

Why God Is Not a Semantic Realist\*  
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What is the proper interpretation of statements about the external world – that is, statements about trees, planets, tables, and other of the objects that constitute the world that we inhabit? On the contemporary philosophical scene, traditional theists are among the most vocal defenders of a *realist* interpretation of such statements. And this for good reason. There seem to be compelling reasons for a theist to think that the truth about the world is to be determined *not* by how things seem from the human perspective (as those who reject realism typically argue), but by how an omniscient mind knows things to be in themselves, in their brute objectivity. According to this view, if there is such a God, then our claims about the world are properly judged (true or false) by how the world is in itself, not by how things seems to us from our finite epistemic perspective.

It is not surprising, then, that traditional theists are, with few exceptions, *global semantic realists* about the interpretation of external world statements, interpreting *all* such statements realistically.<sup>1</sup> Realism of this kind is treated by many as a shibboleth of traditional Christianity, a *sine qua non* of theological orthodoxy. Yet, this love affair between theists and semantic realism is a poor match. I suggest that everyone (theist or no) has compelling evidence drawn

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from everyday linguistic practice to reject a realist interpretation of most external world statements. But theists have further reason to forswear this view, because those who insist on global semantic realism open themselves to the charge of hubris of a theologically inappropriate kind. If the arguments in this paper are sound, then neither God nor any of us have reason to apply a realist interpretation to all or even most statements about the external world.

### *The Realism-Antirealism Debate*

What is the proper interpretation of statements about the external world? Should they be given a *realist* or an *antirealist* interpretation? Consider the statement, “There is a walnut tree in the quad.” According to the realist, this statement makes a claim about how things are in-and-of-themselves, quite apart from what any human being (or other cognitive agent) says, thinks or believes about the matter. According to semantic realism, the statement will only be true if there exists a mind-independent walnut tree located in a mind-independent quad. On the alternative antirealist interpretation, these statements are essentially claims about the world-as-experienced, the world-as-knowable by humans. If the most scrupulous human investigation of the “quad” consistently produces coherent evidence of the presence of a ‘walnut tree’ (i.e., if people with normal faculties see, feel, hear, etc. the “tree”) and these experiences continue in the sufficiently long run, then according to semantic antirealism *it is true* that there is a walnut tree in the quad.

It is important, at this juncture, to recognize the distinction between semantic realism and metaphysical realism. *Semantic* realism is a theory about how to interpret a certain set of sentences; it is a theory about the *meaning* of our words. *Metaphysical* realism is a theory about the ultimate nature of reality; it is a theory about our *ontological* commitments. Let’s define the

theories as follows:

*Metaphysical Realism* =<sub>DEF</sub> Mind-independent objects are the immediate cause of human experiences of the external world. Objects in the external world exist in-themselves, independent of the cognitive activity of any agent and they genuinely possess most of the properties that we attribute to them.

*Global Semantic Realism* =<sub>DEF</sub> All statements about the external world express claims about mind-independent objects and the properties they possess. All external world statements will be determined as true or false in virtue of how things stand with respect to independently existing objects and irrespective of what any cognitive agent thinks, believes or experiences.

Obviously, the truth of metaphysical realism does not entail semantic realism; nor does the converse hold. It might turn out that metaphysically real objects exist, but that the statements that we utter about the external world do not in fact express a commitment to these objects.

Alternatively, it might turn out that while all of our statements about the external world assert the existence of mind independent objects, we are somehow being deceived and none of the objects to which we are committed do in fact exist.

The purpose of this paper is *not* to debunk metaphysical realism. Far from it. I am a staunch defender of that theory. Nor am I suggesting that *no* external world statements should receive a realist interpretation. Some such statements clearly require a realist. The only view I am disputing is *global* semantic realism, the view that *all* external world statements must be interpreted realistically. I shall argue that human language is far more pluralistic than simple, one-note semantic theories like global realism would have us believe. While I suspect that a

thorough semantic theory may multiply semantic-types even further, I am presently advancing only a *dualistic* theory, which suggests that two distinct theories govern the interpretation of external world statements:

*Limited Semantic Realism* =<sub>DEF</sub> Some statements about the external world express claims with realist truth conditions, claims about mind-independent objects and the properties they possess. These statements will be determined as true or false in virtue of how things stand with respect to mind-independent objects.

*Limited Semantic Antirealism* =<sub>DEF</sub> Some statements about the external world express claims with antirealist truth conditions, claims about (and only about) empirical conditions that are accessible from the perspective of human beings. These statements will be determined as true or false in virtue of how things stand with respect to the epistemic perspective of human beings.

While each of these theories is limited in scope, they can be joined to create a theory that governs the entire domain of external world statements. So joined and with a little further elaboration they form a new theory, semantic dualism.

*Semantic Dualism* =<sub>DEF</sub> Statements about the external world uttered in some contexts (e.g. in normal, everyday contexts) express antirealist claims and will be determined as true or false in virtue of how things stand with respect to the epistemic perspective of human beings. Statements about the external world uttered in other contexts (e.g. in contexts where the central purpose of the speech-act is to express a commitment to metaphysical realism) will be determined as true or false in virtue of how things stand with respect to mind-independent reality.

The arguments advanced from this point on will support the claim that all speakers have reasons to embrace semantic dualism and that theists have even more reasons than non-theists for holding this position. It will follow from this that neither theists nor anyone else should accept *global semantic realism for external world statements*.

Before moving to the arguments in defense of semantic dualism, it is important to clarify certain aspects of the theory. The view combines two distinct semantic theories. The difference between the two can be cashed out in two quite different ways. On one account, the semantic difference is to be found in conflicting analyses of the nature of truth. If this view is correct, then there are two different kinds of truth requiring two distinct truth-predicates. Realist statements would be governed by one notion of truth (e.g., the correspondence theory) and antirealist statements would be governed by another notion of truth (e.g., the coherence theory). On this analysis, semantic dualism would consist in the claim that the predicate, “true,” is systematically ambiguous, expressing one property in some contexts, another property in other contexts. While there are those who have argued for multiple truth-predicates,<sup>2</sup> I believe that there is only one coherent notion of truth. It is a primitive notion that admits of very little in the way of analysis (although it is probably closer to "correspondence" than to any other popular alternative). If this is true, then the semantic differences between realism and antirealism must reside somewhere other than in the truth-predicate itself.

Assuming that “truth” is a univocal notion, the difference between semantic realism and semantic antirealism will simply reflect a difference in the type of truth-*conditions* (mind independent vs. mind-dependent) expressed by a particular class of statements. On this view, to say that an external world statement, *p*, has mind-*independent* truth-conditions is just to say that

the truth-value of  $p$  is wholly insensitive to the activity of any actual (or possible) cognitive agent.<sup>3</sup> Thus, in surveying a world,  $W$ , to determine if  $p$  (realistically interpreted) is true in that world, no account need be taken of the cognitive states, capacities or activities of any knower(s) in  $W$  or in any other possible world because the conditions asserted to obtain by the external world statement are wholly independent of any mind.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, the *mind-dependence* that is the central feature of antirealism is also located in the *conditions* that make a statement true. To claim that  $p$  has *mind-dependent* truth-conditions is to say that the truth-value of  $p$  is sensitive to the cognitive states, activities or general epistemic perspective of some actual (or possible) cognitive agent. Thus, it is impossible to determine the truth-value of  $p$  in  $W$  (antirealistically interpreted) without reference to the epistemic perspective of the relevant cognitive agents—which in our case are human beings. By “epistemic perspective,” here, I mean both what the agents do in actual fact experience, think and believe, as well as what they would experience, think and believe under certain epistemically relevant circumstances.

One final caveat. The account of semantic antirealism just offered should not be conflated with *phenomenalism*, the justifiably discredited semantic theory advanced in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Semantic dualism escapes the famous criticisms that ultimately doomed phenomenalism because it does not include its two most dubious claims. First, it does not attempt to reduce the whole of language to talk of epistemic conditions (since realist talk of objects is available, if necessary, to explain how speakers can cash-out talk of epistemic conditions). Second, it does not pretend to offer an exhaustive account of the specific conditions that make any particular statement true, it only asserts that the conditions to which the statements are truth-functionally sensitive must be conditions of a certain broad *type* (the “epistemic” type).

This avoids the need for an implausible commitment to speakers' ability to grasp the meaning of statements that consist of infinite disjunctions of "phenomenalistic" truth-conditions.

### *Traditional Theism and Semantic Realism*

What reasons do theists have for rejecting semantic antirealism in favor of an unqualified semantic realism? One possible reason is the rather obvious difficulty that arises when one attempts to render an antirealist interpretation of the doctrine of theism. To be a traditional theist is, let us say, to believe at least the following:

(T) There exists a divine moral agent who is unlimited in knowledge, power and goodness and who created the universe.

It is hard to know what (T) would mean, interpreted antirealistically. How are we to understand the claim that there exists a being of unlimited knowledge and power given that we must understand it as a claim about conditions that obtain only from the perspective of beings woefully limited in knowledge and power. What could the antirealist truth-conditions for such a statement conceivably be?<sup>5</sup> At best the statement will be reduced to a claim that no longer entails the truth of traditional theism and at worst it will be incoherent. Thus, it seems that a necessary condition for the very possibility of being a traditional theist is being able to grasp (T), *realistically* interpreted, and then to be able to believe that (T), so interpreted, is true.

If this is correct, and I believe it is, then to be a traditional theist it is necessary that one reject any semantic theory that has a universal prohibition against a realist interpretation of any statement whatsoever. Yet many people are convinced that the only good arguments for antirealism are principled arguments, like those from Dummett<sup>6</sup> and Putnam,<sup>7</sup> that claim that

humans do indeed lack the capacity to grasp realist truth conditions. This leads people to think that the only real options are the two dominant *monistic* theories: *global semantic realism* or *global semantic antirealism*. Theists rightly judge that global antirealism cannot be reconciled with theism and so global realism seems the only game in town.

It is also popular to believe that arguments in defense of semantic antirealism are fundamentally arguments against a correspondence theory of truth and in favor of an epistemic theory of truth. Theists have rightly judged that an “epistemic” theory of truth will again threaten the very intelligibility of theism, and so they seem justified in rejecting all forms of antirealism. As a matter of fact, though, semantic antirealism does not commit one to a coherence theory of truth but is perfectly consistent with the correspondence theory, as William Alston has judiciously shown.<sup>8</sup>

Given this tendency to accord antirealism universal scope, whether in the form of an epistemic theory of truth or a global commitment to antirealist truth conditions, it should come as no surprise that theists often have an immediate and negative knee-jerk reaction against all forms of the view. As I have explained, however, the semantic dualism that I propose does not have any such “global” consequences. Not only can all theological discourse be interpreted realistically (meeting the condition necessary for the very possibility of being a theist), but there can be statements from *every* domain of discourse that receive a realist interpretation. My claim is only that *some* statements from *one* domain of discourse (viz., external world statements) receive an antirealist interpretation -- and that is no direct threat to theism.

But this doesn't tell the whole story. The threat of global antirealism isn't the only reason that theists are suspicious of antirealism. Even for the limited domain of discourse that



concerns us here (statements about the external world), theists think they have good reason to assume that a globally realist semantics is required. After all, if metaphysical realism is true (as I concede), then God has created mind-independent physical objects and God has given us cognitive and sensible faculties which provide us with reliable information about those mind-independent objects. Surely, the theist would argue, one is justified in believing that when we *speak* about the “physical objects” in our environment, we are speaking about those very mind-independent objects and not merely the objects “as experienced from our own epistemic perspective,” as antirealism would require. Surely the default position for the theist is that *all* external world statements are governed by a realist semantics. The burden would fall on the nay-sayer to show otherwise. And so it does.

### *Where the Rubber Meets the Road*

As I am prepared to concede, the burden falls on me to show that *some* statements about the external world are properly interpreted antirealistically. In fact, I shall claim that *most* such statements are expressed with antirealist, rather than with realist, force. But how could such a claim be supported, especially in the face of the *prima facie* evidence against the view already articulated? To see how the argument will go, it is important to consider the difference between interpreting the ‘walnut tree’-statement realistically rather than antirealistically. One way to give intuitive force to the distinction between the two interpretations is to consider the role played by what we shall call *ultimate ontology*. We have a rich and complex set of experiences of an “external world” and there is, obviously enough, some ultimate explanation for why we have the experiences that we do. Most of us believe that mind-independent objects provide the

ontological explanation, and so we are committed to metaphysical realism.

(A) *Metaphysical Realism* =<sub>DEF</sub> Mind-independent objects are the immediate cause of human experiences of an external world. These objects exist in-themselves, independent of the cognitive activity of any agent and they genuinely possess most of the properties that we attribute to them.

But what if metaphysical realism is false? Consider two alternative explanations for our experiences of the external world, two scenarios with which you are probably familiar.

(B) *Theocentric Idealism* =<sub>DEF</sub> The interaction of God's mind with human minds is the immediate cause of present and future human experiences of an external world. (This is, roughly, Berkeley's view that objects in the environment are mental entities created by God's mental activity.)

(C) *The BIV Hypothesis* =<sub>DEF</sub> We all are and always have been brains in a vat, *à la* Hilary Putnam's famous description.<sup>9</sup> Our present and future experiences of an external world are caused by a computer that is stimulating our disembodied brains and giving us mutually consistent experiences of a shared environment.

If either of these hypotheses is true, then human experiences of objects (past, present and future) are caused by Berkeley's God or a super computer rather than by mind-independent objects. In all three worlds, (A) - (C), human beings are having exactly the same subjective experiences (of "walnut trees," "tables and chairs," "planets" and the like).

We are now in a position to see how realist and antirealist interpretations will diverge in actual linguistic practice. Consider again our statement:

(1) There is a walnut tree in the quad.

We need only track the truth-value of our ‘walnut tree’-statement in the possible worlds just described. If either of scenarios (B) or (C) is true, then (1) will be false on a realist interpretation because there exist no mind-independent trees in those worlds to make it true. Yet the statement will be true on an antirealist interpretation because, by stipulation, these are worlds in which people are having the very same kinds of experiences that people have in world (A). That is, people in worlds (B) and (C) have “visual,” “tactile,” “auditory,” etc. experiences sufficient to meet the empirical demands of an antirealist claim that there is a “walnut tree” in the “quad”—thus making (1) true in those worlds, when (1) is interpreted antirealistically.

This brings us to the central question under consideration: When (1) is uttered in normal, everyday contexts, is it uttered with realist or antirealist force? If you ask me the location of the walnut tree and I answer you by asserting, (1), am I making a strictly empirical claim that is neutral with respect to *ultimate ontology* or am I making a robust metaphysical assertion that will only be true if (A) is true? The global semantic realist insists that a robust affirmation of metaphysical realism is a part of the very *meaning* of every statement we utter about trees. I disagree. It is this disagreement that I hope to settle in the arguments that follow.

Before going any further, it is important to be clear about what exactly it is that would make one semantic theory true and another false. In saying that most statements about the external world have antirealist truth-conditions, I am not offering a *prescription*; I am not saying that we *ought* to utter these statements with antirealist force. I am saying that we already do. Most traditional theists, I shall assume, disagree. What evidence could either side give to support their claim?

Let’s say that we ask a college student the location of the famous walnut tree on campus,

and she utters our statements:

(1) There is a walnut tree in the quad.

Does this particular utterance have realist or antirealist truth-conditions? We might think that the speaker herself can settle the question. We might ask her if she believes in the existence of a mind-independent walnut tree. Of course, from the fact that she *believes* in a mind-independent tree it doesn't necessarily follow that she has, just now, expressed that belief. If it isn't her metaphysical beliefs, maybe it is her linguistic intentions when she utters the sentence that matters. After all, surely she knows what she means. Thus, we might ask her. "In asserting (1) are you thereby asserting the existence of a mind-independent tree and quad?" If this were a reliable method for discovering the meaning of our utterances, then I would surely lose my battle with the global semantic realist. Anyone who holds that theory will surely give an affirmative answer to that question. Happily for me, this methodology has come under widespread attack. The difficulty is that even competent speakers are notoriously unreliable in the answers they give to such questions. Speakers frequently misrepresent their own semantic intentions. What we say about our semantic intentions in discussion is often little more than a rehearsal of our metaphysical commitments and may be quite incompatible with what I shall call our "considered semantic intentions" which can only be identified by careful examination of our actual linguistic practice. "How can that be?" you ask.

Consider the case of natural kind terms. Locke believed that the word 'gold' referred to all and only those things that fit a particular description (shiny, yellow, malleable, etc.). A majority of contemporary philosophers disagree (I think) and now hold that, 'gold,' has an ineliminable indexical component, that it rigidly designates that deep explanatory property

(probably, atomic number 79) that science will ultimately determine is the fundamental nature of gold. In making that claim, we are not, of course, saying that Locke invested the term with descriptive content, while we now invest it with directly referential content. That would not be to disagree with Locke, but merely to have effected a change in the meaning of the term, 'gold.' No, Putnam's claim is that the term had an indexical character *even when Locke used it*. And it doesn't matter that Locke had a penchant for associating (in his mind's eye) the concepts, "yellow," "shiny," and "malleable," with the term, 'gold.' Such facts about Locke's psychology are not sufficient for making, 'gold,' a definite description. But on what grounds do we claim to know what Locke's words really meant? The grounds must ultimately derive from the nature of his linguistic competence.

Our competence as language-speakers is primarily a practical knowledge that we exercise, not a propositional knowledge that we can readily express in a theory. We are interested in how Locke the English-speaker did use (and would have used) the English language in actual practice, not in what Locke the philosopher did or did not believe about semantic theories. What then would make it the case that Locke meant the same thing by, 'gold,' that we do? In short, the answer is: his linguistic dispositions as a competent speaker of English. Putnam and Kripke suggest that we test our own linguistic dispositions by considering the truth-value of certain claims in carefully chosen counterfactual situations. If 'gold' were indeed a definite description meaning "yellow, shiny and malleable, etc." then competent speakers would be disposed to call anything with those properties, 'gold,' and would refuse to apply that term to anything that lacked those features. To test speakers' dispositions with respect to the 'gold' case, they must be asked to make a judgment about objects (or hypothetical objects) that separate

the deep explanatory property (atomic number 79) from the superficial properties (yellow, shiny, malleable), thus forcing the speaker to choose that characteristic to which the term is semantically tied. We might imagine that we've found a piece of metal that has all of the superficial properties of gold (yellow, shiny, malleable, etc.) but fails to have the same atomic structure (let's say its fundamental nature is XYZ, a heretofore unknown physical structure). Alternatively, we might consider a piece of atomic number 79 that is green, dull and brittle and thus lacks the familiar superficial properties that characterize gold on our planet while maintaining its essential atomic structure.

We now have the means to test a speaker's linguistic dispositions with respect to her use of the term, 'gold.' Simply ask a competent speaker whether these hypothetical substances do or do not fall within the extension of the term, 'gold.' Most speakers are willing to call anything that is atomic number 79, 'gold,' no matter what superficial properties it has and they are not willing to call anything that lacks atomic number 79, 'gold,' no matter how much it resembles our gold in superficial properties. Therefore, if we have reason to believe that Locke (and his compatriots) would, upon learning all of the relevant facts about our atomic theories, have called green atomic number 79, 'gold,' and would have withheld that label from yellow, shiny, malleable XYZ, then we have grounds for saying that Locke's linguistic competence was consistent with the new (indexical) theory of natural kind terms and inconsistent with his own definite description theory. We would, in short, have reason to say that 'gold' functioned for Locke as a rigid designator and thus that the definite description theory that he championed failed to capture the meaning *of his own words*.

Likewise, it is my contention that contemporary speakers who believe that all external

world statements have realist truth-conditions hold a theory that is not consistent with their own linguistic practice. To substantiate this claim I must set up the right kind of thought experiment that will elicit the relevant linguistic performance. Let us begin with the traditional realist who holds that every utterance of

(1) There is a walnut tree in the quad.

has realist truth-conditions and thus will be false in every possible world which lacks a mind-independent tree and quad. Thus we get the familiar conditional used to raise the specter of radical skepticism:

$S_1$ : If I am being deceived by a malevolent demon, then (1) is false.

We can substitute any world in the antecedent, so long as it lacks mind-independent trees. Since the demon's malevolency is not semantically relevant and since the claim of deception begs the question against my theory, let's use Berkeley's world instead.

$S_2$ : If Berkeleyan idealism is true, then (1) is false.

Since on my view, two utterances of (1) may vary in meaning, it is important to specify a particular utterance. Assume, as before, that (1) is what a passerby says when I ask about the location of the famous walnut tree. Thus, we get:

$S_3$ : If Berkeleyan idealism is true, then the passerby's utterance of (1) is false.

Now the semantic dispute between myself and the global realist is very simple. She says that  $S_3$  is true and I say that it is false. I do not believe that statements about the external world, like (1), when uttered in normal, everyday contexts, entail the truth of any metaphysical theory. Yes, there probably exists a mind-independent walnut tree and, yes, I am justified in believing as much. But it does not follow that every time I speak of a "tree" my utterance entails the truth of

a deep theory of ultimate ontology.

When it comes to determining the meaning of our language, everything hinges on what we as competent speakers are prepared to say about certain outcomes. The global semantic realist insists that every statement we make about the world is asserting a popular, but still controversial, metaphysical theory. They insist that if it turns out that the world we inhabit is a mental one (Berkeleyan idealism) rather than a physical one and, thus, that we were wrong about the ultimate nature of reality, then every affirmative external world statement we ever uttered is *false*. What that means is that when I tell my father, “Yes, I am the one who cleaned the garage for you and threw out the old paint cans” I say something false. Why? Not because I didn’t do what my father wanted me to do. I did! The garage is as clean as any human has a right to demand. It is false because the “paint cans” turned out to be Berkeleyan, mind-dependent paint cans rather than mind-independent ones. But surely, when I am talking with my Dad about paint cans, I have no interest in taking a stand on deep metaphysical disputes. I have no interest in asserting that Berkeleyan idealism is false.

Granted, there are occasions when I do assert that metaphysical realism is true and that Berkeleyan idealism is false. In my epistemology classes, for example. But I did *not* assert its falsity in the conversation with my father. Realism, in that context, isn’t bad metaphysics, it is simply bad semantics. It misrepresents the meaning and function of our utterances. Statements about the external world, uttered in normal (non-philosophical) contexts do not make claims about *ultimate ontology*. Their truth-value is sensitive only to how things stand with respect to the epistemic perspective of human beings (viz., the antirealist truth-conditions) not to how things stand with respect to ultimate ontology (viz., the realist truth-conditions).



This same line of argument is even more compelling when applied to moral discourse. If we *were* to discover (or even if we were wrongly to *believe* that we had discovered) that the objects of common sense are mind-dependent as Berkeley thought, would we judge that that fact falsified my daughter's utterance of the following sentence:

*m*: I kept my promise to you, Dad, by making my bed and cleaning my room.

I say, no. God has ordained that we live out our moral and spiritual lives in this environment (whatever its nature). If I am *wrong* about ultimate ontology and Berkeley is right, my daughter's action will be no less an instance of bed-making and promise-keeping than if I am *right* about metaphysical realism. It seems to exhibit altogether the wrong spirit to say what the global semantic realist must say about the Berkeleyan scenario. She must say that my daughter (i) promised to make a mind-independent bed, (ii) did not (and could not) make a mind-independent bed (because they don't exist) and thus, (iii) didn't keep her promise. But why say that? God is responsible for our present epistemic situation, whatever it is. If my daughter sleeps in a Berkeleyan bed, that bed is real enough to be the referent of her 'bed'-statements and it is real enough to be the occasion of her promise-keeping. What possible grounds would we have for saying otherwise?

The arguments just offered ought to be compelling to everyone, theist and atheist alike. But theism brings an added dimension to the discussion. To make the point, let us assume, for the sake of argument, that Christian theism is true and that we find ourselves in heaven. St. Peter informs us that, "Yes, indeed, Berkeley was right all along. God created a mental not a physical universe." Now the global semantic realist must insist that when the Bible says that Jesus fed the five thousand with five loaves and two fishes, the Bible says what is false. Because on her

account what it *means* to say that “there are loaves and fishes” is to say that there are mind-independent objects of a certain kind. Surely this result is unacceptable. The theist cannot really be so presumptuous as to say, in effect, the following:

If God chose to create a mental world instead of a physical world, then Jesus uttered countless falsehoods because *we humans* insist upon speaking a language that entails the truth of our favorite metaphysical theory. God may have the power to create any kind of world that God wants, but we hold the power to make God’s own words false, because we refuse to speak about any “trees” except mind-independent trees or any “fish” other than mind-independent fish.

This exhibits a kind of hubris not consistent with the spirit of theism.

How, then, should the theist understand the place of metaphysical realism in her worldview? As I’ve said, I think that it is rational for everyone to believe that metaphysical realism is true. Nor do any of the semantic arguments just offered require anything like an attack on the *truth* of metaphysical realism. When appealing to the possibility of Berkeleyan idealism, it functions just as well for semantic purposes if we simply stipulate that it is a *counterfactual* conditional and ignore the possibility that it might actually be true. But having said all of that, I believe it is possible for the theist to be *too* dogmatic about her commitment to metaphysical realism. For naturalist realists of a certain stripe, it may well be that the mind-independent existence of the external world is a ground-level, all but unrevisable commitment. But it shouldn’t be so for the theist. The Bible is full of admonitions against the presumptuousness of human beings who privilege themselves as knowing more of the deep facts about the universe than it is their station to know. Paul observes that “we see through a glass darkly” and there are

numerous places in Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and many other books that speak of the extreme limits of human understanding. I do not mean to suggest that these Biblical passages uncontroversially apply to the issue of the mind-independent existence of objects in the external world. I do believe, however, that the Bible as a whole prescribes a certain self-understanding concerning our epistemic and doxastic perspective. We know for certain *whose* we are, we know that our present epistemic situation (whatever it is) is ordained by God, and we know that the objects around us (whatever their nature) are “real enough” to constitute the arena in which God requires that we lead lives worthy of our high calling. But do we know as certainly the fundamental nature of the “physical” universe? Might it not be *hubris* to pound the table and insist that our language will countenance only one kind of metaphysical stuff? Semantic dualism is guilty of no such hubris and is also supported by independent arguments. It is the semantic theory most congenial to traditional theism.

#### *A Little Hand-waving about the Externalist Objection*

Before concluding this discussion, there is one obvious objection to semantic dualism that has not yet been mentioned. All the arguments offered thus far against global semantic realism have assumed that the semantic realism in question is of a Cartesian, or internalist, variety. Put simply, this means that the content expressed by a particular utterance is determined by the internal mental states of speakers. It is only when we make this assumption that we can take for granted (as we have) that our ‘walnut tree’-sentence:

- (1) There is a walnut tree in the quad.

expresses the same proposition (and thus has the same truth-conditions) in both the metaphysical

realist world and in the non-standard worlds of brains-in-a-vat and Berkeleyan idealism. Since the internal mental states of human beings (the sensations, the cognitive activity, etc.) are stipulated to be the same in each of these possible worlds, the propositions expressed by a particular utterance will be the same as well.

While internalist semantic realism continues to be defended by many, an externalist version of semantic realism has garnered many adherents. According to externalism, traditional semantic realists go wrong by assuming that meanings are fundamentally "in the head" and that our statements about the external world will have the same truth-conditions regardless of which possible ontology, (A) - (C), is true of the actual world.<sup>10</sup> It is this last assumption that the externalist denies. According to externalism, an object term like, 'tree,' refers to whatever is causally responsible for (and thus is causally regulating) our use of that term. Thus, in the possible world in which my 'tree'-experience is caused by a mind-independent physical object, the word 'tree' will refer to the relevant mind-independent object; in the world in which I am a brain in a vat, the word 'tree' will (probably) refer to the relevant sub-routine in the computer's software;<sup>11</sup> and, in the possible world in which my 'tree'-experiences are caused by Berkeley's God, the word 'tree' will refer to certain causally efficacious thoughts in the mind of God.

The reason that externalism seems to offer a way out for the global semantic realist is that externalism agrees with antirealism in determining that our walnut tree statement, (1), will come out true even if it turns out that we live in a BIV world or in a Berkeleyan world. In a brains-in-vat (BIV) world, 'tree'-statements will express (largely) true claims about the states of the governing computer software; in a Berkeleyan world 'tree'-statements will express (largely) true claims about God's thoughts. The upshot is that semantic externalism of this type will agree with

semantic antirealism in determining that most ‘tree’-statements uttered in normal speech contexts will come out true even if there exist no mind-independent “trees” (of the standard type) to make them true. This makes it seem like semantic externalism is a natural way for the theist to concede the claims made in this paper about the linguistic dispositions of competent speakers while at the same time to resist the conclusion that this points towards an antirealist element in our semantics.

Externalism is a serious and increasingly popular semantic theory that cannot be adequately addressed in a brief postscript to this paper. All I can offer is a bit of hand-waving that points to the deficiencies of externalism that should make it hard for the theist (or anyone else) to love. Semantic externalism has counter-intuitive consequences that I think most philosophers have yet to fully appreciate. One such consequence is that it raises a rather serious skeptical worry about any speaker’s ability to know the content of his own beliefs and utterances. The problem arises because the content expressed by an utterance is determined by facts about the external environment, facts that may well be epistemically inaccessible to the speaker. Theists are not likely to be happy with a semantic theory if it makes it impossible for speakers to know what they are talking or thinking about.

A second, more pressing worry is that semantic externalism is incompatible with radical skepticism and, as a consequence, may threaten metaphysical realism itself. If this is the case, as I believe it is, externalism has the ironic consequence of taking a semantic theory that seems to be initially realist in its commitments, yet that ultimately undermines the very intelligibility of metaphysical realism. This feature of externalism has been exploited by people like Hilary Putnam and Gary Ebbs<sup>12</sup> who have used semantic externalism to defend the truth of

metaphysical antirealism. Since metaphysical antirealism cannot, in my opinion, be reconciled with traditional theism, this will not likely be a popular position for theists.<sup>13</sup>

While this bit of hand-waving may not satisfy the theist genuinely drawn to semantic externalism, complete versions of these arguments against externalism, as well as others, can be found elsewhere.<sup>14</sup> When externalism is fully understood, I am convinced that very few people will find it easily reconcilable with traditional theism.

### *Summary*

I have offered general arguments to show that *global semantic realism* is false and more specific arguments to show that it is an especially problematic theory for traditional theists. As an alternative I've defended *semantic dualism*. According to this theory, the English sentence, 'This is a hand,' is ambiguous. If I am teaching an epistemology class and speak as a metaphysical realist using a G.E. Moore-type strategy to refute the skeptic, and I say: "This is a hand and thus I refute the skeptic"-- this utterance demands a realist interpretation. It makes no sense otherwise. But in a normal everyday context, if I am playing a word-game with my 2-year old and say "this is a foot," "this is a hand," I suggest that the very same English sentence would express an antirealist claim. The linguistic ability accorded by the first interpretation gives me the resources necessary to express my commitment to metaphysical realism. The linguistic ability accorded by the second interpretation gives me the resources necessary to make claims about the empirical environment in which we live, independent of considerations of ultimate ontology. This latter ability is one that is underappreciated. It allows me to express the significance of "the world-as-experienced," a world of moral, spiritual and aesthetic value

*regardless of its ultimate ontological nature.*

## ENDNOTES

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1. Alvin Plantinga is one theist who defends a certain kind of antirealism. He claims that there could be no propositions, and thus no truths or falsehoods, if there were no mind as the creative source of those propositions. The source he has in mind here is God. And while this is indeed a kind of antirealism, once God has populated the universe with all possible propositions, things then can go on (I think) pretty much as the traditional realist would have imagined it. (Alvin Plantinga, "How to be an Anti-realist" Presidential Address, delivered before the Eightieth Annual Western Division Meeting of the American Philosophical Association in Columbus, Ohio, April 29, 1982.)

2. Terry Horgan has defended a view that treats the truth-predicate itself as multiply ambiguous, resulting in a version of semantic pluralism (see, "Metaphysical Realism and Psychologistic Semantics," in *Erkenntnis* 36 (1991): 297-322).

3. This account of "mind-independent truth conditions" can be stated in such simple terms because the theory is intended to apply only to statements about the external world. A more complicated account is required for an analysis of "mind-independent truth conditions" as applied to statements about an individual's mental states.

4. This characterization purposely qualifies human artifacts as "mind-independent" in the relevant sense. The existence of this table is *causally* dependent upon the mind that conceived and built it. But, to determine the truth-value of a realist utterance of the statement 'the book is

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on the table' (uttered at time,  $t$ , in world,  $W$ ) the only things that need be surveyed are the non-mental objects that exist in  $W$ . Every mind that exists in  $W$  can simply be ignored, including the mind of the carpenter who built the table.

5. It might be suggested that theologians like Gordon Kaufman actually defend a kind of "anti-realist theism" and that they are in the business of providing idealist truth-conditions for traditional theistic doctrines. This I think would be a confusion. Kaufman is not simply advancing a semantic idealist interpretation of (T). For Kaufman, "God" functions as a regulative idea and not as the name for an entity in the universe (idealistically construed or otherwise). He holds what I consider to be a coherent worldview that is a challenge to traditional theism but that view can hardly be captured by attempting (per impossible) an "antirealist" interpretation of the Apostles' Creed.

6. Michael Dummett, "Realism" and "The Reality of the Past" in *Truth and Other Enigmas* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1978), 145-165, 358-374.

7. Hilary Putnam, "Realism and Reason" in *Meaning and the Moral Sciences* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978): 123-138; *Reason, Truth and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981): 1-74.

8. William P. Alston, *A Realist Conception of Truth* (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1996).

9. Putnam, *Reason, Truth & History*, 1-21.

10. We know that Descartes did assume that our statements about the external world would have



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the same truth-conditions regardless of which possible ontology is true of the actual world because the threat of radical skepticism that he took so seriously simply doesn't arise without this assumption. The only reason for thinking that my present 'table'-beliefs will be threatened by the demon ontology is if my 'table'-statements make the *same* realist assertion whether the actual world is a demon world or a mind-independent world.

11. Putnam suggested two other possible alternatives for what brains in the vat might be talking about. He says:

Given what 'tree' refers to in vat-English and what 'in front of' refers to, assuming one of these theories is correct, then the truth-conditions for 'There is a tree in front of me' when it occurs in vat-English are simply that a tree in the image be 'in front of' the 'me' in question--in the image--or, perhaps, that the kind of electronic impulse that normally produces this experience be coming from the automatic machinery, or, perhaps, that the feature of the machinery that is supposed to produce the 'tree in front of one' experience be operating.

(*Reason, Truth and History*, 14.)

The first option seems an unlikely one for the typical externalist realist; the second option will produce results very like the one I have in fact used (i.e., states of the software program).

12. Gary Ebbs, *Rule-Following and Realism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1997).

13. Hilary Putnam is one person who does not see a conflict between metaphysical antirealism (what he used to call, "internal realism") and theism. While I have never been clear about how he thinks the two can be reconciled, he has never been persuaded by my arguments that the two are incompatible.

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14. David Leech Anderson, "A Dogma of Metaphysical Realism" in *American Philosophical Quarterly* 32:1 (January, 1995): 1-11; "What is Realist about Putnam's Internal Realism?" in *Philosophical Topics* 20:1 (Spring, 1992): 49-83; "The Truth in Antirealism" (typescript).