conclusion that, in revising our web of belief, “epistemology is one of the weakest parts to stand on” (1999, p. 97). I have argued that Devitt himself stands on the epistemological part of his boat as he outfits it with metaphysical Realist planks.

Devitt defends his epistemological naturalism at length. His defense of naturalism essentially proceeds as a demonstration that there is no motivation for positing the a priori as a way of knowing and that all attempts to make such a way of knowing non-mysterious fail in the end (2010, Ch. 13). Still, Devitt maintains that “experience has taught us a great deal about the world of stones, trees, and cats, but rather little about how we know about this world” (1999, p. 96). He does not mean that we know little about whether we learn from experience, but instead that we know little about how the experiential learning process works, as he makes clear elsewhere: “Although we do not have a serious theory of empirical justification, we do have an intuitively clear and appealing idea, an idea that treats the mind/brain as an instrument sensitive, via experience, to the way the world is” (2010, p. 290).

The only epistemological theses which are rightly put after metaphysics are the ones which Devitt argues lack the empirical support which metaphysics enjoys. Devitt’s strategy of putting metaphysics first would lack motivation if, on the contrary, an epistemological thesis which might undermine that metaphysics did happen to enjoy a strong amount of empirical support. Devitt argues that attacks on Realism from the realm of the a priori do not stand up to scrutiny because, in the first place, we have reason to doubt the existence of a priori knowledge and because, in the second place, the anti-realist theses traditionally thought to have a priori support cannot be justified empirically. While the fact that Devitt puts epistemology first in a certain sense is not in direct contradiction with his view that we should put metaphysics first, there is still tension: The tension is that Devitt cannot say that epistemology generally lacks the support metaphysics enjoys, on pain of undermining the motivation he has given us for putting metaphysics first at all. Thus there is still room for an epistemological attack on Realism, albeit not an a priori attack on Realism, as long as the anti-Realist epistemological theses can be strongly supported empirically in accordance with naturalism.

I have been arguing that Devitt’s attempt to protect Realism from epistemological and semantic attack ultimately rests on his acceptance of epistemological naturalism,

⁴ Thanks to an anonymous referee for *Erkenntnis* for helping me to appreciate that Devitt had moved on from his earlier view that skepticism was not only “unanswerable,” but also “uninteresting” (Devitt 1997, pp. 64, 75).

and further that this fact is in tension with his strategy of putting metaphysics first. I now turn to argue that even if we go along with Devitt, doing our metaphysics first from a naturalistic perspective, the naturalistic evidence from experience does not support Realism in the way Devitt claims it does.

3.2 Basic Experiential Evidence Does Not Justify Belief in Realism

Devitt wants us to start with metaphysics, and he thinks that the metaphysics we begin with will be Realist, since he believes that “when we approach our metaphysics empirically, *Realism* is irresistible. Indeed, it faces no rival we should take seriously” (2010, p. 110). Recall how Devitt thinks that a realist metaphysic gets established: Via experience. But do our experiences tell us that what exists does so mind-independently? What would that experience be like as opposed to an experience that those objects have an existence which is at least partially mind-dependent? In this section, I argue that Realism is not irresistible. It is resistible, I claim, because our everyday experiences are silent on whether the objects of our experience exist mind-independently in all the ways required for Realism.

Devitt’s Realism has an existence dimension, according to which the observable entities of common sense and the unobservable posits of science exist, as well as an independence dimension, according to which they do so mind-independently (1997, pp. 14–22). My claim against Devitt is that our experiences only confirm, at best, the existence dimension of Realism and some aspects of the independence dimension. When we have experiences of stones, trees, and cats, those experiences certainly count as evidence that stones, trees, and cats exist, that they continue to exist when we are not perceiving them, and that their existence does not depend in any way on our opinions about whether they exist, or whether we desire that they exist. Yet experience does not tell us whether the world as we experience it is somehow shaped by our conceptual apparatus or other, perhaps unknown, facts about the way that our minds relate to the world. Granted, our experiences of objects also do not tell us that the objects depend on our minds. Basic experience is neutral on this point and so is not sufficient justification for either Realism or its opposite. Hence, even if we put metaphysics first in the way prescribed by Devitt, Realism does not get established as early on as Devitt says it does and so it is not already in place when we go on to do semantics and epistemology. The putting of metaphysics first does not deliver Realism.⁵

⁵ An interesting question, suggested to me by an anonymous referee for *Erkenntnis*, is whether Devitt ought to be seen as a direct realist in the philosophy of perception. The direct realist would take our experiences to count as immediate evidence for the existence of objects, whereas the indirect realist would infer the existence of objects from the experience of some kind of perceptual intermediary, such as a sense-datum. The debate between direct and indirect realism is of great importance to the realism debate generally, but a thorough analysis of the issue is beyond the scope of this paper. Since I grant Devitt the existence dimension of his Realism, my arguments are consistent with either view. Many thanks to the anonymous referee for the suggestion as well as for helpful guidance and commentary on the topic.

It is important to emphasize that in claiming that experience does not tell us whether objects are mind-independent, I am not claiming that the independence dimension of Devitt's Realism requires that we know anything a priori. It could be that, once all of the empirical evidence is amassed and we have developed metaphysical, epistemological, and semantical theories on firm empirical bases, we then become justified in asserting that the objects of our experience exist completely mind-independently. It is also important to note that, on my view, experience justifies us in believing something stronger than what Devitt terms "Weak, or Fig-Leaf, Realism," the view that "something objectively exists independently of the mental" (1997, p. 23). Our experience justifies us not only in believing that something exists, but further that particular things exist. Additionally, Devitt's arguments against extreme skepticism (1997, Ch. 5; 2010, Ch. 3) are left largely intact despite our failure to establish the independence dimension of Realism. Experience still justifies our belief in ordinary objects; our belief in them is not the result of a trick played by an evil demon—they are not illusions or hallucinations.

In his chapter on "Worldmaking" (1997, Ch. 13), Devitt elaborates on how the notion of mind-independence is relevant to Realism. I would like to set aside Devitt's concern that Constructivism, understood as the view that we literally create the world through thought, is obviously wildly implausible. Aside from his objections to Constructivism, Devitt's discussion provides insight into the way that he thinks some degree of mind-dependence is acceptable to a Realist. His discussion also helps us to understand the sort of mind-dependence that is incompatible with his brand of realism. Once we are clear on these matters, we will be better able to approach the question of whether everyday experience speaks in favor of the mind-independence of the objects we experience in the way Devitt claims it does.

Devitt gives an account of how belief in Lockean secondary properties, which can be said to depend on our experience, is compatible with a belief in Realism, though a particular version of the view that all of the properties of objects are secondary properties is incompatible with Realism. We will work with a classic example, the property of redness. According to Devitt, "the secondary property of redness is the power to make us 'sense redly'...an object is red in virtue of its power to have a certain effect on (normal) *humans*" (1997, p. 250, emphasis in original). Devitt explains how his view of secondary properties is not at odds with Realism and differs crucially from the sort of mind-dependence we get with Constructivism.

Regarding their dependence on us, Devitt points out that for the Realist who holds Devitt's account of secondary properties, "things are red in virtue of how we *sense* them," while for the Constructivist, "entities have their natures in virtue of how we *think about* them" (1997, p. 252). Another difference brought out by Devitt is the fact that on his account, there still would have been red objects even if we had never existed, since there still would have been objects with the power to bring about the relevant sensations in us, while for the Constructivist the existence of objects requires that we exist (p. 252).

Devitt goes on to consider another version of his view which would have it that, "to sense redly is to *judge* that something is red or that it is as if it were red, or to be *disposed to judge* that something is red or that it is as if it were red" (p. 252). He admits that on this modified view, "things *are* red in virtue of how we think of

them,” and yet, “it remains the case that there would have been red things but not Constructivist entities if there had been no people,” since there still would have been things with the power to cause us to judge them as red even if we had never existed (p. 253). If we view not just some but all properties as secondary properties which objects have in virtue of causing us to judge that they have them, Devitt says, “the known world is all the result of our imposition. The generalized Lockean account is Constructivism” (p. 253).

Let us take stock of my objection to Devitt that experience does not establish Realism in light of Devitt’s views on mind-independence just surveyed. Concerning the idea that some properties of objects might be mind-dependent in the sense that those properties are powers of objects to affect us in certain ways, we can grant Devitt the point that Realism about the objects is still possible—the objects would still have mind-independent primary properties which would be responsible for our experience of the secondary properties, and indeed we would be able to investigate the primary properties naturalistically. We must note, however, that immediate experience does not tell us which properties might inhere in the objects themselves primarily and which properties might only be powers to cause us to perceive the objects in certain ways. Thus our everyday experiences are silent on the issue as to whether objects have this kind of mind-dependence or not.

Now consider the generalized Lockean view that all of the properties of objects should be regarded as secondary properties, and in particular the version of the view discussed by Devitt according to which for an object to have a property is for the object to cause us to judge that it has said property (1997, p. 253). On this way of viewing things, our thoughts do determine how the world is, though the thoughts we have about the objects are supposed to be brought about by the objects in some unexplained and perhaps inexplicable way. Devitt rightly points out that such judgment-dependence would infect relations as well, and hence causal relations would also be dependent upon our judgments so that we would be left without the possibility of a scientific account of the way in which the noumenal objects bring about our judgments (p. 253). He further claims that objects are, on the view under consideration, mind-dependent in the sense that “there is no longer any basis for claiming that red things (or whatever) would have existed if there had been no people” (p. 253).

While Devitt does provide reasons to believe that Constructivism is false, I submit that experience on its own does not tell us whether the properties we judge objects to have are properties the objects have mind-independently as opposed to properties the objects have in virtue of bringing about the relevant judgments in us. Furthermore, just as our experiences do not tell us whether any given property we judge an object to have is had primarily or secondarily, so also do our immediate experiences fail to tell us whether all of the properties of the object are primary or secondary properties, properties inhering in the objects themselves or mere powers of objects to bring about particular judgments in us. *Ex hypothesi*, our experiences and our judgments are of secondary properties, not the primary properties which bring about those experiences and judgments in us. The immediate experiential evidence is the same regardless of whether the properties of objects are dependent upon us in this way or not. Thus, basic experience does not establish that the properties of objects are mind-independent in the way required for Realism.

I have been arguing that even if we base our metaphysics on the naturalistic evidence of experience, the independence dimension of Realism will need to be established, if it can be, farther down the road, most likely once we have more filled-out semantic and epistemological theories which tell us something about the relationship between our minds and the world. Devitt might reasonably respond that Realism is a metaphysical thesis, and to the extent that I am claiming semantics and epistemology may be more relevant to its assessment than he allows, I am confusing a metaphysical issue with semantic and epistemological ones. Devitt in fact argues at length that the issues are commonly confused to the detriment of the debate (1997, Ch. 2; 2010, Ch. 2). Let us now consider Devitt's Maxim 3: "Maxim 3: Settle the realism issue before any epistemic or semantic issue" (1997, p. 4). Devitt thinks we should accept this maxim even though he offers a caveat which, I contend, leaves room for anti-realist rebuke. Here is the caveat:

This maxim is oversimplified because realism, though largely metaphysical, *is* a little bit epistemic and semantic: the world must be independent of our knowledge of it and of our capacity to refer to it. So at least that much epistemology and semantics must be settled to settle realism. (1997, p. 4).

My response at this point is that the "little bit" of semantics and epistemology that the independence dimension of Realism requires is not something that we can truly attain without actually doing the semantics and epistemology. Early on in our investigations, going only on our experiences, we learn what exists but we do not learn how it exists. We do not learn any very specific facts about how our minds are related to what exists.

It might also be claimed in Devitt's defense that I do not take proper account of his argument for Common-Sense Realism, which is a realism about observable objects (1997, pp. 73–75). Devitt's argument for realism about these objects is elegantly simple: The best explanation for why it appears that they exist, for why we have experiences as though they exist, is that they do exist: "It is as if there is a black raven because there is a black raven" (p. 74). Yet notice that the existence dimension of Realism does all of the work. We do not need the independence dimension to explain our experiences. Devitt's argument for Common-Sense Realism only establishes the existence dimension of Realism, which is not under attack here.

It may also seem that in arguing that our immediate experiences would be the same regardless of whether the objects we experienced were mind-independent or not, I am simply reverting to the sorts of a priori speculations which Devitt argues against. This would be especially problematic in the context of my maintaining that Devitt's arguments against skepticism stand despite the fact that our experiences are only good enough to establish the existence dimension of Realism.

Devitt says:

The Moorean puts us in an armchair and asks us to start by assessing the evidence for *Realism*. In so doing we must resolutely decline to *theorize about the standards* of good and bad evidence, for that epistemological path was what led to the disaster: we simply apply our ordinary evidential standards, just as

we presumably did in childhood when we became *Realists* in the first place. (2010, p. 63).

In the passage just quoted, Devitt speaks of “our ordinary evidential standards.” Elsewhere, he says that his Realism accords with “the folk epistemological view that [the ontology of science and common sense] is objective and independent” (1999, p. 91). Perhaps Devitt and I are at odds concerning what the ordinary evidential standard is, but on my view the ordinary standard takes our experiences to justify us in believing the objects we see around us are independent of us in the ways I have already admitted: The objects we see continue to exist even when we are not looking at them, and exist whether we believe that they do or desire that they do. It does not follow that our experiences justify us in believing that the objects we see are not, in Devitt’s words, “partly constituted by the mind’s imposition of concepts, theories, or languages” (2010, p. 61). We can still combat skepticism—we are justified in believing that the world of experience is not an illusion and even justified in believing that particular things exist. Again, this is not to say that we cannot come to be justified in believing in such mind-independence. Eventually, through naturalistic empirical methods, we may establish that Realism is true—something the skeptic would never admit. My point here is only that full-blown Realism, according to which the observable objects of common sense and the unobservable posits of science not only exist, but do so mind-independently, cannot be established as the foundation of the rest of philosophy without further development of empirical theories concerning the relationship between our minds and the world.

4 Conclusion

I have attempted to give an account of the general strategy Devitt deploys in advancing his version of metaphysical realism. That strategy involves endorsing an epistemological naturalism from which Devitt argues that we should give priority to metaphysics. I have attempted to spell out precisely how Devitt’s prior endorsement of the epistemological view of naturalism causes conflict with his view that we ought to give temporal and explanatory priority to metaphysics. Once we have accepted naturalism and given priority to metaphysics, Devitt argues that the evidence for Realism, which includes both an existence dimension and an independence dimension, is overwhelming compared to the evidence for any of the various theses in semantics and epistemology which might speak against it. I have argued that our experiential evidence only establishes the existence dimension of Devitt’s Realism early on in our investigations. Without the establishment of the independence dimension, which may, admittedly, be established through naturalistic means later on, Devitt cannot make Realism the basis of our further theorizing.

Devitt’s take on the realism issue is complex and subtle. Besides offering positive arguments in favor of his Realism, Devitt has gone to great lengths to carefully scrutinize and attack the major anti-realist arguments of his opponents. Presently, I have not aimed to assess the overall merit of Devitt’s defense of realism against those

specific attacks—I have only been concerned to critique Devitt’s defense of Realism based on the doctrine that we must put metaphysics first.

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